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# CASSIANO BRANCO - MODERN VISIONS OF AN 'INCONVENIENT' ARCHITECT

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## **Abstract**

Cassiano Branco (1897-1970) belonged to the pioneer generation of modern Portuguese architects, which worked during the years of the dictatorship regime. During the 30s, Cassiano produced an anti-conservative and eloquent architecture, contrasting with the guidelines of the regime. The discomfort about his personality came also from his ideological opposition to the government. Among his counterparts he has been considered 'an exception to the rule', working, mainly for private investors, on programs for renting house buildings, movie theaters and tourism facilities, which were built over the *boulevards* outlined in Lisbon or in the natural and intact regional scenarios of Portugal.

**Keywords:** Cassiano Branco, Estado Novo Architecture, and Modernity.

## **1. Introduction**

On 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974 there was the Revolution that deposed the Estado Novo dictatorship regime in Portugal<sup>1</sup>. Following this political and social event, the magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* published in 1976 a thematic issue, dedicated almost completely to the country, which heading was 'Portugal An II'<sup>2</sup>. This issue was the opportunity to present a prominent group of architects in an international context that included Siza Vieira (n. 1932), Teotónio Pereira (1922-2016), and Gonçalo Byrne (n.1941), among others, who were mainly involved in social-housing programs.

The Historian José Augusto França (n. 1922) opened this issue of the French magazine with a text about the 'pure and inflexible' period of the 'fascist regime'. França identified a new generation of architects that emerged together with the regime on the 30s. Cristino da Silva (1896-1976), Pardal Monteiro (1897-1957), Cottilleni Telmo (1897-1948) and Cassiano Branco (1897-1970), were some of the pioneers of a modernity that replaced the 'neo romantic' revival style of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the conceptual ambiguity between modernity and tradition debated in the sphere of the regime (mainly from the early 40s), those protagonists launched the bases for a new language on architecture, which was assumed later in the 1<sup>st</sup> Congress of Portuguese Architects' Association, held in Lisbon in 1948.

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<sup>1</sup> The military dictatorship was implemented in Portugal in the sequence of Coup d'état of 28<sup>th</sup> September 1926. The Estado Novo (New State) Constitution would be promulgated in 1933.

<sup>2</sup> AAVV. *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* – 'Dossier Portugal an II', de Maio/Junho de 1976.

From those protagonists mentioned above, Cassiano Branco received a special attention on the following article written by Fernando Gomes da Silva, who qualified him as an ‘exception to the rule’. The text, full documented with pictures provided by the architect’s family archive, was placed in the magazine as a mediation point between the traumatic period decrypted by França, and the presentation of the new generation of architects committed to the challenges set by the Revolution. Cassiano had died six years before this publication, at the age of 72, being introduced as an ‘inconvenient’ (*gênant*) architect, not only because of his political position against the regime<sup>3</sup>, but also because of his anti-conservative architecture.

Namely in the 30s, Cassiano Branco’s architecture explored shapes and situations extracted from the artistic *avant-garde* universe. Cubic volumes, circular balconies and bowindows are the composition fundamentals of several buildings designed by Cassiano especially for private investors coming from the new *bourgeoisie* created by Estado Novo. Those fundamentals were used to develop programs for renting house buildings, movie theaters and hotels, which were built over the *boulevards* outlined in Lisbon in the late previous century.

Cassiano Branco integrated ideas and novelties in his projects withdrawn from artistic fields, following the principals of a shared education between artists and architects in the Fine Arts School of Lisbon. The *avant-garde* debate was intensified particularly during the First World War, when Portugal lived an effervescent cultural moment. In that period it was relevant the presence of artists such as the Delaunay couple who found in the west limit of Europe a possibility for their research about *simultanéité*. Cassiano Branco would explore some of these concepts manipulating his architecture as a tool to explore this modern aesthetics namely in building elements, and in the sinuosity surfaces of his facades.

Cassiano Branco and the architects of his generation were exposed to new materials and technologies. Particularly concrete and its derivatives, and the components produced by the strong Portuguese ceramic industry<sup>4</sup>, had a huge impact, changing building methods and demanding a new attitude from architects<sup>5</sup>.

Cassiano Branco’s architecture reflected all those changes and ambiguities brought by the Estado Novo regime.

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<sup>3</sup> Cassiano Branco would be involved in the election of the regime opponents Republican Presidents candidates twice. In 1949, he supported Norton de Matos (1867-1955). His involvement with Presidential elections would lead to his detention by PIDE (International Police for Estate Defense) in 1958, by the time he was supporting Humberto Delgado’s (1906-1965) candidature.

