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***Convents as Urban Elements:
Morphological Analysis of Cities in Southern Portugal***

Introduction

The history of religious communities in Western Europe can be briefly characterized by a double tendency of a model life of devotion: on one hand, a life of isolation found only in God, on the other hand, the finding of God in relationships with others. The first practiced by monastic orders which first appeared in the eleventh century and the latter which emerged in the thirteenth century with the mendicant orders. The monastic communities, mainly, Benedictines and Cistercians, sought isolation by settling in rural areas, where they built sumptuous buildings - the monasteries – while the mendicant communities (namely the Benedictines and Cistercians) settled in cities, building their modest houses – the convents – in the proximity of urban areas.

Monasteries and convents reflect in this way the characteristics of the religious life led by the different religious communities. Architecture appears as a tool through which to communicate the ideals of living a life of devotion. Nevertheless, the way in which it relates to the territory, or with its surroundings in particular, is also a fundamental element for the affirmation of its spiritual doctrines. Therefore, the choice of place for the building of their home was for the religious orders an essential aspect in order to determine its foundation. Consequently these buildings – monasteries and convents – should also be seen and interpreted as territorial organisms (Marado, 2007) whether they are found in a rural or an urban space.

Interpreted in its architectural dimension, these religious spaces are constructions consisting of three elements: a church, surrounding buildings and fence. In artistic terms, the church is the most prominent of the buildings, communicating directly with the outside world. The premises consist of a series of spaces, ordered and hierarchized, in terms of symbols and function, being that the cloister is at the center of it all, organizing and coordinating all the others. Finally, the fence (also designated as the garden) constitutes a non-built space, a green area that is outlined by a wall, which connects with the building, hence giving unity to the whole.

In urbanistic terms convent spaces are important elements in the composition of the city. Their relationship with the urban space is made on various levels: they guide or constrain urban sprawl, participate in the design of the city and make the connection between the metropolis and the surrounding territory.

Based on an analysis methodology that will take into account the different historical times and implementation models, this article aims to explore the consequences of the presence of convents in the urban space, through a comparative study of three cities in southern Portugal.

Religious orders and territorial distribution: the Portuguese territory

The distribution of religious communities throughout the Portuguese territory was not uniform, mainly for historical reasons. Traditionally monastic institutions occupied territories to the north, while the mendicants settled in territories further to the south. In the Iberian Peninsula monasteries were crucial in the consolidation of the territory, which was re-conquered in the north, and played a decisive role in consolidating the independence of the Kingdom of Portugal. On the other hand, the monasteries constituted fundamental elements of the Kingdom's expansion towards the south, which was a territory of larger urban expression (Calado, 2002, p.9).

By analyzing the Portuguese monastic geography, one can observe that the Benedictines, for instance, settled mostly north of the Douro river and that the Cistercians occupied the areas between the Douro and Tejo rivers, while the Franciscans had a significantly larger presence south of the Tejo river (Azevedo, 2000). The southernmost region of Portugal, the Algarve, clearly had a predominance of mendicant communities, which were for the most part Franciscan friars. Out of the 32 religious communities that marked their presence in this territory between 1249 (the final Christian re-conquest) and 1834 (the extinction of the

religious orders), only two were monastic: one belonging to Jeronimus monks and the other to Bernadine nuns. The majority were Franciscan communities (16), although of different branches (friars, nuns and third regular) and of distinct orders (Conventual, Observants and Capuchins). The others were found in lesser numbers: the Carmelites (4), the Eremitics of Saint Augustine (2), the Eremitics of Saint Paul (1), the Trinitarians (2), the Hospitallers of de Saint John of God (1), the Jesuits (2), the Camillians (1) and the monks of Pegos Verdes (1).

During their ten years of existence, the religious orders went through several phases of prosperity and decadence, and consequently underwent different process of internal reform, which resulted in divisions, substitutions and extinctions (Azevedo, 2000). Consequently, out of the 32 communities present in this area, only 26 conventual buildings were built, one of which has since completely disappeared. This dynamic is due not only to the historical path of each one of the religious institutes, but also due to the different political, economic, social and cultural contexts of the country and the region itself.

Religious orders and territory location: the south of Portugal

In addition to the characteristics of the geographical distribution of the different religious institutes, each one of them had specific criteria of territorial location, which on another level, determined the place where to install their homes. As previously mentioned, the monastic orders settled in a rural space, while the mendicant orders settled in the vicinity of urban nuclei/centers. Later on, after the XVI century, other religious institutes, such as the Jesuits, settled within city walls, clearly affirming an urban vocation.

