

PHOTOGRAPHY & VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE: THE PORTUGUESE APPROACH

Alexandra Cardoso & Maria Helena Maia

CEAA | Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo (FCT uRD 4041)

Escola Superior Artística do Porto (ESAP), Portugal

Abstract

At least, from the 1880s, it is possible to identify the presence of popular architecture in surveys, which were formally or informally held in Portugal. However, the most significant survey was the Survey on Portuguese Regional Architecture carried out by the Portuguese Architects' Union in the second half of the 1950s. This work, published in 1961, used mainly photography as a source of registration of the rural dwellings during the fieldwork. A photography made by architects who have shaped in this work a gaze and an insight that has become decisive in the subsequent architectural production. This paper deals with the Survey as photographic record and way to look at vernacular architecture.

Keywords: Modern Architecture, Portuguese architecture, Vernacular Architecture, Survey on Portuguese Regional Architecture, Photography and Architecture

The interest for popular architecture, more precisely, for its rural and vernacular version, becomes apparent in Portugal in the early 19th century. However, we must wait until the last decades of the century, that an until then quite unknown idealized approach to an ancestral universe becomes the object of a more rigorous research.

The contact with the reality resulting from rural work caused the disappointment of the people moving from the idealized report of the old nannies to a reality confirmed on the spot. It brought the disbelief of the urban universe in the rural world's quality. In this reality, one can research part of the explanation of the negative discourse that installed itself in Portugal, at different levels, during the last decades of the 19th century (vd. Maia, Cardoso and Leal, 2013). This was valid until, at least, the nationalist reaction with an opposite sense caused by the *1890 British Ultimatum*.¹

¹ The British demand of the African territory located between Angola and Mozambique (mainly in present day Zimbabwe) culminated in 1890 in an ultimatum in which Portugal was to retreat its troops in the region or face war with Britain. The Portuguese government's acquiescence to British demands led to an internal movement of opposition and revolt which significantly advanced the republican cause, as well as intensified nationalism

Actually, from the 1870s, experts, such as writers, anthropologists, architects, archaeologists began to share an interest in profound Portugal thereby contributing for its discovery, and that is reflected in their works. Photography played an increasingly important role in this process, as the real country revealed itself to a great extent through photographic register.

Photographs and engravings produced with photographs became a constant in the journals of the time,² thereby, contributing to the diffusion of until then unknown monuments, landscapes and architectures.



Figure 1. Photograph of Carlos Relvas. Silver-gelatine negative; impression contemporaine. Published in *Carlos Relvas and House of Photography* (2003)

Let us take as example the *Revista Pittoresca e Descritiva de Portugal com vistas Photographicas* published by the architect – archaeologist Possidónio da Silva (1861-1862)³ that constitutes the first album with photographic reproductions of monuments⁴. The journal *Panorama Fotográfico de Portugal*, published in Coimbra from 1869 to 1874 and including already views of several

² See, for example, the photographs by Carlos Relvas that originated a considerable quantity of illustrations enriching the journals of the time.

³ This journal was the first Portuguese photographic publication with official funding. See. Batista, 2010: 101)

⁴ In this case, the photographs are stick to the publication's pages.

places, in this case, by such photographers as Carlos Relvas must be also mentioned in this regard.⁵

The recourse to photography as registering form became increasingly evident. For instance, the photographer Carlos Relvas integrated the commission that travelled all over Portugal searching for material for the *Exhibition of Portuguese Art* taking place at the South Kensington Museum in 1880⁶. Accordingly, he photographed the urban settlements planned by Alfredo de Andrade and described by Rangel de Lima (Maia, 2007).

At the time, vernacular housing was already quite frequent, although integrated in heritage and picturesque sites from which it didn't manage to move away. Photographs of empty streets or of streets with some inhabitants in pose register rural settlements, houses details, unusual solutions. It is enough to see some of the extant photographs by Carlos Relvas.