<sup>4</sup> The main ceramic industrial products were: bricks, roofing shingles, mosaic pavement, tiles; stoneware shackles for sewage, porcelain sanitary, among others.

<sup>5</sup> Structure compression was overcome by the introduction of cantilevered slabs, allowing torn veins and volume variations. Also the integration of industrial components required a rigorous metrical planning, contributing for increasing architectural rationality.

## 2. Liberdade Avenue as the main stage for Cassiano's modernity

Cassiano Viriato Branco was born in 1897 in Lisbon, in a house close to Liberdade Avenue<sup>6</sup>. This axis was the most important *boulevard* opened fifteen years before his birth in accordance to Ressano Garcia (1847-1911) Plan. Cassiano could observe and feel all the implementation process of this positivist desire, which would become later the main stage for expressing his own visions of modernity.

A photo by Domingos Alvão (1872-1946), taken in 1937, at the balcony of the famous Victoria Hotel, designed by Cassiano Branco, depicted this overlapping. Alvão presented the long *boulevard* almost intact, with its palm trees, flowerbeds and ornamented sidewalks, while the round balcony of the hotel intersected the left side of the composition, framing the image. This balcony coated in rosy marble and bright stainless steel elements, was proposed by Domingos Alvão as a tribune to observe the city and its changes.

Victoria Hotel was projected between 1934 and 1935. The building, featured as non-symmetric composition with horizontal cantilevered finished at the extreme by round balconies, as the one in the photo taken by Alvão. Those circular shapes embodied the spirit of Delaunay's *simultanéité*, reacting to the intensity of sunlight as a cadency of orphic circles.

The first project designed by Cassiano Branco to Liberdade Avenue dated from 1928, two years after finishing his degree in Architecture. At that time Cassiano developed a two-floor concrete building garage program (already demolished) to keep and sell automobile vehicles. Two striated pilasters emerged in its façade extremes evoking flaming torches, while above the entrance gate; a glass composition filtered the light, creating an *art-déco* atmosphere in the interior. The Paris International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts, which Cassiano Branco visited in 1925, was a fundamental reference followed by him mainly in the 30s.

The same materials and architectonic vocabulary were used in the terrace kiosk of the Palladio Café (also demolished), built in 1933. A centralized concrete structure, based on one main column, supported an intermediated floor over the bar, from that point was possible to have a reserved and panoramic view of Liberdade Avenue. On the top, a modern neon lighting lettering advertised 'Martini Vermouth' drink brand, under a comic image of a pig.

The atmosphere produced by urban lights and advertisements was a novelty at that time. Theaters and cinemas contributed to this new environment with its announcements and crowds, being Liberdade Avenue the most important spot of the capital. Cassiano Branco had the opportunity to work on those new urban programs, being involved since 1930 at the

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<sup>6</sup> Cassiano Branco was born in Telhal Street nr. 51, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.

renovation of the eclectic Eden Theatre. Cassiano Branco's challenge was increasing the audience number, transforming the former hall in a movie-theatre with the capacity for receiving the sonorous cinema. The last proposal made by Cassiano to Eden Theater consisted in five vertical bowindows, which depicted the façade above the ground floor, while at the top two steel frame boxes of light similar to lanterns were deployed, punctuating the building limits. The new hall would be inaugurated in 1937, although without Cassiano Branco's responsibility, once he had breached the contract with the building owner, Companhia União Fabril, being Carlos Dias the architect who finished the project.

From Cassiano Branco's design, it remains the main architectural structure, and the entrance lobby below the projection room, where several stairs conducted people to different sectors of the cinema. This particular lobby with limited dimensions was designed as a kind of a movie set, composed by overlapped stairs, creating a dynamic and delirious atmosphere, which worked as a preparation to the cinema experience.

### **3. Dwelling buildings for the new *bourgeoisie***

The cinema apogee in Lisbon during the 30s matched with an economical and political stability reached by the regime through a tight control of public finance that allowed to overcome the negative impact of the 1929 American Depression<sup>7</sup>. For Cassiano Branco this was the opportunity to design several renting buildings to private investors, filling and consolidating available plots all over Lisbon.

Cassiano worked with common typologies, leaving his mark mainly in façades, which were designed by him as a kind of scenario to be understood in movement, just as in the cinema experience. As it was mentioned before, the new possibilities of concrete were determinant for his architectonic exploitation. Cassiano's façades used to be designed in a systematic game between the plan of vertical structure, tangent to the deployment perimeter of buildings, and the plan of cantilevered volumes that advanced on the first one.

