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Collective Storytelling of Common Architecture

Arquitectura Aqui in Portugal and Spain

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[Traffic control police cabin turned into a press kiosk in Ponte de Lima, Portugal (built c. 1940). Phot. Ricardo Costa Agarez, 2022.]

Introduction

Digital archives can be open laboratories for knowledge production and for new forms of intellectual and cultural examination of the built environment. Open is the key qualifier here: Open to whom? Whose archives are these? Who are their gatekeepers? What content are they open to? Does open access, on its own, guarantee the creation of a meaningful laboratory for knowledge production? Can the production itself be open? Knowledge of architecture and the built environment is generally narrow and exclusive: for the twentieth century, much of the research and writing behind it is based on canonical works (most in the ‘global North’) and very little on the common buildings and ensembles that frame community lives in unassuming ways – ‘common’ objects both in that they were meant to serve collective purposes and have not been seen, in art-historical, style-focused readings, as deserving attention. Even canonical works are largely narrated in specialised dissemination forums, confined by the rarefied language of experts. If storytelling avantgarde buildings to ‘lay’ audiences is a challenge for most, how about more mundane structures? Common pieces of public infrastructure are, in fact, seldom seen as architecture at all in most contexts, even by designers. This widens the gap between the world of architects and the communities they exist to serve – a gap that has recurrently assailed the conscience of architectural thinkers, from contextualists to postmodernists and beyond.

We believe that digital archives constructed as open laboratories for knowledge production can help bridge this gap and bring architecture closer to communities, if they are collectively generated: the paper discusses this possibility, its promise and challenges, based on a concrete example. Our research, dissemination and public engagement project *Arquitectura Aqui. Community, Proximity, Action: Housing and Collective Facilities in Portugal and Spain 1939-1985* is grounded on a purpose-built digital archive: a new open-access information system where existing data (historical, material, technical and socio-cultural) is collected from mostly analogue, national, regional and local sources, filtered and combined in novel readings using layperson-friendly language and turned into storytelling vignettes about communities and their built environment. This ongoing collective effort in architectural and urban history making and dissemination incorporates contributions from local actors – users, promoters, enablers and researchers – and seeks to respond to their input and concerns. Our focus on common objects aims at extending the use life of sturdy, pragmatic buildings that fulfil the essential needs of historically deprived groups in villages on remote locations that experienced desertification and deindustrialisation processes and towns in metropolitan and coastal areas. We approach communities comprehensively, investigating every building or space dedicated to collective use and lowest-income rehousing estates, built within the proposed timeframe through public (state or local) commission and/or funding. Seeking to avoid a patronising stance and conventional value-granting hierarchies, we co-create this history with community members to encourage its appropriation and inform local management, retain and reuse initiatives, countering the unsustainable, resource-exhausting trend to pull down and replace these structures that is still prevalent in Portugal and Spain.

On *Arquitectura Aqui*

In this paper, we present the tenets and lines of development of our ongoing research projects – under the common header *Arquitectura Aqui* (*Architecture Here* in both Portuguese and Spanish)² – while questioning their potential, limits and challenges, at a moment when we prepare to test our ideas in loco, with fieldwork set to begin in the coming months.

Four key concerns underpin *Arquitectura Aqui*:

1. How can we, as historians and thinkers of architecture and urban design, foster a more sustainable built environment? A critical approach to the often fluid notion of sustainability in built environment production processes in the ‘developed’ world is, we believe, dependent on a heightened conscience of the need to retain and reuse existing building stock before building anew – the need to extend, through repurposing, reappropriating and maintaining, the ‘use life’ of buildings and ensembles.³ Portugal and Spain – where modern essential needs were met with the slow-pace provision of basic infrastructure and collective-use facilities throughout the twentieth century – appear as a relevant field of enquiry into how buildings erected with considerable effort in what were then ‘developing’ countries, can be reassessed and reconciled with contemporary requirements through the prism of critical sustainability.

