

Resumo

O artigo explora o impacto da obra de George Kubler, *Portuguese Plain Architecture* (1972), no desenvolvimento da arquitetura portuguesa pós-1974. A filosofia da história da arte que Kubler propõe em *The Shape of Time* (1962) introduz a possibilidade de *sequências* fechadas de objetos (closed sequences) pudessem ser abertas por certos factores específicos. Pode argumentar-se que existe um efeito semelhante sobre o curso da arquitetura portuguesa após 1974, que foi em parte influenciado pela ideia de uma *arquitetura chã*. A popularidade do livro de Kubler sobre a arquitetura portuguesa, dentro da academia e práticas arquitectónicas, foi crescendo gradualmente, e o termo *arquitetura chã* é utilizado ainda hoje no vocabulário dos arquitectos. Kubler mostrou um tipo de arquitetura que não tinha sido anteriormente definida por historiadores, mas também apontou para uma nova tradição possível de se manifestar no período pós-revolucionário. A relação do livro de Kubler com os atributos ideológicos do modernismo e o contexto político português da altura contribuiu para a re-emergência de uma nova ordem de arquitetura chã que ainda ressoa na época contemporânea. ●

Abstract

The paper will address George Kubler's *Portuguese Plain Architecture* [PPA] (1972) and its effect in Portuguese architectural practice. Kubler's philosophy of art history implied that closed sequences of objects could be opened by several reasons. Thus, it will be argued that there is an effect upon Portuguese architecture post 1974, that is apparent by the reemergence of some of the form classes treated by Kubler. This was mostly achieved through the popularity of Kubler's book within architectural practice, scholarship and moreover by the establishment of the term "Plain Architecture" in Portuguese architectural vocabulary.

Plain Architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shared some qualities with the architecture to be built in post-revolutionary Portugal, most importantly the effect that could be achieved with low budget buildings that were responding to a situation of crisis, and simultaneously exhaled aristocratic sparsity. The connection of PPA with the ideological attributes of early modernism and the political context of the time catalysed the reemergence of a new order of Portuguese Plain that resonates still in contemporary architecture. ●

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PORTUGUESE PLAIN ARCHITECTURE: HISTORY OPENING A CLOSED SEQUENCE

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Introduction

¹ This being mostly visible in Anthony Vidler's *Histories of the immediate present: inventing architectural modernism* (2008).

² Manfredo Tafuri (1935-1994) defined the notion of 'operative history' as a critique to early histories of architecture with a partisan image of the modern movement, such as Sigfried Giedion's and Nikolaus Pevsner's. Here the term 'active' refers to the unavoidable instrumental role of any history rather than a partisan endorsement of a worldview.

³ For an extensive review of the book see Priscilla Colt's review (Colt, 1965) and Kubler's own reassessment twenty years later (Kubler, 1982).

⁴ Kubler was greatly influenced by his teacher Henri Focillon and revised the translation to English of Focillon's book *Vie des Formes* (1934). (Focillon, 1948)

Recent historiographies of modern architecture show the connection between the writing of architectural history and the redefinition of the architectural field.¹ The idea of an 'active'² history assumes historic narratives as design devices that might be used by historians and architects alike to achieve change in the development, education, and practice of architecture. Active history of architecture presents itself, rather boldly, as a search for a theory of architecture rather than an encyclopedic enumeration of past architectural feats. Thus, in the twentieth century the historical production within the field of architecture has been fundamental for the development of the discipline

The architectural historian George Kubler (1912-1996) in the book *The Shape of Time* (1962) developed a theory of history as an open field of multiple connections, allowing for multiple correlations between artifacts, and largely ignoring rigid systems of classification.³ In it he defined possible classification systems according to series and formal sequences.⁴ These formal sequences could be closed or dormant in certain periods of time "but any problem is capable of reactivation over certain conditions" (Kubler, 1962, p.34). These conditions can also be created by the attention given to a certain historical issue at certain times, awakening a latent interest and therefore encouraging the replication or reinterpretation of a previously remote motif. Therefore history plays a role as an instrument that allows these awakenings of closed sequences.