The project for 3 Almeida Brandão Street in Lisbon, designed in 1932, corresponds to one of the first programs for multi-familiar buildings done by Cassiano Branco. This was a four-storey building with two dwellings on each level. The internal organization followed the common typologies of that period, featured by a central axis that hosted the stair, storages and bedrooms for employees and kitchen; Living or *bureau* rooms were related with the main façade; facing the side façade, a row of bedrooms was placed together with the bathroom. Finishing this sequence, the dining room was placed in articulation with the kitchen. The

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<sup>7</sup> For this accomplishment contributed the interest rate reduction providing an easy access to credit, and public investment mainly with a huge campaign of public works. Cf. CARDOSO, José Luis (2012) 'Ecos da Grande Depressão em Portugal: relatos, diagnósticos e soluções' em *Análise Social*, n.º 203, Lisboa, on line edition [http://www.scielo.mec.pt/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0003-25732012000200006#1](http://www.scielo.mec.pt/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0003-25732012000200006#1) (consulted in May, 2016).

symmetry of the main façade followed the *art-déco* research done by Cassiano, being the composition depicted by horizontal strips underlined by masonry advances. At the center of the elevation, rotated cubic volumes integrated oblique windows, while in the last level a composition of plans is projected to the sky.

Cassiano's projects of dwelling renting buildings would increase in the middle of the 30s, after the implementation of the Concrete Code (1935). This was a period of huge production with great investments in residential programs. Cassiano Branco designed several buildings over these years, being some of them signed towards to the municipality by the civil engineers he used to work with. Cassiano's interventions in 46 Álvares Cabral Avenue and 7 Nova de São Mamede Street are examples of this intense activity, shared with those engineers<sup>8</sup>.

In 1937 Cassiano Branco designed his masterpiece in terms of residential buildings in 27 Defensores de Chaves Avenue. This building also followed the right/left symmetric typology, was a synthesis of his projects done in the 30s displaying an undulated *art-déco* façade. The composition symmetry was reinforced by a striated plan, which intersected the sequence of organic cantilevered volumes that featured the elevation.

Cassiano's dwelling buildings were addressed to a new urban society, at the time very concentrated in Lisbon. The dimension of the houses and their facilities, such as bathroom, kitchen and ventilation, contrasted with the general living conditions of ordinary people. Cassiano Branco acted in the beginning of a period, understanding the demands of this new social extract that emerged during the agenda of Estado Novo regime.

#### **4. Tourism and the Conciliation Challenge Between Tradition and Modernity**

A healthy conscience of urbanism allied with policies providing the natural marvels and the epic history of the country, created the perfect scenario for introducing tourism as a fundamental subject in that period. A special sensibility for idleness programs depicted Cassiano's work base. The urban proposal done in 1930 for Costa da Caparica in the south of Lisbon followed this principle, foreseeing a huge change on that Atlantic coast territory. New hotels, casinos, cinemas, theaters and sport facilities would be provided to the new *bourgeoisie*, which would use this wide city to exhibit a new way of life contrasting with the reality of that place, which at the time remained as a small village of fishermen with precarious conditions.

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<sup>8</sup> Bandeira Vaz and Teixeira Rego signed technical responsibility in the case of 46 Álvares Cabral Avenue; Jacinto Bettencourt did it in 7 Nova de São Mamede Street. Both were designed between 1936 and 1937.

The development of tourism would be a strategy of the regime that would promote a set of policies to improve both historical built heritage, as well as a healthier quality of life, fundamental issue to build a ‘new state’<sup>9</sup>. Cassiano Branco understood the importance of tourism sector proposing ideas and projects to areas with potential growth.

The Thermal Grand Hotel of Luso was Cassiano’s first experience in terms of regional hotels, designed in 1938. This project was also the opportunity he had to work with Bissaya Barreto (1886-1974), a philanthropist doctor, administrator of Luso Water Company. The medical assets of water in that region of Beira coast (in the center of country), was the main argument to built a facility with good conditions to host people on healthy vacations, providing at the same time the possibility of enjoying the natural environment of that place. The building was planed as an L, framing the huge swimming pool that joined the water from Luso fountain. Nevertheless the hotel traditional image was considered a ‘building with modern lines featured by a refined elegance combined with ornate sobriety’<sup>10</sup>.