But, it is important to mention that a knowledge corpus of traditional housing was in construction and became one key subject of the national architectural culture regarding the debate on the *Portuguese house* in the same period. However, the works dedicated to the discovery of Portugal gained only significance in the early 20th century. We mention here the publications combining texts by recognised authors with images of distant rural and archaic houses and villages, historical monuments and landscapes with a recognised natural beauty. See, for example, *A Arte e Natureza em Portugal*, edited by the photographer Emilio Biel (1902-1908) and illustrated with both his photographs and the photographs by Cunha Moraes.

As concerns vernacular architecture, it is important to register the importance it gained from the last decade of the 19th century in the Portuguese architecture universe and whose first great systematiser was Rocha Peixoto.

⁵ Other example is the *Vistas de Portugal* [Views of Portugal] (1880) by Carlos Relvas (Vd. Sena, 1998: 66).

⁶ Rangel de Lima (journalist), Alfredo de Andrade (architect) and Carlos Relvas (photographer) covered all Portugal in 1880 with the aim to collect both Portuguese art works for the exhibition in preparation at the South Kensington Museum in London and data that would permit them to act as referees on the value of both movable and immovable heritage of the convents that the government intended to sell, so to assure the safeguarding of the heritage considered of special cultural significance. The reports by this commission give a rather negative idea of the state of national heritage. See: Maia, 2007: 222-23).

In his pioneering articles *Os Palheiros do Litoral* (1898) and *A Casa Portuguesa* (1904) Rocha Peixoto identifies and organizes typologically the different solutions of vernacular housing.

João Barreira describes also the typologies of the traditional *Portuguese house* in the catalogue's text of the Portuguese representation at the National Exhibition of Rio de Janeiro from 1908. Both the works are illustrated with photographs.

The approach to vernacular culture, however, will have to wait until the middle of 1930's to move into a whole new phase, in a process strongly marked by the work of the geographer Orlando Ribeiro.

His first photographic record on rural Portugal dates from 1937 and depicts a poor and isolated rural environment. But Orlando Ribeiro is mainly a researcher of the different components shaping both the natural and the human territories.

Indeed in 1945, his publication *Portugal: o Mediterrâneo e o Atlântico*, established the existence of large natural regions caused mainly by the contrast between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean influences. These main regions were also subdivided into geographical "landscape units" mostly characterized by land-relief and soil nature, inherently linking them 'on their natural features' (Ribeiro, 1945).

Thus, based on a geographical characterization, Orlando Ribeiro offers a view of Portuguese rural architecture, and its close *liaison* with local building materials and natural landscape.

In his photographs, the natural expressiveness of the materials used in construction is emphasized by the framework given by the photographer.

Such could be the case of stone in its organic use – applied both in dwellings, in field-supporting walls or in paved rural paths – or the thick walls made of mudbrick or even the wooden houses on stilts built on dunes.



Figure 2. Beira Litoral coastal barn photographed by Orlando Ribeiro, published in *Orlando Ribeiro. A Casa e o Mundo* (s.d.)

The gaze of Orlando Ribeiro on these wood architectures is accurate: "One storied houses, salient chimneys, balconies, everything was built with great mastery and elegance, in this material, rare in our popular architecture" (Ribeiro *apud* Belo 2012).

The shape of the rural dwellings had also a significant impact on Orlando Ribeiro's research who distinguished "two basic types, one for the North, the other for the South, both based on a rectangular floor plan and, in most cases, with a gabled roof" (Ribeiro, 1998 [1945]: 92). However, the uses made by its inhabitants are different.

In the North, the two-storey building shelters the cattle at the ground floor while at the first floor, with its own independent access through stone stairs, a dwelling is made up of a kitchen and a room. On the other hand, in the South, the one-storey house is exclusively used as dwelling, with whitewashed walls. Certain architectural features are considered determinants by this geographer, such as the outside balcony sheltered by the roof, in the North, or the chimney standing out the façade in the South (Ribeiro, 1998 [1945]: 92).