Kubler once posed the question "What can historians do for architects?" (Kubler, 1965) showing that he was critical of partisan histories, referring that

historians are useful to help architects to be aware of certain conventions such as the illusion of individual authorship in an architectural work: "... the architect would profit by unlearning, with the historian's help, another set of traditional illusions about individual authorship. The history of architecture has been written far too much as if it were the record of exclusively individual performances. Actually, every building is a collective enterprise. Multiple authorship is the rule; single authorship is the rare exception. The metaphor of the coral reef is worth recalling here; the individual artist stands upon an immense secretion or platform of prior achievements. We tend to overestimate the potential of individual achievement." (Kubler, 1965, p. 302) Kubler finishes his essay with the question: "what are the architects of this moment going to do for the historian?" (Kubler, 1965, p. 302) because ultimately it is with their work that the history of architecture is built.

Adding to Kubler's conclusion one might say that architectural history and architecture are fields that develop from an interrelation between each other. And as an example of this interrelationship one might mention the effects that Kubler's book *Portuguese Plain Architecture: Between Spices and Diamonds, 1521-1706* (1972) has had in Portuguese architectural scholarship and practice opening a sequence for the development of a previously unclassified architecture.

Kubler's book defined a new category to be considered by historians and architects: *Portuguese Plain Architecture* (Kubler, 1972). Portuguese historians of art consider Kubler because this book marked a new beginning in Portuguese scholarship.⁵ Portuguese architects remember Kubler because the category of *Plain Architecture*⁶ could be defined as a new tradition that is open for interpretation.⁷

The book *Portuguese Plain Architecture*, which has been considered to contain Kubler's "most poetic and evocative descriptions of individual works of art" (Reese, 1985, p. xxix), was a catalyst for a change of perspective of art history and in architectural practice in Portugal. Kubler defined *Portuguese Plain* as the architecture developed in a period of crisis and austerity between 1500 and 1700 and that resulted in the abandonment of ornamentation and the development of an architecture that would be simple and functional. He associates this transformation to the modernist movement in the twentieth century and to the connection between "economic necessity with the abandonment of the heavily decorated surface." (Kubler, 1972, p. 3)

Kubler's description of Portuguese architecture presents a system where inanimate objects absorb the qualities of the specific character of a monarch, borrowed from King João III (1502-1557) personality: "inward, religious and lonely, frugal and ceremonious as well as an expert in architecture." (Kubler, 1972, p. 6) This disposition served as an alter ego for *Portuguese Plain Architecture*, that allowed the development of the idea that there is something specific and unique to Portuguese architecture, that distinguishes it from its European counterparts. This architecture appears to be the embodiment of the essential qualities of architecture itself because it is made out of immaterial elements

⁵ A postgraduate program in Art History inaugurated in 1975, lead by the historian José-Augusto França, had a course based in Kubler's *Portuguese Plain Architecture* and *The Shape of Time* given by the historian José Eduardo Horta Correia. See (Horta Correia, 1991)

⁶ Kubler derives the term *Plain Architecture* from Júlio de Castilho's (1850-1819) (Castilho, 1879 #65) use of 16th and 17th century's Portuguese word *chão/chã* as applied to architecture. It literally means *flat* but it was used to signify unornamented. See (Kubler, 1972 p. 3)

⁷ An issue of the journal *JA: Jornal Arquitectos* about the contemporary appropriation of the term was published in 2001 (Dias, 2001).

⁸ In fact several notes regarding this had been made in even in early reviews regarding this. See (Smith, 1973) and (Varela Gomes, 2001)

⁹ In the first paragraph of the Introduction Kubler notes: “The transformation from 1520 to 1580 in Portugal is therefore of the same order as in the present century, when an ornate and eclectic taste surviving from the late 1800’s yielded to rationality and economic necessity in the abandonment of the heavily decorated surface.” (Kubler, 1972, p. 3)

¹⁰ For a list of terms that define a ‘modernist’ feeling in Kubler’s text see (Varela Gomes, 2001)

– such as proportion and light – strictly functional and thus not dependent of technological progress.

