TO AND FRO:
MODERNISM AND VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

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ARCHITECTURAL THEORY AND THE VERNACULAR IN PEDRO VIEIRA DE ALMEIDA'S WRITING

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Pedro Vieira de Almeida left his main interrogations, motivations, and concerns about the Inquérito à Arquitectura Regional Portuguesa [Portuguese Regional Architecture Survey] clearly formulated in the research project entitled *The "Popular Architecture in Portugal". A critical look* presented to the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology in 2009.[1] Vieira de Almeida's theoretical and critical approach to the Survey undertaken in the late 1950s by the Portuguese Architects' Union, and published in 1961 under the title *Popular Architecture in Portugal*[2] was backed by his longstanding and prolific work as a

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[1] Project application Almeida, Maia, Cardoso & Leal (2009). Project presentation was published by Almeida (2010) and final results were published in Almeida (2012 [2011]), Almeida (2013 [2011]) and Maia, Cardoso and Leal (2013).

[2] Between 1955 and 1960 a Survey on Regional Architecture was undertaken in Portugal. A systematic register of vernacular building in the countryside resulted from it, underlining the particular interest of its authors in rural dwelling structures. This work was promoted by the Portuguese Architects' Union, who sought to demonstrate the diversity of popular housing solutions, as well as to provide to "students and professionals of construction […] the basis for an honest, active and healthy regionalism", as the architect Keil do Amaral stated in the text that launched the idea. The Survey received financial support from the government and was carried out by six teams of architects, each team being responsible for one of the six regions in which the country had been divided for this purpose. Each team gathered three architects who covered the territory by car, scooter, on horseback or on foot, drawing and photographing remaining examples of "living" vernacular architecture. The collected material - about 20.000 photographs and drawings – was later treated and selected to join the book in which the results were presented. Entitled *Arquitectura Popular em Portugal* [Popular Architecture in Portugal], this book was published in 1961 and reprinted in 1979, 1988 and 2004.

theorizer, as a critic, as a historian and as an architect. The very work that makes Vieira de Almeida one of the main references in Portuguese architectural culture from the early 1960s up to the present day.

Pondering over the relation between different interests, problems, orientations, and critical and theoretical positions, Vieira de Almeida planed this project, and defined its core goals way above intentions of highlighting both the tacit motivations that brought the survey forward, or the prospective impact it had in Portuguese architectural culture of late 20th century. Those issues were taken into consideration, but only "as long as one can take from them some general conclusions of critical nature" (Almeida, 2010: 16). This happens because Vieira de Almeida was not looking for an "'internal criticism' [of the Survey], specifically focused in what may seem the greater or lesser coherence of its formulations and conclusions, nor (…) an 'external criticism', committed to the analysis and interpretation of cultural and political conditions of the undertaking." (Almeida, 2010: 16)

In fact, Vieira de Almeida's proposal was far more ambitious. He was not exactly seeking to "establish any plan in order to gauge the Survey in itself, but consciously trying to continue the work that prestigiously had the Survey as one of its first steps." (Almeida, 2010: 16) In other words, Vieira de Almeida engaged himself in carrying on the inquiry and the analysis prompted by the Survey for it established the basis that allowed him to acknowledge, think about and thoroughly develop three assumptions (closely interconnected) he believed essential: (1) the recognition of vernacular architecture's crucial value, (2) the major theoretical and critical potential of "wall thickness" and "transition-space" expressive values in architecture, and (3) the much expected overcoming of the center-periphery unbalanced modernist divide.

Vieira de Almeida's in-depth analysis on these subjects became a decisive contribution to the history of the 20th century architectural theory produced in

Figure 1. Thin walls. Escaroupim (Salvaterra de Magos)
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Portugal in terms that this article tries to elucidate in the following pages[3]. As we shall see, Vieira de Almeida's critical analysis goes far beyond any simplistic notion Modernism, while also distressing the common cut line established for its overcoming. In so doing, the complexity of Modernism is acknowledged in a rather productive way.