Bissaya Barreto conservative beliefs would demand from Cassiano Branco a complex exercise for combining tradition and modernity. Those convictions would be promoted with more visibility during the Centenarian Commemorations of the Portuguese nation, which had been prepared to take place in 1940<sup>11</sup>. The Centenarian program foresaw initiatives in several historical cities, the Portuguese World Exhibition to be held in Lisbon, would be the most relevant. Cassiano Branco worked for the Exhibition designing the surrounding areas of the Colonial Garden. However his participation in the main event of the capital, his attention would be much more devoted to the challenge launched by Bissaya Barreto for designing a thematic park for children in Coimbra.

Barreto imagined a pedagogical place where monuments and traditional Portuguese houses from north to south, including the one from the colonies, could be deployed in an a scale adjusted for children. ‘Portugal for the Little Ones’, would be the name of the enclosure, which included three sections, each one built in different moments, gathering the architect and the philanthropist doctor for a long period of 28 years.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The first Tourism National Congress took place in 1936 in the Geography Society of Lisbon, being an important initiative to debate the potentialities and gaps that existed in Portugal on this matter. Costa da Caparica was addressed by Manuel d’Agro Ferreira referring the demand of the beaches by lots of people coming from the capital, spending there long periods without good host conditions.

<sup>10</sup> *cf.* ‘Grande Hotel das Termas do Luso’, Brochure edited by the time when the hotel opened, by the Water of Luso Company, in 1940.

<sup>11</sup> In the Centenarian Commemorations of the Portuguese nation it was intended to celebrate the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Foundation and 300<sup>th</sup> of its Independence Restoration.

<sup>12</sup> The first phase named Village Nest for the Little Ones was concluded in 1940; the second one corresponding to the Ethnographic and Colonial Section completed in 1951; the Metropolitan Section finished in 1961 was the last phase of the park.

Barreto would involve and support Cassiano's in a wide research about the fundamentals of the Portuguese architecture; this influence would be determinant on the architect's path. The reports done by Cassiano Branco as base for Coimbra Park reproductions, gave him knowledge about the identity heritage of the country, contributing for a changing thought process about a possible way that Portuguese architecture could take.

The first section of the Park named 'Village Nest' was concluded in 1940, integrating a taxonomic panoramic of Portugal typical houses. The Ethnographic and Colonial sector was the second section, finished in 1951, including pavilions from the former Portuguese Colonies<sup>13</sup>, Brazil and the islands of Madeira and Azores also took part of this section, together with a complex pavilion dedicated to Coimbra featured by a reproduction of the main architectonic references of the city<sup>14</sup>, all of them gathered in the same building. The Metropolitan Section finished in 1961 represented the last phase of the Park built, including pavilions dedicated to Portugal regions. As Cassiano had already explored in the Coimbra Pavilion, all the buildings, which composed the Metropolitan area were designed as a *collage* of reproduced fragments of each region monuments. In this context, the Park would be for Cassiano Branco a kind of a laboratory for disposing and manipulating all collected elements, rehearsing improbable conciliations among them all.

This process was seen as a base from where it would be possible to rebuild a kind of continuity between the past and the future, which, according to common sense, would be interrupted by modernity. Cassiano's research passed from the scientific process of collecting and reproducing in appropriated scale to a kind of taxonomy inversion, which originated new uncanny architectonic entities.

## **5. Porto Coliseum and the International Approach**

Cassiano Branco was also involved in the project of the Porto Coliseum, by the time of the Centenarian Commemorations. This concert hall, planned for Passos Manuel Street, corresponds to a mature project, reflecting his sensibility about international culture.<sup>15</sup>

A special attention was done to Amsterdam City Theater, designed by the Dutch Architect Jan Wils (1891-1972), which had been also involved in the long process the Coliseum in 1938.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The colonies represented are Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, São Tomé and Cape Verde.

<sup>14</sup> Coimbra pavilion integrated architectonic fragments of the Santa Cruz Church, the Old Cathedral, the Episcopal Palace and the University Turret, among others.

<sup>15</sup> Cassiano Branco had been working on this project since 1937, besides his contract with Garantia Insurance Company signed two years later, in 1939.



Porto Coliseum was deployed in a plot of block interior, overcoming the former Passos Manuel garden, where music and theater performances used to be carried outdoor. Cassiano Branco proposed a wide round shape to host the concert hall, which would be deployed in the center of the block core.

Cassiano's façade for Porto Coliseum would be designed in the following Passos Manuel alignment, resulting from the division between two different programmatic morphologies. One of them, depicted by a blind wall with Porto coat of arm and a vertical plan announcing the presence of the building, corresponds to the concert hall; the other corresponded to a commercial building with horizontal ripped windows that complement the set. This functional separation was Cassiano's proposal strength, distinguishing it namely from the one made by Wils, who foresaw a glass building occupying all the following street alignment.