By rearranging the perception of Portuguese architecture in Portugal, Kubler achieved what he defined to as historians’ commitment, that is, to “... discover a patterned set of properties that will elicit the recognition all the while conveying a new perception of the subject.” (Kubler, 1962, p. 12) The return to a severe and austere architecture suggests a historical parallel with modernist architecture, and since the latter was intertwined with progressive politics this also contaminated the understanding of *Portuguese Plain Architecture*.

Plain Modernism

The book was adopted enthusiastically, not because of its flawless historical rigor,⁸ but because its narrative established a connection between *Plain Architecture* and essentially modernist features. The vocabulary that is used to describe *Plain Architecture* can be interchangeable with descriptions of Modernist buildings, early in the introduction Kubler sets the tone for this interdependence comparing both concepts, the reading of the book is unavoidably influenced by this connection. Similar to Modernist narratives, Kubler tells a story of duality: *Plain Architecture* appeared as a reaction towards the excessively decorative Manueline architecture, and likewise modernist architecture was also understood as a reaction to all the decorated revivalisms of the nineteenth century.⁹

Some of the quasi-vernacular buildings that Kubler chose to show as examples of *Plain Architecture* were evocative of early modernist buildings. Passages alluding to the austere and functional qualities of Portuguese architecture abound,¹⁰ and there is even a direct connection between the reception of Modernist architecture and the alleged impression that Portuguese architecture would have in the sixteenth century:

“The effect at Jerónimos in Belém, at Arronches, or at Freixo de Espada à Cinta was not unlike the mushroom columns in twentieth-century reinforced concrete construction as used under curved shells.” (Kubler, 1972, p. 30)

Kubler suggests us to think about Pier Luigi Nervi’s structures while looking at Mosteiro dos Jerónimos columns, a thought that that may seem farfetched but is endlessly recurrent while reading the book. These comparisons between *Plain Architecture* and Modernism continue to appear to the reader in each passage alluding to volumetric relations, and the fascination with ‘pure volumetric forms’ is even assigned by Kubler to be “recognizable as a distinct Portuguese trait as early as the sixteenth century.” (Kubler, 1972, p. 9)

Kubler himself admitted that he started his work as a historian because of a similar association, between the religious architecture of New Mexico and the formal austerity of Modernist buildings. Writing about the interest that the church Ranchos de Taos created among artists in the twentieth century Kubler noted:

“Yale College in the 1930s was a hotbed of architectural debate. During the years of the Great Depression, the academic Gothic quadrangles for the entire university were built on designs from the office of James Gamble Rogers. (...) *To undergraduates reading about the International Style in Europe, however, the immediate future seemed clear, bare simple shapes stripped down to functional nudity were the way, and for me, the way led to New Mexico.*” (Kubler, 1987, p. xi)

Historical drift and *bricolage*

Kubler’s research drifted from Latin American architecture to Portuguese and Spanish art and architecture precisely because he was interested in historical drift, and it was this interest that allowed him to define a new philosophy of history in *The Shape of Time* (Kubler, 1962).¹¹

Portugal, given its geographical and historical situation, is the kind of place that was very convenient to Kubler’s study. It is remote and yet connected, it was once very influent and yet lost most of its influence, it was part of Europe and yet it maintained the fundamental difference that its poverty and remoteness imposed.

Kubler’s contribution, with Martin Soria, to the *Pelican History of Art* series already dealt with the architecture of Spain, Portugal and their colonies in Latin America (Kubler, 1959). This work was amplified and expanded in the following years, Kubler published articles that later would become part of the main text of *Portuguese Plain Architecture* (Kubler, 1966) and translated a treaty by Félix da Costa (1639-1712), a Portuguese painter who Kubler considered to be the theorist of the Portuguese Plain Style.