As far as types of territorial location, two realities can be distinguished from the onset: the rural foundations, located in a rural space and which only associate with elements of the natural scenery, and the urban foundations which settled in cities, whether in their surroundings, within their boundaries or in their interior. In the meanwhile there is still another type, which we designate as periurban foundations (Marado, 2007, pp. 89-109). These are situated in between the urban and the rural space, that is, they are located outside of the urban agglomerations but still within their area of influence, and despite being in a natural space they associate/relate with the city.

The old convents in the Algarve were analyzed according to this scale of location typologies. The conclusions of this study (Marado, 2007) indicate that in this region, out of a total of 26 monastic-conventual buildings, the majority (about 60%) was established within urban space, some (about 35%) correspond to periurban foundations and a mere minority (8%) have been established within a rural context. This clear predominance of convents that have been established/built/ founded within a city – or that are connected to one – precisely translates what was previously pointed out in respect to the prevalence of mendicant communities in the southern territory of Portugal.

Implementation models in the urban space: an analysis of three cities

With the intent of demonstrating the importance of the role of convents as structural elements in the urban form, we have focused our analysis on the three cities in the southern region of Portugal which had the greatest number of urban foundations: Tavira, Faro and Loulé, all of which are located in western Algarve. Tavira has 6 convents (all urban establishments). Faro has 4 conventual houses (3 of which are urban establishments) and Loulé has 3 convents (two of which are urban).

We began by identifying the periods in which the establishment of the convents took place, that is, we distinguished amongst those that were built between the XII and the XV centuries, and those built after the XVI century, not only because they correspond to distinct moments in the history of religious orders, but also because of urban history. The first period refers to the appearance of the mendicant orders, which were the first to settle in an urban context. At this time cities were still primary structures, contained within walls. The second movement begins with the internal reformation process of the Church, which produced a new dynamic in the center of the religious orders, a product of the reformist initiatives that led to new tendencies and also to the appearance of a new type of clearly urban communities. At this time the cities were significantly more complex structures that went beyond their original walls, expanded their urban perimeter, built new headquarters/centers and some even raised new fortress walls.

The next step was to identify the location of the convents in the city, that is the place where they were implemented, hence distinguishing three models of implementation: in the city's surroundings, within its boundary and in its center (inside the city walls). After analyzing each one of the two periods that were identified, we concluded that

in Tavira during the first period two convents were founded (São Francisco and Nossa Senhora da Piedade) in the space surrounding the city. During the second period the remaining four were erected: one of them (Graça) within city-walls, and the remaining three (São Paulo, Santo António and Carmo) on the boundaries of the urban grid. In Faro all of the foundations were built from the beginning of the XVI century onwards, but only one of these (belonging to Clarissa nuns) was built within the city walls, while the others (the Franciscans, Jesuits and Capuchins) were built on the boundary of the urban space. In Loulé one (Franciscan) was founded during the first period and established itself in the city's surrounding area and the other (belonging to concepcionist nuns) was built during the period that followed within the fortified city.

When the data from the location of the convents in the aforementioned cities was analyzed we reached several conclusions. First, we found that the convents founded during the Middle Ages in Tavira and Loulé were located in the cities' surrounding areas and that all are Franciscan houses, two belonging to friars and one to nuns. The characteristics of the location of the first two are the same and respect the location typology of the first Mendicant communities. They are situated in the space surrounding the city, near one of the access roads, being that the building faces the urban space while the vegetable garden is developed in the opposite direction, enclosed by walls (Rossa, 2002, p. 228). The other convent, a female community, whose foundation was initially intended for Clarissa nuns, was built as was commonly done at the time, in the proximity of the existing male house in the same city, but at a greater distance from the city limits.

Secondly, we found that the monasteries built from the XVII century onwards were founded within the city walls or on the city limits. The analyzed data revealed that the conventual buildings built during this period within the cities' walls belong for the most part to female communities (Clarissa nuns of Faro and concepcionist nuns of Loulé) who sought protection in the interior of the fortress. It is also crucial to point out that in settling in the inner part of the city, some religious buildings came to occupy the space left empty by the Jews – the old Jewish quarters – after their expulsion by D. Manuel I in 1496. The same occurred in Tavira with the convent of – Augustine friars and in Loulé with the female convent. This shows us that these religious buildings were often used as elements of the sacralization of urban space.