In the relationship with the house and the place the inhabitants aren't static figurants inserting themselves strategically into a photographic composition, but integrant part of their territory, in their everyday practices.

This interest in vernacular architecture also marked the work of other professionals.

At the end of the 1930's a group of agronomists had an increasing interest in the subject and set out on a government-backed *Survey of Rural Architecture*. However, because their report denounced the miserable living conditions of the population and the poor housing conditions, it was subjected to political censorship and only two, of the three volumes planned, were initially published.⁷ Recently, the third volume was published with information from surveys that were able to fold.

Lima Basto, the mentor and coordinator of this survey argued in the first published volume (1943) that "to study the conditions in which the population of a country lives and develops is a basic duty for the people interested in the progress of this same country".

In addition to civic concerns, this survey had also a double function of a more operative character, expressed in the respective *Questionnaire – Guide* (1943): (1) "to know the economical and hygienic housing conditions of rural workers"; (2) " a) to obtain study elements for the determination of the form to improve these conditions, taking into account the family's present possibilities; / b) the measures that should be taken to change these conditions, considering the financial outlay of both agriculture and the state".

A specific *Questionnaire – Guide* was elaborated for the field surveys and serving as guidance to "obtain a description as complete and real as possible of the targeted facts", something that, according to its authors, permitted to the survey to "be as detailed as possible"⁸. The identification of the results is registered by the set of collected *examples* following a presentation grid, and corresponding to the number of cases representative of each of the regions in study. In the author's proposal, "The presented works, produced with the greatest scruple, intend to be exact photographs of the predominant rural house".

⁷ The work was planned to be published in three volumes: (1) The Northern Region, from 1942. (2) The Central Region published in 1947; (3) The Southern Region, whose publication was hindered by censorship. This volume was published but in 2013, in an edition organized by Fernando Oliveira Baptista, João Castro Caldas and Maria Carlos Radich.

⁸ This *Questionnaire – Guide* is constituted by a first part including the general instructions and a second parte listing the questions organized by subjects: location of the house, family, a. s. o.

Critical opinions or personal commentaries on the subject presented are scarcer, which reflects the author's systematic but distant approach to the subject in study. Thus, it is up to the reader "observe how close or by contrast how distant one was" of the required habitability conditions⁹. The gathered material is thereby presented in an objective and factual way.

We have the impression that the same cold rigor is present in the way these architectures are sometimes photographed.

In some photographs, the closeness of the house, whose façade occupies almost the whole available space, permits neither field depth effects, nor reveals concerns with the object's global framework that appears thus exclusively focused on a bi-dimensional plan. In other photographs, when the building is photographed in its tri-dimensional component, either its relationship with its environment is registered based on the reference indicators of the *Questionnaire – Guide's*, or it appears lost in its landscape, demonstrating its isolation¹⁰.



Figure 3. Photograph of vernacular house in Monte da Casada (S. João, Castelo de Vide) published in *Inquérito à Habitação Rural*

⁹ In addition to the study of the functional construction and organization of the house, questions related to natural illumination and warming, sanitarian hygienic, furniture, clothes and domestic objects were also surveyed.

¹⁰ *i.e.*, in the case, it belongs to an agglomerate of similar houses, forming a place, a village or small town.

In these photographs, the inhabitants appear, in general, in a static pose, maybe to serve as scale reference to the building. But this sensation of moment frozen in time transmitted by some of these photographs seems also to translate the affective distance between *inquirers* and *respondents*, for the rest, confirmed by the deliberate anonymity attributed to the second¹¹.

The gaze is almost always a technical gaze in tune with the “crude tone of the reports contributing to the sharpness of the presented panorama” (2012: 23-24), that is of clear poverty and misery.

These photographs are published in a page often shared with the buildings plans, thus completing the description of the case study.

