

## THE VALUE OF MODERN LEGACY FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE ILLUSTRATED BY MICRO-HISTORIES OF CONSERVATION IN PORTUGAL

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When we look globally at the developments and achievements of the last three decades, we recognize that every modern conservation project involves an attempt to bring into a valid and sustainable balance three different aspects that usually arise from the renovation of modern buildings: repair, upgrading and remodelling. Furthermore, when we review the individual stories of the same projects, we see that these three issues usually correspond to the interests of three different types of stakeholders, i.e., repair reasons are supported by conservation specialists, enhancement reasons are supported by users, and remodelling ones by owners/investors.

As a rule, ‘rehabilitation measures’ carried out under the orientation of ‘conservation specialists’ concern structures of an iconic, monumental character, which are scientifically conserved and restored as such on the basis of the existing public interest, with public funds specifically earmarked for this purpose.

In contrast, ‘remodelling’ promoted by ‘owner/investor’ management generally involves a larger number of structures, monumental or not, that a private company acquires and remodels in order to put them back into service on the real estate market. In this case, since every decision is tied to the interests of the private entity, every decision, including those of re-design, is evaluated by calculating the division between investment and profit. This means that scientific reasons have to be mixed with economic ones, and that those who design the project have to work harder to find a reasonable solution that in the end can be valid also in – and not in spite of – its economic viability.

I have treated the case of the ‘upgrade intervention’ designed for the benefit of the ‘users’ last, because here the efforts of those who undertake the task of re-designing the conservation could be even more complicated. In fact, in such situations the construction of an operational (including financial) path for the restoration of buildings/works is as important as the technical conditions for its implementation. This is the case when planners/designers for the preservation of structures participate in the efforts to create the preliminary conditions for a project to be elaborated later. These are operations that are naturally attributed to the third sector economy.

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Looking at the body of works of a well-known protagonist in the field, such as Wessel de Jonge, I would point out as an example of a publicly-funded intervention the restoration of Jan Duiker's Zonnestraal Sanatorium in Hilversum, in the category of privately funded interventions the adaptive reuse of Aldo van Eyck's former Amsterdam orphanage, and as illustrative of a case in which the architect also participated, working to establish the preconditions for the project, the refurbishment of Gerrit Rietveld's 'Om en Om' social housing in Reeuwijk.

As for the Portuguese micro-histories that I would like to present, it can be said in retrospect that this was the situation we found ourselves in when, moved by an interest that, at least initially, concerned only the value of Álvaro Siza's works as cultural heritage, we looked at, with a view to their preservation, two buildings he had constructed at the very beginning of his career. These are the Matosinhos Parish Centre/Community Centre (Porto, 1960) and the Lordelo do Ouro Cooperative Building (Porto, 1963), about which Siza himself recently wrote:

"The Cooperative building, a work I executed in my younger years, between 1960 and 1963, shows my interest in the use of exposed raw concrete, something rare in Portugal at the time (...). I had already used exposed rough concrete in the Parish Centre/Community Centre, a project from which I was removed by the sponsors (Building Committee and the then Abbott of Matosinhos), due to an unavoidable disagreement over planned changes during the course of the work. Lordelo's case would not be much different, except for the fact that I was dismissed after the completion of the works (in 1969), because of a disagreement about changes that would profoundly affect the building."

These are two buildings that had a rough start due to unfortunate circumstances, but then, although incomplete in one case and heavily altered in the other, performed for decades the tasks for which they were built and are now in a deplorable condition due to lack of proper maintenance. This is actually also due to the lack of appropriate strategies to adapt to changing functional requirements, as well as to economic difficulties faced by their owner institutions.

Thus, there are two buildings owned by non-profit but still private institutions whose managers do not seem to be aware of the intrinsic value of the architectural heritage they are dealing with. Moreover, this value seems to be perceived by the occupants as a burden that binds them in remodelling activities that they might like to be detached from.

And above all, the lack of institutional awareness of its importance, especially in the case of the Cooperative building, for which, due to the absence of any protective norm, there is a possibility that the building will be alienated and even demolished, to be replaced with the intention of monetizing the valuable location of its plot overlooking the banks of the river Douro.