The potential of "wall thickness" and "transition-space" expressive values
Recognizing the theoretical and critical potential of expressive values such as "wall thickness" and "transition-space" is a core question in Vieira de Almeida's thought, and it must be singled out first as the subsequent premises depend on it. Acknowledging this potential lead Vieira de Almeida to a thorough reconsideration of architecture, and by extension of its historical accounts

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[3] After Vieira de Almeida's death in 2011, his contribution to architectural theory and criticism became a paramount focus of the ongoing project.

(particularly Modern Movement's history, as well as that of its overcoming). Portuguese architecture was the necessary and legitimate basis for that reconsideration. But the fact that Vieira de Almeida defined these expressive values, and assessed them on a local basis, does not mean that they are confined to national borders. Quite the opposite, he insisted on affirming their scope and consequences as generally valid.

In addition, "wall thickness" and "transition-space" can never be taken as some kind of fixed premises for qualitative assessment. Instead, they must be heuristically considered. In so doing, Vieira de Almeida writes, they will lead to the "encouragement of new strategies, of new typological investigations, showing us from the outset the need of a new definition of 'type'" (Almeida, 2010: 19). Put differently, Vieira de Almeida aimed this research to contribute to a redefinition of "type" (Almeida, 2005). And this redefinition should consider not only formal or programmatic aspects, but also shared expressive elements. These values must, thus, be keenly acknowledged and studied.

We will begin by looking at the hypothesis of "wall thickness" being a central expressive element of architecture, a hypothesis on the grounds of which Vieira de Almeida distinguished a "poetics of thick walls" and a "poetics of the thin walls". Vieira de Almeida envisioned this possibility as he was reading through a suggestion made by the Portuguese architect Raul Lino (Almeida, 2010: 19). As it happens, research on this premise started in one of Vieira de Almeida's early works – the Raul Lino exhibition and the in depth study made for its catalog (Almeida, 1970) –, and is therefore very much intertwined with his acclaim of an idea of architecture (Lino's) that praised tradition. Such an acclaim was paramount because it overcame hegemonic assumptions considered in almost every account of the Modern Movement. Here lies the idea that Raul Lino's sensitivity towards "thickness values may have had unexpected repercussions in his work, since it (...) may have contributed to his misunderstanding of modernist language which [Vieira de Almeida clarifies] was definitely exploring a radical vision of a poetic of thin walls." (Almeida, 2010: 19)

Figure 2. Thick walls. Malpica do Tejo (Castelo Branco). Image from *Arquitectura Popular em Portugal*, Associação dos Arquitectos Portugueses, Lisboa, 3ª edição: 1988 (3vol.), vol. 2, p. 24

Concurrently, Lino's final attempt to approach the expressive values of thin walls might explain the decreased effectiveness of his later architecture, so Vieira de Almeida sought. In both cases, Lino's position towards this variable conforms an important case-study. It shows us a structural ill-suitableness to the poetic of thin walls modernism was upholding. In the beginning, such ill- suitableness matched a dynamics of resistance supported by Lino's praise of tradition, and his sensitivity to the poetics of thick walls.

Lino's case study gave a decisive contribution to critically ponder over the flow of such expressive values in an international scale. In fact, the background of Vieira de Almeida's study on the expressive values of thickness embraces not only Gropius' Bauhaus and Le Corbusier proposals, but also what he considered as "opportunistic and commercial languages in architecture" that would later blossom. Vieira de Almeida (2010: 21) writes: "the success of thin walls, even now enduring, come to accept all experiences, presenting itself as a privileged

field for all internationalisms, particularly those structured outside any critical conscious and more than suspicious contours".

Symmetrically, Vieira de Almeida insists in elucidating Adolf Loos' brilliant conception of the Modern. He recalls us that for Loos Modern was "inextricably linked to its own historical consciousness and traditional values through a creative sense of time," which for Vieira de Almeida conformed the "only cultured way of understanding the values of modernity" (Almeida, 2010:14).