The anthropologists joined the geographers and the agronomists. In 1947, traditional Portuguese housing was a main subject of the Portuguese anthropologists, who proposed to “*carry out a comprehensive study on this subject by analysing the dwelling in its complex variety of architectural, ethnographic and historical aspects*”. From this resulted, in the next decade, the publication of various studies of the different housing typologies, whose aim was to contribute to a “*planned comprehensive survey*” (Oliveira 1986, apud Oliveira and Galhano 2000 [1992]: 11).

In the 1950s, also the architects became interested in vernacular architecture. Previously, in 1947, Keil do Amaral had proposed to the architects’ union to carry out a survey on regional Portuguese architecture, emphasising the importance of its knowledge for the development of “*the basis for an honest, active and healthy regionalism*” (Amaral, 1947).

One decade later, between 1955 and 1960, the architects went to the field, performing an exhaustive graphic and photographic survey of the country diffused by the work *Arquitetura Popular Portugal*, published in 1961.

¹¹ João Castro Caldas explains that “the motive for this procedure resulted mainly from the wish that they would seem rural worlds with characteristics standing out of the respondents group. The anonymity was an option erasing the individual trajectories in the reading of the rural world, [...] the anonymous body of the rural bulk.” (Caldas, 2012: 25). The terms *inquirers* and *respondents* are used by the survey’s authors.

This work, known as *Survey on Portuguese Regional Architecture*, was carried out by 6 teams of young architects, whose task was to register the vernacular architecture in the regions in which the country was previously therefore divided.

They covered a profound Portugal, initially in scooter and by car, but also with many kilometres on foot or riding a horse or an ass, in recognition trips to villages, settlements and places isolated in the landscape and with a very difficult access.

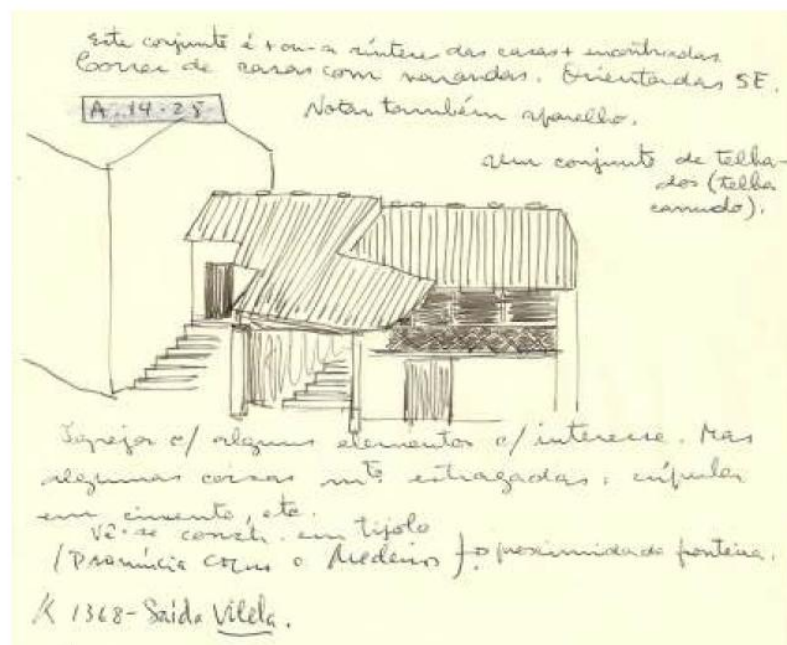


Figure 4. Notes of the zone 2 team (Dias, 2013:107)