2. How can we nurture more resilient communities – i.e., less reliant on dwindling public resources to erect new structures and better prepared to address present and future needs with initiatives focused on managing the building stock that is already there? We suggest that constructing a solid knowledge base about this building stock is an essential step in supporting well-informed, sustained participation and engagement by local communities in management actions. This effort will be more effective if such knowledge base is constructed together with communities: as Chris van Empel noted,

² *Arquitectura Aqui. Comunidade, Proximidade, Ação: Habitação e Equipamento Coletivo em Portugal e Espanha 1939-1985 / Comunidad, Proximidad, Acción: Vivienda y Equipamiento Colectivo en Portugal y España 1939-1985* is the public name of two research projects: *ReARQ.IB – Built Environment Knowledge for Resilient, Sustainable Communities: Understanding Everyday Modern Architecture and Urban Design in the Iberian Peninsula (1939-1985)*, funded by the European Research Council (Starting Grant GA949686) and hosted by Iscte – University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal (PI Ricardo Costa Agarez, researchers Catarina Ruivo, Diego Inglez de Souza, Ivonne Herrera and Sheila Palomares); and *The Architecture of Need: Community Facilities in Portugal 1945-1985*, funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (PTDC/ART-DAQ/6510/2020) and hosted by Évora University, Portugal (PI Ricardo Costa Agarez, researchers João Cardim, Rita Fernandes, Sofia Diniz and Tânia Rodrigues).

³ There is by now substantial literature on the topic of Retain & Reuse applied to built environment production processes. For a recent, concise overview, see David Cheshire, *The Handbook to Building a Circular Economy* (London: RIBA, 2021). For a specific example that materialised some of these tenets – the award-winning ‘metamorphose’ of the Tour Bois-Le-Prêtre in Paris by Druot, Lacaton and Vassal –, see Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton and Jean-Phillipe Vassal, *PLUS – Les grands ensembles de logements – Territoires d’exception* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2004).

communities become interested in built environment management processes once ‘their involvement is encouraged by stimulating information, and expertise is provided to support their contributions.’⁴

3. How can we help make architecture and urban design more socially relevant? In other words, how can we contribute to reconnect the discipline and everyday needs, widening the relevance of the profession to society at large? In contemporary Portugal and Spain, the distance between the two increases, just as the two countries become relevant in architecture’s global dissemination circles through the fractional output of a celebrated few; the everyday production that most intensely affects people’s lives and escapes publication is blanketed over as low-quality by the metropolitan architectural elite.⁵ Many Iberian citizens, meanwhile, tend to associate architecture with high-profile schemes (conference centre, townhall, courthouse) and less so with their proximity facilities (health centre, retirement home, fire brigade station).

This is detrimental to both architecture and society. One way to counter it, we posit, is to shed light on the immediate context of everyday life, its more mundane objects, seeing unassuming, bureaucratic and even ‘ugly’ buildings as architecture deserving to be considered and discussed: in short, *Architecture is Here*, all around us. We – those who think about the discipline’s place in the world – need what Joan Ockman called a ‘critique of normative architecture’ to mend ‘the breach between theory and practice’ and overcome the discipline’s marginalisation: in ‘allying itself with avant-garde projects rather than addressing itself to issues of normative practice,’ Ockman noted, architectural theory ‘has too long evaded the challenge of taking on the real and pressing problems of the designed environment’.⁶ While Ockman wrote from a specific academic and economic (North American) context, we borrow her proposition to address what we see as a shortcoming of architectural culture in Portugal and Spain: investigating twentieth-century quotidian, collective-use buildings is one first step towards creating a critique and a theory of this architecture – and prompting practicing architects, today, to engage with it more closely.

4. How can we understand differently and appropriate structures that are directly associated to a traumatic or controversial period of recent history, marked by radical shifts in political rule both in Portugal and Spain?

Our main question is, in short: How can architectural and urban history – of our closest, most essential and needed structures such as collective-use facilities and lowest-income housing, in this case

⁴ Chris van Empel, ‘The Effectiveness of Community Participation in Planning and Urban Development’, *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment* 117 (2008), 549-556 (549).

⁵ A position made clear, for example, in a recent report on the state of affairs in Portuguese architecture commissioned by the national research council: Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, *Agenda Temática de Investigação e Inovação: Arquitectura Portuguesa* (Lisboa: FCT, 2019).

⁶ Joan Ockman, ‘Toward a Theory of Normative Architecture’, in *Architecture of the Everyday*, edited by Steve Harris and Deborah Berke (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997): 122-52 (150).

erected between 1939 and 1985 in Portugal and Spain – be put at the service of more sustainable and resilient communities?

We believe that the answer to this question involves, among other tools:

1. The creation of a digital archive as an open laboratory for the collective production and dissemination of knowledge, accessible to different publics and constantly expanded.
2. The development of storytelling devices that combine our capacity to read the built environment as designers and thinkers (by reading we mean researching, analysing, describing, structuring a discourse and writing about buildings and ensembles) with the capacity of community members to read and elaborate on those structures in many ways other than these.