During the building process, Cassiano's contract was breached. This disagreement prevented him to complete the façade with the neon lights he had predicted. Besides this event, Coliseum maintained the essentiality of the project, visible in the sequence of spaces, which were designed to drive crowds to different seat sectors of the concert hall.

As in the Eden Theater of the Capital, Porto Coliseum was also designed to involve people in a dynamic experience, which started in the porch of the main entrance, which enlarged Passos Manuel Street, creating an external foyer for ticket sales and continue into different halls and curved corridors before reaching the round shape of the concert hall. In a certain sense, this main hall translated into space dimension, the orphic concepts used by Cassiano in the balconies and ironworks of his buildings.

## **6. Cassiano Branco the 'Inconvenient' Architect**

Although the arguments launched by Gomes da Silva in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* considering Cassiano Branco's 'inconveniency', the historical expression of his architecture after the 30s should be also considered as an 'inconvenient' issue. Cassiano's unbridled talent and his sense of modernity was absorbed by a growing demand about national identity.

After the 30s, Cassiano's architecture depicted by an architectonic conflict perceived in the late decade. How to combine the research about tradition with modernity, compelled him in a dilemma, figuring out a kind of an impossible solution to overcome this demand.

Besides all those issues, Cassiano Branco's marked with his cosmopolitan visions the beginning of modernity in Portugal, in the traumatic period of the dictatorship.

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<sup>16</sup> Cassiano Branco's interest by Dutch architecture was also visible in the magazine clips he used to collect about Willem Dudok (1884-1974), namely the Collège Hollandais building in the Cité Universitaire of Paris, and the Hilversum morphologies, constituted research fundaments. Also clips in Cassiano's assets referenced the cinemas Odeon in England Crewe, York, Yeovil and Dudley, built between 1935 e 1939.

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## Biography

Paulo Tormenta Pinto, Portuguese Architect, born in 1970. Graduated from Lusíada University in 1993, PhD from Polytechnic University of Catalonia (Barcelona) in 2004. In 1994 he opened an architectural practice in Lisbon. Completed many constructions projects in Portugal. INH-Award for Architecture in 2002 and IHRU-Award for Architectures in 2012. Aggregated Assistance professor at ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon, where has coordinated the Phd program in Architecture since 2011.

## Illustrations captions and credits.

**Figure 01.** Photos by Domingos Alvão ‘Hotel Vitoria na Avenida da Liberdade’, Lisbon, 1939. [Alvão Photography Found, Centro Português de Fotografia DGLAB/SEC-PT/CPF/ALV/006172 and DGLAB/SEC-PT/CPF/ALV/005064];

**Figure 02.** Cassiano Branco, Rios d’Oliveira Garage, 1928, Lisbon [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation CFT003.010288.ic]; and kiosk in Liberdade Avenue, 1933, Lisbon. [Cassiano Branco’s Assets PT/AMLSB/CB/04/06/02]

**Figure 03.** Cassiano Branco, Eden Theater Stairs, 1937, Lisbon [Cassiano Branco’s Assets PT/AMLSB/CB/06/01/05]

**Figure 04.** Cassiano Branco, elevation and plans of 3 Almeida Brandão Street, Lisbon, 1932. [AML/Building 978/Proc.2087/DAG/PG/1932]

**Figure 05.** Elevation and plan of 46 Álvares Cabral, 1933, signed by Teixeira Rego [AML/Building 50194/Proc.6436/DAG/PG/1936]; Elevation and plan of 7 Nova São Mamede Street, signed by Jacinto Betencourt [AML/Building51011/Proc.868/SEC/PG/1937]; Cassiano Branco Elevation and plan of 27 Defensores de Chaves Avenue,

1937 [Cassiano Branco's Assets PT/AMLSB/CB/05/34, and AML Buiding 51324/Proc.26214/DAG/PG/ 1996].

**Figure 06.** Cassiano Branco, Costa da Caparica Plan, 1930. [Cassiano Branco's Assets, Municipal Archive of Lisbon/ PT/AMLSB/CB/09/02/08].

**Figure 07.** Cassiano Branco, Portugal for the Little Ones, Metropolitan Section [Cassiano Branco's Assets, Municipal Archive of Lisbon/PT/AMLSB/CB/01/05/22].

**Figure 08.** Cassiano Branco, Porto Coliseum by Domingos Alvão, 1939. [Carlos Romão Archive in <http://cidadesurpreendente.blogspot.pt/2006/11/o-coliseu-visto-por-domingos-alvo.html>, in October 2014], and Porto Coliseum Plan, 1940 [AMP/LO1940/0615/062]