Vieira de Almeida's early research – this time his pioneering study on space in architecture (Almeida, 1961-63), where both a thorough analysis of the notion of space, and a debate on Zevi's and Bachelard's approaches to the subject were developed – would also back the conclusion on thickness' expressive values having very different consequences in terms of limiting space: "whereas 'thin walls' just enclose space, cutting it from general space, 'thick walls' structured themselves generating space." (Almeida, 2010: 22) This conclusion added the focus of analysis that would later allow him to move the question on the relation between mass and volume out of its normal equation, and to argue: "it is not the notion of volume that will allow the treatment of space, but the very notion of mass that will generate it." (Almeida, 2010: 22)

The study on transition-space's expressive value also benefits from a longstanding affiliation in Vieira de Almeida's thought. As a matter of fact, Vieira de Almeida raised the critical notion of transition-space in the early 1960s in order to define "a space untied to any specific role, playing as a particularly qualified additional space" (Almeida, 2010: 24). The author was bearing Rex Martiensseni's (1958) characterization of the Greek patio-colonnade and *stoa* qualities in mind, as well as Eglo Benincasa's idea on how in southern Europe's life took place in *semi-open* spaces, meaning spaces "maintaining maximum potential of intimacy even though they provided open ambiances", and on how this is a crucial question of this area's architecture (Benincasa *apud* Almeida, 1963: 127). Those *semi-open* spaces parallel the idea of transition-space, i.e. a space that is neither interior, nor exterior, a space that embodies an everlasting way of living (Almeida, 1963:

Figure 3. Transition-space. House of the Cypress, Sintra. Raul Lino architect © Pedro Vieira de Almeida

127), and grounds the "fluidity and special continuity in the relation between architecture and urbanism" (Almeida, 1963: 96).

This *transition-space*, which can only be defined in a "somewhat ambiguous way", is opened to a variety of use-values, seriously implying the user "in completing a project." (Almeida, 1965) Both from the point of view of its expressive value – able to distress the "crystal clear evidence of formal choices" – and from the point of view of its creative openness to various social modes of appropriation – as with an "all purpose room", or with the functional plasticity that Vieira de Almeida also attempts to define by way of the notion of "lost space" –, the awareness on transition-space sets an outlandish idea of architecture if one considers Modernist basic assumptions. In Pedro Vieira de Almeida's own words: "To Modernist logic, with its challenging but hard social perspective, though fully justified at the time, (...) 'transition-space' inherent freedom seemed naturally inappropriate for it was non-economic. Within that logic preference was given, and indeed in a brilliant way, to promoting flexibility of the internal structure of

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the plan, the 'free-plan' that in 1929 Le Corbusier referred to as being one of the five fundamental principles of architecture." (Almeida, 2010: 24)

These were the propositions Vieira de Almeida believed we should analyze in some examples collected from the Survey, for they would allow us "to structure a proper typological reasoning." (Almeida, 2010: 19) But why did Vieira de Almeida thought that vernacular architecture configured the appropriate territory to this kind of research. In other words, why should typological reasoning be achieved through the in depth study of Portuguese Regional Architecture and through the Survey undertaken in the late 1950s?

As we shall see, the answer to this question bears on a political standpoint – i.e. it corresponds to a matured stance on the paradoxical relation between the architecture and its social vocation or "responsibility", which Vieira de Almeida supported without concessions.

Vernacular architecture's key importance

A question like N. Leach's "can there ever be a Democratic architecture?" (2004), could never have passed unnoticed to Vieira de Almeida. The query matches some of his main concerns, and was considered essential from the outset. Nevertheless, as far as Pedro Vieira de Almeida is concern, it is an ill-formulated question, since its overall ambition – taking architecture as a whole – prevents a possible answer: "It is certainly not architecture globally considered that may capture values of democracy" (Almeida, 2013 [2011]).

Vieira de Almeida fully supported Leach's position while stating that architecture is not by itself liberating or repressive. Nevertheless, "architecture can contain *efficient causes* of repression or liberation" and it is possible to investigate them: what really matters is to know "which elements of the architectural language might take one or other of these tendencies" (Almeida, 2013 [2011]).