Félix da Costa lived at a time of economic crisis, when Portugal had just regained its own king, after sharing three monarchs with Spain during a dynastic crisis, and before the trading of Brazilian gold and diamonds that brought another wave of wealth to the kingdom. It was roughly this timespan that Kubler used to define *Plain Architecture* and that is described in the subtitle of the book “Between Spices and Diamonds.” The simplicity of forms that defined Portuguese Plain corresponded to the fashion set by Félix da Costa (Kubler, 1967, p. 3) who presented a taste in art and architecture that was attuned to the economic sparseness of his time. Kubler notes that “he preferred to take his guidelines from architects who ‘strive for the essential and abhor the unnecessary’” (Kubler 1967, p. 18) and portrays Félix da Costa with a paradoxically progressive personality: “... he was both reactionary and avant-garde in his preference for classic order, coming too late for the sober

¹¹ These subjects were ideal to identify patterns of influences and disjunctions within the limits of those cultures: “The Shape of Time was written at the end of a twenty year period when I had been teaching and writing about Spanish architecture (1957), Latin American Art (1959), and pre-Columbian archeology (1962). The three books had occupied me since before 1950, and it seemed timely after the completion of the pre-Columbian manuscript in 1959 to bring together some of the theoretical points that had emerged from those overviews of the art of the New World, both in isolation and in relation to Spain and Portugal.” (Kubler, 1975, p. 759)

¹² The praise of craftsmanship is embedded in the idea of the *bricoleur*. The duality *bricolage*/engineering is analogous to the duality concreteness/abstraction. The *bricoleur* would work within the present whereas the engineer would have a more abstract approach to problem solving: "In its old sense the verb 'bricoler' applied to ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting and riding. It was however used with reference to some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle. And in our own time the "bricoleur" is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman." (Lévi-Strauss, 1972, p.16)

¹³ This issue has been thoroughly debated in Portuguese scholarship. For a synthesis see (Varela Gomes, 1991)

art of the Spanish court in Portugal before 1640, and too early for the neoclassic age. In short Félix da Costa preferred academic rule to rustic slovening, and favored tradition over ornamental drift." (Kubler, 1967, p. 18)

Kubler's view of da Costa's treaty was influenced by twentieth century theory: he looked at it through Lévi-Strauss's metaphor of the 'bricoleur' (Kubler 1967 p. 26). Félix da Costa's text was a patchwork of quotes from diverse authors, that achieved a character similar to Lévi-Strauss's reference to the ahistorical *savage* mind – the mind that would be more prone to the concrete, the mythical, to intuition and atemporality than to the abstract, the scientific and the historical.¹²

Kubler's *Portuguese Plain Architecture* was also characterized as a kind of *bricolage* by Thomas Reese (1985) given his interest on the subject of the *bricoleur* since it was "free from academic rules and Italianate forms" (Kubler, 1972, p.3) and "like a vernacular architecture, related to living dialect traditions more than to the great authors of a remote past" (Kubler, 1972, p. 3). Kubler also used the metaphor of assemblage of different motifs as a character of *Plain Architecture*. The combination of diverse ideas, the array of architects and craftsmen, the long time span of the building process and the incorporation of all these changes into one project made the association of *Plain Architecture* with the concept *bricolage*.

Modernist Vernacular

This emphasis on the specificity of Portuguese architecture was an interesting subject in Portugal at the time when the book was published. In 1972 Portugal was on the brink of a social and political revolution. As early as 1946 António de Oliveira Salazar, Portugal's autocratic prime-minister, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine next to a rotting apple signaling his decline, he was a remain of the of the pre – and post – World War II situations in Europe, a politician used to act in a climate of fear and suspicion, and pursuing a "self-consciously retrograde" strategy (Judt, 2005, p. 510). Even with the international restructuring of geopolitical relationships of Europe and the United States of the postwar period it took almost another thirty years for Salazar's regime to be overthrown in 1974 by a revolutionary military coup. Following a nineteenth century ideological tradition, the regime equated Portuguese identity with the distant era when Portugal was a growing empire.