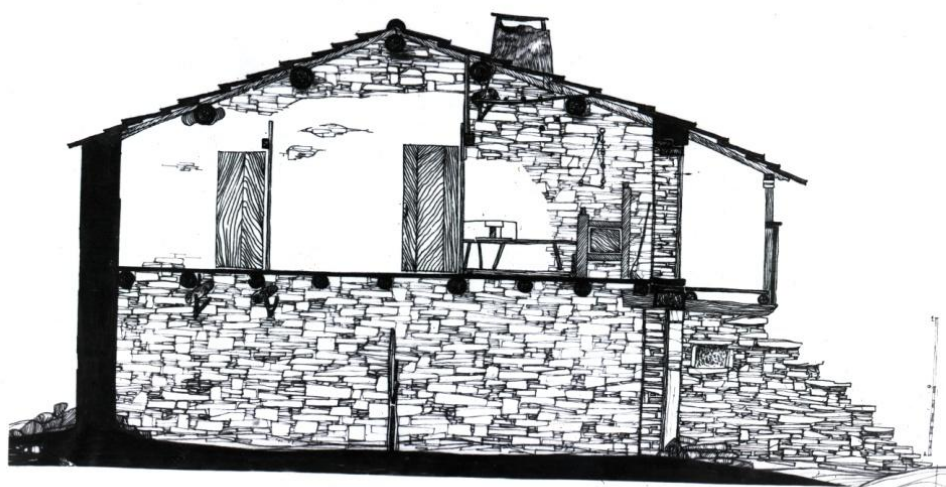
The impressions of these incursions were registered in travel diaries and in diverse written notes, sketches and detailed drawings used later as references for the more rigorous drawings illustrating the publication. The teams organised the photographs of their areas in individual records identified by inscription numbers and items referring to the location and the identification of the photographed object, from which some were selected for the book.¹²

¹² The Ordem dos Arquitectos [Architect's Order] makes available online a great part of the *Survey's* photographs, through the images database OA PIX (<http://www.oapix.org.pt/>), since 2012.

Carvalho Dias, one of the architects who covered the region of Trás-os-Montes, described the process they used in the assemblage of photographs with notes and drawings registered in the *field diary*:

In all these notes the registers of the photographs we marked with letters **A** or **D**, corresponding respectively to the photographs by **A**rnaldo and by **C. D**ias, followed by two numbers' series: the first indicating the film number, and the second the orders' number of the photo in the same film. For instance, *A-17-5* indicated that it referred to the photograph nr. 5 of film nr. 17 made by Arnaldo's camera. Undoubtedly, this permitted us to identify all photographs we had, linking them to our drawings and texts. This tactic systematically improved after the first digressions revealed to be of extreme usefulness, in particular, during the phase of final selection and choice of the documentation to be published in "Arquitectura Popular" (Dias, 2013: 107)

The documentation selected for publication by the authors of the area 2 / Trás-os-Montes¹³ was later photographed by the Oporto photographer Teófilo Rego. It was a technical work recording in photography the produced drawings, schemes and maps, because the photographs of the architectural objects were made by the team.



¹³ Octávio Lixa Filgueiras, Arnaldo Araújo e Carlos Carvalho Dias.

Figure 4. Draw of Trás-os-Montes Team photographed by Teófilo Rego to be published in *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal* (Teófilo Rego Archive. Museu Casa da Imagem, Fundação Manuel Leão)

The thousands of photographs made by the architects registered a Portugal no longer extant. But, they showed also the different teams' viewpoints on vernacular architecture, some more concentrated on the materials and on the building processes, others with a stronger focus on the housing typologies and on their anthropologic component. However, they shared a same fascination for the formal and structural characteristics of these same architectures.

As a matter of interest, as Silva Dias¹⁴ recalls, once in the field, the reality exceeded everything for which they had previously prepared themselves, and the emotional answer provoked by the contact with these landscapes and architectures was one of the lessons they drew from this *Survey*.

These architects – some of them had learnt to use a camera during the *Survey*-, ended up producing "a masterpiece of photography and pagination". The choice of photography, which by origin has a documentary function, eventually translates "the fascination with the photographed objects and the variety of plastics treatments they motivated" (Sena, 1998: 299).

Materials, textures, shadows, volumes, constructive details, single architectural features, populate these images marked by the empathy between the photographer and the object. In this black and white photographic compilation, depopulated architectures coexist unconcernedly with other architectures inhabited by families who seem to know¹⁵.