Furthermore, Vieira de Almeida sought that this kind of research was not only possible, but was also urgent, given the fact that "these are some of the factors that can determine the so-called 'social responsibility of architecture'" (Almeida,

Figure 4. Transition-space. Glazed balcony in Pedrógão Pequeno
© Nuno Cardoso, 2010

2013 [2011]). Thus, adding to straightforward equations of the problem based on the recognition and assessment of the social significance of architectural programs, a second degree question must be considered: that which brings us back to "sectors of architectural language, which by themselves lead to what might be called a true 'encouragement to freedom' of appropriation, and therefore have major and specific social responsibility." (Almeida, 2013 [2011]) *Transition-space* is a key example of such encouragement.

It was also on the grounds of these queries that Vieira de Almeida's attention to vernacular architecture was strengthened. To begin with, vernacular architecture escapes the guidelines and constraints of erudite architecture[4]. It generates a territory – or reservoir – of freedom while playing with expressive and use values of vital importance in Vieira de Almeida's thought and research.

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[4] "The notion of 'vernacular' supposes a reality where expressive maturation was not deviated by any excess of information" (Almeida, 2010: 12)

Thus, it is not surprising that we find his definition of the vernacular detached from the hypertrophy and growing trivialization of the term. On the contrary, Vieira de Almeida is committed to the recovery of a "primitive", authentic value for the concept, one able to move it from the muddy connotations that the cultural industry had been bestowing it. Engaging in a dialogue with Eduard Said (2004) and Neil Leach (2005), Vincent Canizaro (2007) and Panayotis Tournikiotis (2001), Vieira de Almeida advocates:

"I suppose the idea of 'vernacular' in architecture has always meant a holder of an expression stratified over time, of regional nature, spontaneous, popular, genuine, meaning culturally candid, not dominated by scholarly ideas (...). Thus, contrary to what Vincent Canizaro [2007:20] seems to vindicate, I suppose the vernacular cannot be seen as a simple answer out of sheer necessity, adapted to the conditions of each site. The vernacular also implies cultural choices, even though they do not address to a predetermined cultural aim." (Almeida, 2010: 12)

Taking vernacular architecture as a core area of research is, Vieira de Almeida believes, the necessary condition to deepen and assess the premises launched on the grounds of his observation of erudite architecture. In other words, vernacular is the territory in which "the analysis of the importance of thickness in architectural expression will become clearer." This is exactly why "the collection of vernacular architecture corresponding to the so called 'Survey of the Union' is precious." (Almeida, 2013 [2011])

Overcoming the center-periphery divide

In addition to re-balancing and debate specific Portuguese architectural trends and constraints – the Survey focuses Portuguese popular architecture and therefore opens the equation of a specific situation that draw us back both to the specificity of national architectural culture, and to the registration of a proper Portuguese heritage sentenced to perish –, we are now in better conditions to grasp the overall implications Vieira de Almeida ascribed to the research

project *Popular Architecture in Portugal. A critical look*. As he makes clear: "if the explanatory potential of the hypotheses risen at the outset of this research project proves worthy, as I expect, one might also try to address from there questions brought about by some modern architecture as a generic paradigm, and by modernism as a professional movement giving them more structured answers. By the same token, one might also try to give partial answers to questions on what we currently see built and released in the world (...)" (Almeida, 2010: 25-26).

Finally, it is possible to claim that the radical interdependence between critical regionalism and critical internationalism highlighted by Vieira de Almeida has to be assimilated and encourage new critical approaches to architecture. What Vieira de Almeida view as the potential of this "homemade" attempt, was its ability to disquiet and eventually overwhelm the common tendency for parroting conclusions imported from foreign cultural centers, while paving the way for new premises to enter international debates. In other words, Vieira de Almeida strived to make us mistrust any straightforward interpretation of the architectural values associated with the Modern Movement, as well as to look for an enhanced critical meaning of Post-Modernity. Pedro Vieira de Almeida committed himself to these tasks with the greatest enthusiasm ever, leaving a tremendous legacy to architectural though.

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Acknowledgments