Both conservative and progressive architects in Portugal grappled with notions of tradition. If conservative architects were developing an image of tradition that would be fitting with the State's ambitions, progressive architects were trying to find the authentic essence of Portuguese architecture in vernacular buildings.¹³ Like Félix da Costa, progressive Portuguese architects in the 1960s and 1970s were, like their European counterparts, "both reactionary and avant-garde," and were exploring Portuguese vernacular architecture. Such as Kubler had found New

Mexico religious architecture, they were fascinated by its simplicity, its austerity and its clear association with modernist formal and ideological values. (*Arquitetura Popular*, 1961).

Due to the backwardness and poverty in Portugal at the time, there was a Thoreauvian view of economics which allowed the instigation of an aesthetics of poverty, as in the ultimate functionalism of buildings made with scarce resources, the true “machine à habiter” that peasant’s houses were. While the regime encouraged the recognition of Portuguese picturesque traits in crafts and architecture, left wing architects were struggling to find the essence of Portuguese architecture in vernacular forms evocative of modernist austerity.¹⁴ This ideological yoke that links forms to political factions was encouraged by the known association between early modernism and left-wing politics.¹⁵ Thus, radical Portuguese architects adopted an aesthetics that allowed the two categories to blend – the vernacular and the modern.

The Portuguese reception of Kubler’s book is also correlated to the ideology of aesthetics of scarcity and to progressive liberal thought. The trope found in Kubler’s definition of, that it was made with the available means, was also emerging at the time. The architect and critic Nuno Portas (b. 1934) described the situation when he addressed the Aspen Design Conference of 1968: “But in our countries [Portugal and Spain] with their retarded process of industrialization, and after many naive experiences, it is clear that the sense of modernity deals with the rational and progressive use of available means and not with the use of a specific technology.”(Portas, 1968) The problem of poverty and inequality in Portugal was a matter for consideration by designers. Portas also made a call for a change in architectural work to be attuned to economics of poverty, urging designers to follow the example of the Italian architect and activist Danilo Dolci (1924-1997) who shifted his practice to social work (Portas, 1968).

After the revolution in 1974 the vast majority of architectural projects attempted to deal with the lack of housing through the development of large social housing neighborhoods throughout the country. Portas, then Secretary of Housing and Urbanism of the transitional government implemented a housing program (SAAL) in which many young architects participated.¹⁶ This was a great opportunity for this younger generation, and a few of them eventually became distinguished as the paragon of Portuguese architecture. The most well known being Álvaro Siza (b. 1933), but others such as Vítor Figueiredo (1929-2004) and Manuel Tainha (b. 1922) continued to operate in a context of architectural development.

The direct analogy between *Plain Architecture*, as defined by Kubler, and contemporary Portuguese architectural practice was made in 1979 – nine years before the publishing of the Portuguese translation of the book – by the architect Duarte Cabral de Mello (b. 1941). Mello referred to projects made within SAAL housing program, in the magazine *Arquitetura* dedicated to the work of architect Vítor Figueiredo (Mello 1979). Figueiredo’s projects were mainly State funded social

¹⁴ Similar reactions happened throughout Europe, about the Italian case see (Sabatino, 2010).

¹⁵ The social concerns of early modernist experiences, such as the Bauhaus in Weimar were connected to the socialist concerns of pre-modern William Morris by Nikolaus Pevsner in his book *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936).

¹⁶ For an extensive study of the process of development of housing projects see (Bandeirinha, 2007).



Saint Francis Church, Rancho de Taos, New Mexico, c. 1929. Photograph by Ansel Adams.
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housing, built with very tight budgets. Given the social and political context of Figueiredo's works, Mello shaped the analogy with *Plain Architecture*. According to Mello, Figueiredo's projects were part of the tradition of Portuguese architecture as Kubler presented it, quoting Kubler's association between vernacular architecture. Like *Plain Architecture*, Figueiredo's projects had great effect using scarce resources. Rather than owing everything to modernist tradition the projects recalled Plain spaces where "the interiors were enriched only by proportional refinement, and the coolly rational exteriors of those buildings subsisted without further ornamentation for about a century..." (Kubler, 1972, p. 4).