In the published book, photographs of a local landscape still in the raw state prepare the reading of the architecture produced in a region, in an implicit association between geographic conditions and solutions of the local *habitat*. This

¹⁴ Record of a Silva Dias oral speech in a round-table discussion with architects António Menéres, Álvaro Siza, Carvalho Dias, Francisco Silva Dias and Pedro Borges Araújo held in Museu Nacional Soares dos Reis, Porto, March 1st.

¹⁵ This is, for example, the case of Sr. José Tamanqueiro's house at the village of Montes, in Trás-os-Montes (Area 2).

is a clear influence of the book *Portugal, Mediterraneo e Atlantico* by Orlando Ribeiro, with it they have learnt, "where and how to look"¹⁶.

The impact of this work on the Portuguese architectural culture was huge. This can be exemplified, on opposed sides, by both the presence of photographs of the *Survey* in the Portuguese proposal for the CIAM X (Maia and Cardoso, 2014) and the use done by touristic enterprises of the formal repertory rendered available by the published photographs (Almeida, 2008: 110). This second aspect was far away from what their authors would have wished to.

Indeed, as they have recognized right in the introduction to *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal* (1961 [2004]: XXV), the images selected for the publication and focusing essentially on the formal component of vernacular architecture may have contributed to 'a distortion of the real aspect of life conditions of the villages', and thus for the construction of an idealized image of a rural world. The life conditions of the inhabitants of those architectures were, however, quite hard, as already demonstrated by the agronomists *Survey*.



Figure 6. Mudbrick house in Maria Vinagre (Aljezur) photographed by the zone 6 / Algarve team and published in *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal* (1961)

It is not by chance that the publication of this *Survey* was censored whereas the architects' publication was personally praised by Salazar, no matter if it was, or,

¹⁶ Interview with Francisco Silva Dias in 13.12.2010 published by Inês Filipe dos Santos Oliveira Oliveira (2011). In fact, he recalls that his team coordinator, N. Teotónio Pereira (Zone 4) used to recommend the reading of *Portugal: the Mediterranean and the Atlantic*.

on the contrary, it wasn't about the wise use of architects' misunderstandings, as claimed by Portas (1978) or of the regime, as argued by Vieira de Almeida (2008: 110).

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Author identification

Alexandra Cardoso. Architect (FAUP, 1994). Integrated researcher of Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo (CEAA), R&D unit 4041 (FCT); Director of CEAA (2003-2010). Researcher of the projects: *The "Popular Architecture in Portugal." A Critical Look (2010-2013); Southern Modernisms (2014-2015); Photography, Modern Architecture and the "Escola do Porto": Interpretations on Teófilo Rego Archive (2014-2014), and Portuguese Participation in CIAM X (2014)*. Last related publications, include the books *To and Fro: Modernism and Vernacular Architecture (ed.)* and *Dois Parâmetros de Arquitectura Postos em Surdina. Leitura crítica do Inquérito à arquitectura regional. Cadernos 3 and 4 (all with M.H. Maia and J.C. Leal, 2013)*.

Maria Helena Maia. Graduate in History/Art and Archaeology and PhD in Modern Architecture and Restoration. Professor at ESAP and coordinator of its Autonomous Section of Theory and History. Director of CEAA, FCT R&D unit 4041 and principal researcher of its Architectural Studies research group; Researcher of the projects *Photography, Modern Architecture and the "Escola do Porto": Interpretations on Teófilo Rego Archive (2013-2015), Southern Modernisms (2014-2015)*. Last related publications, include the books *To and Fro: Modernism and Vernacular Architecture (ed.)* and *Dois Parâmetros de Arquitectura Postos em Surdina. Leitura crítica do Inquérito à arquitectura regional. Cadernos 3 and 4 (all with A. Cardoso and J.C. Leal, 2013)*. Prizes: (1) José de Figueiredo 2008 of Portuguese National Academy of Fine Arts; (2) Ignasi de Lecea 2007-2008 of Public Art & Design Observatory –Universitat de Barcelona (with M. Acciaiuoli and J. C. Leal).