In an attempt to do something – within our means, of course – in the first semester of the academic year 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, as part of the Design Studio Course Unit of the 5<sup>th</sup> year of the Integrated Master's programme at the School of Architecture, Art and Design of the University of Minho, which deals with architectural design in the preservation of buildings, we took the Lordelo do Ouro Cooperative building as a case study; the same happened with the Matosinhos Parish Centre/Community Centre in the first semester of 2020-2021. Thus, in the hypothetical framework of an unsolicited conservation plan for each of the two cases, we addressed the necessary definition of an overall rehabilitation strategy before working on the forms of implementation of a specific strategy (i.e., the short programme of re-design). Therefore, we used the studio's autonomy of action to imagine ways and practices to reactivate the life of these buildings based on their architectural and spatial qualities. That is, we drew on their value as cultural heritage to show that this is a treasure to draw from, not a burden to carry. In this sense, we also always wanted to be pragmatic and consider the feasibility of the proposals.

That 'unsolicited conservation plan' was defined and produced in accordance with the Studio's program, which is usually divided into three phases. In the first phase students are given the full archive documentation of the original design dossier and asked to study and survey the chosen building so as to produce detailed observations and a comprehension of the built form, while drawings are also produced to register alterations and deterioration problems. The whole group of about 20 students is divided according to different tasks in order to produce a global result. Then, in the second phase, students are asked to imagine and set out a strategy, which could lead to a functional extension of the building's life. In this phase they work in smaller groups, so they can come up with alternative strategies. In general, this could be seen as an attempt at a new life for the building while trying to recover the interplay between the given structure and its social context. In the third phase, the work becomes individual, consisting of a translation of the previously outlined functional reorganization strategy into a spatial organization for the building; consequently, at this point, minimum yet sufficient alterations can be defined. At this stage, each student has also to deal with the repair or improvement of a construction problem or detail, which is chosen in the logical continuity of the whole work.

Ultimately, our work was a kind of exploratory research aimed at identifying problems, outlining operational measures and organising a design agenda as the final result. None of the proposed global and detailed outcomes was intended to be a final result, but rather part of a series of interlocking hypotheses that could focus the stakeholders' attention on the functional and symbolic potential of these previously neglected buildings and on the real possibility of restoring them to the better condition they would deserve.

While in the case of the Parish Centre we could not go beyond a well-received final exhibition of the projects, in the case of the Cooperative we managed to open a city-wide debate by also involving local associations, city administrators, residents, and Álvaro Siza himself. Now the City Council is considering adding the building to the list of the city's protected buildings, and we can say that its restoration is considered a motor for the recovery of the social institution for which it was built. This means that we are trying to explore all of the different motives for the preservation of the building and to collaborate with all the stakeholders, recognizing that this is the only effective way to save it.

When we translate the individual case into general terms, we come across the central theme of the so-called Faro Convention, which asks the question: "Why and for whose benefit should we enhance cultural heritage?" Since 2011, when this framework on the Value of Cultural Heritage to Society came into force, the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in actions to recognize, protect, preserve, enhance and manage cultural heritage has become increasingly relevant; but when it comes to 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural and urban heritage, examples of this kind are still scarce – perhaps even outside Portugal. Also from our side, that is, as lovers of modern architecture, complex projects should be developed that, in agreement with their owners and through the participation of all those who have an interest in them, can achieve their reactivation and thus their preservation as cultural heritage.

## References

- 1 Allan John, *Revaluating Modern Architecture* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022).
- 2 Riso Vincenzo, *Álvaro Siza's Lordelo do Ouro Cooperative Building* (Braga: Lab2PT, 2021).
- 3 Carughi Ugo (ed.), Piani di Conservazione [Special issue], *do.co.mo.mo Italia giornale*, anno I, n. 34 - luglio-dicembre 2022.
- 4 Wessel de Jonge Architects' archive of works available at: <https://www.wdjarchitecten.nl/projecten/>





3. Lordelo do Ouro Cooperative Building, Porto; rare colour photo that illustrates its original features and condition as built by Álvaro Siza's (Jorge Gigante 1967, collection and courtesy of the author's family).