Mello compared the independence of Portuguese architects of the seventeenth century from academic constraints with Figueiredo's independence from the orthodoxy of modernist architecture. Figueiredo's architecture evoked, fifty years later, the sparse and abstract qualities of early modernist projects, and related to the scale and budget of a small peripheral country. This mixture between early modernism abstraction and the economics of poverty was thus linked to the core of *Portuguese Plain Architecture*. Mello links all these factors in the following section: "These are projects [Figueiredo's] whose great civic importance dissociates them from the scarcity often attributed to that type of dwelling. They pursue the lead already opened up by Portuguese Architecture from between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, between Discoveries and Brazil, a time when scarceness was widespread. An architecture without ornaments was developed at that time, a 'plain style' based in 'an experimental attitude among designers who were nourished on Renaissance theory and yet were able to disregard its prescriptions in the quest for useful and inexpensive building.'" (Mello, 1979, p.25)

On the other hand, the recognition of developed also through a different path. Influenced by the New Brutalism in England, younger architects following the teachings of Fernando Távora (1923-2005) developed the appreciation of the roughness of materials related to an ethical position. In the 1960s, when the image of modernism became associated with corporations, and copies of Mies van der Rohe skyscrapers were becoming ubiquitous, the preference for the vernacular constituted a reaction. In the 1970s, Kubler's *Portuguese Plain Architecture*, presented an opportunity to translate this English influence into a Portuguese essence. It was as if Portuguese architecture had always been Brutalist, as were the examples of vernacular architecture that Peter and Alison Smithson found in Greece following Le Corbusier's footsteps (Banham, 1966). It was an advantage for Portuguese architects to be presented with a concept as rich as *Plain Architecture*, since it was related to Modernism and simultaneously with the praise of craftsmanship that was already present in the Brutalist vocabulary, and was also rooted in the consideration that this way of building was "a distinct Portuguese trait".

Alexandre Alves Costa (b.1939), architect and critic synthesized in a poetic way the instrumentalisation of Kubler's *Plain Architecture* by his generation: "Kubler gave us courage, Távora inspired us, taught us, and so, between conversations and travels (...) there is a Portuguese architecture." (Costa, 2001, p. 35) When Alves Costa says "Kubler gave us courage" he implies that Kubler was convenient to redefine a reality that already existed, recognized by an eminent scholar who endowed this historical precedent: a kind of Portuguese architecture that is an interpretation of certain vernacular traits through the prism of modernism, awash in the ideological ballast that those modernist ideas exuded.

Conclusion

In the last 30 years Portuguese architecture changed, in the sense that the political and social context also changed. The entry in the European Union was marked by a return to a nostalgic desire to show the significance of Portuguese architecture abroad. The opening of economic barriers allowed the internationalization of Portuguese architects and the recognition of their projects beyond the country.

In a recent interview, the architect Eduardo Souto de Moura (b. 1952) who won the Pritzker Prize in 2011, remembered George Kubler's *Portuguese Plain Architecture* to sustain that there is in fact a Portuguese architecture, that is pragmatic and plain, and that his own work is inscribed in that tradition. (Sacchetti, 2011) One might approach many of the most recent projects made by Portuguese as influenced by the formal traits of Portuguese Plain, although the economics of poverty was long substituted by an array of large scale projects that nevertheless formally evoke the aesthetics of poverty.

Kubler's book appeared at a crucial moment and became instrumental to a certain group of progressive architects who had a penchant for modernist architecture and the vernacular but were not comfortable with the conservative labeling of traditional Portuguese architecture. In light of Kubler's work it was possible to fit works that used the language of traditional forms with modernist tropes as examples of a contemporary emergence of *Portuguese Plain Architecture*.

Paradoxically, it was this 'inward and religious' architecture that would serve the model to the 'secular and expansive' revolution. The suggestion of moral ascendancy that was implied in early modernism was definitely shared with some aspects of *Portuguese Plain Architecture*, a connection between the moral legitimacy and the simplicity that early modernist buildings shared with Portuguese architecture of the sixteenth century. *Portuguese Plain Architecture* became thus a blend between two different kinds of romanticization, the first dedicated to the moral grounds of early modernism, the second to a renewal of Portuguese tradition. ●

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