Lastly we noted that the monasteries founded within the boundaries of the urban space during this period are in fact the majority. In Tavira, they are the convents of

São Paulo, Santo António and Carmo, and in Faro they are the convents of the Jesuits and of the Capuchins. In Loulé not a single foundation existed with these characteristics. Convents such as these that were implemented in the perimeter of the urban grid made the transition between the urban and the rural, accentuating the already existing boundary between town and countryside. Additionally, we observed that the distribution of these buildings along the urban perimeter was made, as is common, in a ring around the urban space (Pérez Cano, 1999, pp. 229-235).

Convents as urban elements

Depending on the historical period in which they were founded and on their location within the urban structure, and obviously on the dynamics of the city itself, convents produced different urban facts. The morphological analysis of the cases presented confirms what some authors (Gaspar, 2002 and Rossa, 2002) have said about the consequences of the urban installation of religious institutes in the city, demonstrating that the convents acted simultaneously but in a contradictory manner, as centers of attraction for urban growth and as barriers to the expansion of the city. Once these elements were consolidated and once inserted into the urban grid they acted as reorganizational elements of the urban form.

The Franciscan convents founded in the beginning of the XIV century in the outskirts of the cities of Tavira and Loulé, near main access roads, functioned at first as attraction centers of urban growth. For example, in the case of the Franciscan house in Loulé, we can observe how this building was one of the main driving forces of the occupation outside of the city walls. In the XIV century, the village of Loulé was contained within walls, with the exception of the Bairro da Mouraria (a neighborhood), that was built south of the walled nucleus, and of the Convent of São Francisco, that was built in the east, linked to the city by a road that led to the Porta do Sol. The studies that focus on the urban evolution of this nucleus (Raposo, 2007) indicated that it would have been around the convent that the occupation of this area first began, which later ended up joining the area which radiates from the city, concentrically and continuously, in the usual process of urban growth.

Consequently, the monasteries that were built in the area surrounding the cities acted not only as centers of attraction, but also as elements that dynamized the occupation of urban areas where they settled. Later on, due to the growth of the city these vast spaces eventually developed into barriers of urban development.



Franciscan convent (Graça convent), Loulé

The convents that were built inside the walled nucleus led to the renewal of those areas. Such was the case of the construction within the walled space of the female convent of Faro, which occupied the area of the ancient Jewish quarter, sanctifying and classifying this urban space. The way the building was inserted into the urban structure - the church transversely facing the adjacent public space, creating a sizeable square connected with its lateral façade - led to the restructuring of this area. This implementation model in the urban grid corresponds to the one utilized by the female communities and responds to the needs which closure imposed on its architecture and especially on the manner in which it communicates with the outside world (Gomes, 2002, 2002).



Clarissa nun's convent (actual Municipal Museum), Faro

The conventual buildings that were built on the edge of urban areas between the XVI and XVIII centuries constituted elements of obstruction of urban growth. One of the most significant examples is the Colégio Jesuíta in Faro. Founded in 1605 on higher ground on the northern limit of the city, with its majestic façade facing the urban space that was developing outside of the original nucleus of walls, this building closed off the city with its enormous fence. Faro's urban growth towards the East, which was already partially blocked by the presence of the Franciscan

convent, was definitely conditioned by the establishment of this large conventual space. The metropolis grew until the later part of the XIX century, using the spaces left empty by the conventual houses, contouring the walls of their fences. After that date, the city began to expand with a new logic and a new language (Salgueiro, 1992), however in its interior various empty spaces remained, the majority built by the convents (building and fences). These empty spaces, once inaccessible, were made available with the extinction of the religious orders, which in Portugal occurred in 1834. At the beginning of the XX century the city was able to fill-in these areas, now with a well defined orthogonal grid that divided them into allotments for urbanization purposes (Marado, 2006a).



Jesuits convent (actual Lethes Theatre), Faro

Conclusions

The convents functioned initially as centers of attraction for urban growth, promoting the development of new neighborhoods in the proximity and attracting the growth of the city. Nevertheless, the way in which they were distributed around the urban space had at a later date the opposite effect consequently blocking the development of the city. These buildings and most particularly their fences, created in the majority of the cases barriers to urban expansion. On the other hand, the regular houses also functioned as structural elements of the urban design/make-up/structure. Its implementation in the consolidated grid or in the surrounding city provoked the renewal of these areas.

Whether built from scratch or from a preexisting building, conventual spaces. Buildings and fences, have actively participated in the layout of the city, and have clearly marked the urban form of our cities. This participation is not only visible at the moment of their founding, but also throughout their presence in the urban space, whether as religious spaces, or after their extinction, or even today.

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