

Portuguese colonial architectural archives at the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, mid 19th century - 1975

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The Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (AHU - Overseas Historical Archive) holds Portuguese architectural and also engineering archival records created and managed by the Colonial Public Offices seated in Lisbon, dating back to the end of the 16th century to 1975. The archives from the offices that performed duties in the Portuguese colonies remained there, even after their independence from Portugal. Until recently, records dated from the mid 19th century onwards were poorly identified, a panorama that changed over the last decade. These records are related to Angola, Cabo Verde, Guinéa-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Mozambique, previous Portuguese possessions in India, Macao and East Timor. The AHU hosted two funded projects by the Portuguese Foundation to Science and Technology (FCT) submitted by the Centre for Socioeconomic and Territorial Studies from the Lisbon University Institute (*DINÂMIA'CET-IUL*). The participation of the AHU in both projects allowed processing these records bulk. The first one was “The Colonial Urbanization Offices”, a three year project *which* benefited from the collaboration of five archival fellowships during nearly two years. The second project is the “Coast to Coast”, has a similar duration to the previous and will be ongoing until December 2019, with the contribution of an archival fellowship. Two archivists of the AHU participated in these projects as well, supervising the archival processing as researchers.

These Portuguese colonial architectural and engineering records were transferred to the AHU since 1931, predominantly after the military coup of April 25th, 1974, also known as the Carnation Revolution. They were stored in twelve repositories. Most of the records, specially the ones from the mid 19th century to c. 1930, were in bundles, often together with documents of other subject matters. Sometimes this happened because Colonial Public Works were ruled, mainly in that period, with other affairs by the same department or division (“repartição”) or by the same subdivision (“secção”), which led to their keeping in the same archive. The criteria for the selection of the documents to be described was based, on the one hand, on the incomplete and sometimes inaccurate information of the documentary contents provided by out of date repository guides. On the other hand, it was based on the initial scarce knowledge about the institutional history of the departments, its functions and competences over Colonial Public Works and about the history of their archives. All this made difficult the archival records selection, especially those previous to the creation of specialized offices such as the Gabinete Colonial de Urbanização in 1944, but the AHU had to take the risk.

Methodologically it seemed more cautious to adopt as a standard procedure the maintenance of the documents order in its container, original or not. Even when there had been a container alteration (mainly from bundle to box), the documents order was kept not harming any future data processing including of the records other than architectural. The level and the depth of the records description varied attending namely to the relation among its extent, the available human resources, the aims of the projects and the documentary access from the users of the AHU. Considering these variables, the unit of description was either of sets of records, of file and part of file or, more seldom, of items. The archival description, carried out according to the present international standards and Portuguese guidelines (which are being debated considering new search behaviours) includes the following elements: reference code, reference number, title, span dates, level of description and extent of the unit of description (identity statement area); name of creators (context area) and document's scope and content, with the indication of the number of photographs and architectural or other technical drawings (content and structure area). The history of the offices that produced and received these records and of the archives that kept them will be presented at a higher level of description.

So far, both projects have surpassed the 17.900 archival descriptions, most of them already available on-line. The archival descriptions from Public Works records dated ca. 1930 to 1974 are in the digital repository ACTD available at <https://actd.iict.pt/view/actd:AHUMUd004>. The description of the previous records will be soon available at the archival database from the DGLAB (Direção-Geral do Livro, dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas) which the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino uses and that can be accessed directly at <https://digitarq.ahu.arquivos.pt/> or by the site <http://ahu.dglab.gov.pt/>

Future challenges concern, besides the deepening of specific archival descriptions, strategies of digitisation of large format drawings, increasingly requested, including by the countries that share this common archival heritage. This requires knowledge, resources networks and a debate on the role of public and private agencies. The challenges concern also the improvement of repositories conditions and specially of the containers of architectural and engineering drawings.