Not coincidentally, the objects that retain our interest – market halls and elementary schools, vicinity healthcare centres and retirement homes, post offices and cooperative facilities, low-cost rehousing estates; generally sturdy, concrete-framed, no-frills structures, many barely fifty years old – are repositories not only of energy and materials but also of local knowledge and (intensely) lived experiences. These mid-century buildings are ‘perhaps the most unloved stock of buildings ever constructed’, as Carl Elefante put it: yet saving the significant amounts of embedded energy they contain ‘must play a role in curtailing climate change.’⁷ Our research focuses on a period that coincided, in Portugal and Spain, with the generalisation of reinforced concrete, ‘The most destructive material on Earth’, to use the environment journalist Jonathan Watts’ words.⁸ Envisaging alternative futures for these structures, other than demolition and replacement, counters the planned obsolescence premise that, according to reinforced concrete critics like Sérgio Ferro and Anselm Jappe, was at the root of its development as a mass-construction technique.⁹ The implications of this development were profound, as Jacques Fredet noted: reducing the estimated life of buildings turns them into mere functional implements that can be put aside once initial costs are redeemed; their embedded social content, historically a formative element of the city, disappears; the symbolic function of the built (latent or manifest) is often forgotten.¹⁰

Concurrently, while such facilities tend to fall outside of the established categories of historical, cultural or architectural significance (stemming from the traditions of historic preservation policies),

⁷ Carl Elefante, ‘Changing World, Evolving Value’, *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 48, 2-3 (2017): 9-12 (p. 10).

⁸ Jonathan Watts “Concrete: The Most Destructive Material on Earth” *The Guardian*, 25 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/feb/25/concrete-the-most-destructive-material-on-earth>.

⁹ See Sérgio Ferro, “Concrete as Weapon,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 46 (December 2018) and Anselm Jappe, *Béton — Arme de construction massive du capitalisme* (Paris: Editions de L’échappée, 2020).

¹⁰ Jacques Fredet, *Les Maisons de Paris: Types courants de l'architecture mineure parisienne de la fin de l'époque médiévale à nos jours, avec l'anatomie de leur construction*, vol.1 (Paris: Editions de l'Encyclopédie des nuisances, 2003), 134-135, cited in Jappe, *Béton*, 84-85.

they tend to bear testimony to important episodes, routines and even long periods of our daily lives: they are where we dwell, learn, meet, heal, trade, work, enjoy ourselves. They are condensers of common (as in both collective and unexceptional) life, consistently present, which makes them particularly relevant when we think of ways to engage and empower (for lack of a better term) communities and strengthen their stance in wider built environment valorisation initiatives.¹¹

Furthermore, structures planned and built between 1939 and 1985 in Portugal and Spain witnessed a specific sequence of historic events whose consequences remain vivid in contemporary Iberian life. The end of the Civil War in Spain had this country join Portugal in establishing two of the longest-lasting dictatorship regimes in recent history, toppled by force (in Portugal) and attrition (in Spain) in the mid-1970s. Both countries then entered a stage of political transition and stabilisation (with the attendant late-capitalist formatting strategies) as a requirement for accession to the European Community, which materialised on 1 January 1986. Peripheral communities across the peninsula are largely served, to this day, by facilities erected through undemocratic processes, many of which dressed in the heavily decorated compositions commonly associated with the history-obsessed governments of Franco and Salazar: 1940s county jails (in Portugal) and Guardia Civil barracks (in Spain) – intimidating, sturdy and begging re-functionalisation – are possible examples among many. This brings another challenge to *Arquitectura Aqui*: politically-charged architecture – or perceived as being so in metropolitan views – needs to be addressed in a holistic approach where style is but one of the aspects discussed, and the values of use life and materiality gain relevance.

We are looking at a building stock that has been left out of current global efforts at the reuse of twentieth-century structures – Docomomo duly focusing on important pieces of modern architecture legacy, for example – in a context where that priority is still far. The construction industry being one of the key engines of the economy, in both Portugal and Spain (as an essential provider of low-wage employment), the newly built is still widely prevalent, and most reuse initiatives are only partly so, often narrowed down to maintaining the reinforced concrete structure and replacing everything else. The longstanding experience in northern and central Europe, now with reuse-first policies and circular economy principles increasingly in place, remains a distant reference.

In the cadre of our research and public engagement projects, we are purpose-building an online, open-access digital platform where existing data (historical, material, technical and socio-cultural) is collected from mostly analogue, national, regional and local sources, filtered and combined in novel readings using layperson-friendly language. This digital archive incorporates contributions from local

¹¹ For broadening approaches to diverse built environment values, see e.g. Kathryn Rogers Merlino, '[Re]Evaluating Significance: The Environmental and Cultural Value in Older and Historic Buildings', *The Public Historian* 36, n.3 (2014): 70-85.

actors – users, promoters, enablers and researchers – and aims to weave them into a form of co-written history: an account that seeks to avoid the top-down rigidity of academic knowledge flow (i.e., experts from Lisbon go and illuminate unknowing locals on the value of their built environment) and adopt a mutual learning stance instead.

Being metropolitan based, we can access relevant information resources (archives and libraries) more easily than peripheral community members; as trained researchers and designers, we can critically analyse data and understand buildings (form, function, culture, history) in a serviceable way. We envisage a co-creation process in which we bring those two assets (hard data and critical analysis) to the community, share and expose them to debate; in exchange, we tap into the wealth of knowledge contained in the memory and experience of individuals and groups, as well as in the more conventional records (papers, iconography, film) under their stewardship. Collecting, accumulating and linking these heterogenous contents in a relational and non-linear data system opens new possibilities for uncovering, reading and sharing fragments of these related histories, enabling users – experts, community members and the general public – to take an active part in determining the fortune of this building stock.

Arquitectura Aqui focuses not on objects or agents but on communities, taking their built environment and socio-cultural dynamics as the spatial and historical unit of enquiry.¹² These are our elected entry points, from which both our research method and the users of the digital archive branch off to discover buildings and ensembles, individuals and organisations, programmes and schemes, actions, projects and events that configured the community's built environment. Each item is supported by myriad resources (archive, literature and legislation readings; fieldtrip notes; photograph, audio and video records), all cross-referenced and individually searchable. One of our challenges is to turn this mass of information on seldom-before studied buildings and ensembles – the crown jewels of Iberian architecture being largely absent – into storytelling vignettes that are not only relatable but relevant to laypeople at large, and community members in particular.

Our collectively built, open archive will therefore be formed by combining three main resources:

1. Our own visits, readings and investigations – we experience the objects, today, and research their history, recording both the hard data and our fieldnotes on the database; this (purpose-built) online repository is divided into forms designed to record 'Objects' ('Communities' and 'Buildings'), 'Agents' ('People', 'Organisations' and 'Programs'), 'Activities' ('Actions', 'Projects' and 'Events'), 'Documentation' (from archive file readings to literature reference notes) and 'Resources' (photographs, video, audio and PDF files).

¹² We understand communities, in the first instance, as geographically defined groups, ranging from entire cities and towns (capped at 100.000 residents as of 1985) to villages and hamlets (minimum 3.000 residents in 1985) and sections of larger centres (neighbourhoods). Our study samples an array of communities with different cultural, economic and social historical backgrounds and later-day compositions; our work cases are diverse and multivocal, both between and within them.

2. The testimony and record of experiences by users, managers, neighbours and community members at large – we ask people to share their knowledge with us, in informal conversations, in semi-structured interviews and in writing (via a dialog-like form), during our engagement moments and later.

3. The materials (raw, undigested) that both the team and our community participants gather.

It is based on these three main resources that the team then narrates the stories behind the creation and use processes of the buildings and ensembles – and, by extension, of the communities themselves. *Arquitectura Aqui* was designed as a methodological experiment to probe ways to answer the key question stated above (How can architectural and urban history be put at the service of more sustainable and resilient communities?) by studying a sample of 45 communities in Portugal and Spain (15 per each year of fieldwork) representing a diverse range of social, cultural, economic and demographic contexts. Our findings will inform similar initiatives in other contexts, in the Iberian Peninsula and beyond. In each community chosen for the sample, we establish both formal and informal partnerships with municipalities, local interested parties and other agents (individual and collective); we also draw on the support of regional and national institutions (from archives to government bodies).

We have been drawing inspiration from existing experiments and grassroots initiatives while honing our concept and preparing our tools of engagement with communities for this collective history-making exercise. The recent record of participatory practices encoded in the terms of reference of large urban projects, and the actions spontaneously organised by social movements to resist or propose alternatives to these ambitious plans, are important references to design our own strategies. On the other hand, experiments in public history, stimulating citizens to access local archives and take part on the writing of the history of their communities and spaces, complement our intention to act dynamically between local and micro history and urban activism. The limits of the different ‘steps’ of participatory processes as described and analysed by Sherry Arnstein¹³ are also lessons to be considered when proposing participation efforts that go beyond rhetoric. Even if both countries were under violent dictatorships during a significant part of the period of our study, Portugal and Spain have a rich history of ‘associativism’, ranging from organisations established in remote rural communities to promote cultural and leisure activities to associations designed to provide decent housing and reclaim the right to the city.

Only experience will tell what the most efficient strategies and participation tools are to engage community members on this shared process of narrative elaboration and meaning elicitation. We expect unusual or dissonant historiographical perspectives to emerge from this juxtaposition of general and monographic studies with extensive data collection and close attention to the users’ objects of interest and memories. Our goal is to shorten the gap between academic knowledge and lived experiences and

¹³ Sherry R. Arnstein “A Ladder Of Citizen Participation”, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35 n.º 4, (1969): 216-224 .

create a common field of engaged people prepared to participate and imagine new futures for these structures. *Arquitectura Aqui* asks us to probe a new alliance between architects, scholars and citizens.

Short bios

Ricardo Costa Agarez is an architect and architectural historian and theorist. He is currently Senior Researcher at Iscte – University Institute of Lisbon; Principal Investigator of the ERC Starting Grant research project *ReARQ.IB – Built Environment Knowledge for Resilient, Sustainable Communities: Understanding Everyday Modern Architecture and Urban Design in the Iberian Peninsula (1939-1985)* (Iscte – IUL, 2021-2026); and Principal Investigator of the Portuguese research council-funded project *ArchNeed – The Architecture of Need: Community Facilities in Portugal 1945-1985* (Évora University, 2021-2024). His research interests lie in the architectural humanities and the cultural and material studies of architecture and urban design, and he has specialised in the history and theory of 19th- and 20th-century cities and buildings, national and regional identity issues, dissemination and knowledge transfer phenomena, architectural cultures in bureaucracy, collective housing and facilities and public-sphere architecture.

His PhD dissertation in Architectural History and Theory, “Regionalism, Modernism and Vernacular Tradition in the Architecture of Algarve, Portugal, 1925-1965” (The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, supervised by Adrian Forty) was awarded the RIBA President’s Award for Outstanding PhD Thesis 2013 and published as *Algarve Building* (Routledge, 2016). The Giles Worsley Fellow of The British School at Rome (British Academy) in 2014, he was FWO Pegasus Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at Ghent University in 2015; and, in 2016-2017, postdoctoral assistant at KU Leuven, where, with Rajesh Heynickx and Freddie Floré, he created the FWO-funded Scientific Research Network “Texts \approx Buildings: Dissecting Transpositions in Architectural Knowledge (1880-1980)”. He was assistant professor at the University of Évora (Portugal), Department of Architecture between 2017 and 2021.

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Diego Inglez de Souza is an architect and urban planner by the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of University of São Paulo (2003), Ph.D. in History and Architecture by the same institution together with the Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne (2014). He worked as assistant curator of the X International Architecture Biennial of São Paulo (2013), contributing also with the research for the exhibitions *Infinite Span — 90 Years of Brazilian Architecture* (Casa da Arquitetura, Matosinhos, 2018–19 and SESC 24 de Maio, São Paulo, 2021) and *Our Land is the Sea* (Centro Cultural de Belém / Garagem Sul, Lisbon, 2020–21). He was a lecturer at the Catholic University of Pernambuco between 2015 and 2019, fellow researcher at Laboratory of Landscape, Heritage and Territory (Lab2PT) of the University of Minho between 2019 and 2021, working on the *The Sea and the Shore, Architecture and*

Marine Biology research project (2019-2021) and currently research fellow of the ERC Starting Grant research project *ReARQ.IB – Built Environment Knowledge for Resilient, Sustainable Communities: Understanding Everyday Modern Architecture and Urban Design in the Iberian Peninsula (1939-1985)* (Iscte – IUL, 2021-2026). Author of the book *Reconstruindo Cajueiro Seco: Arquitetura, Cultura Popular e Política Social em Pernambuco (1960–64)*, published by FAPESP and Annablume (2010), chapters of books and several articles and papers published on Brazilian, European and American journals, magazines and exhibition catalogues.

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