



Understanding Nuno Teotónio Pereira: an existential reality.

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Abstract

Architect Nuno Teotónio Pereira was one of the protagonists of the reflection on the place of architecture and its collective experience in Portugal. As an architect, he was interested in the interior space of the house, in its forms and perception of it as a city, and also in a vast notion of the term territory – at the end of the day, the conceptual sequence of the modern view of the world.

With projects, works, writings and political activism, he placed the reflection on the discipline in a level of ambition unlikely in the Portuguese context. This text proposes a digression about his writings and is based on one of the themes to which he dedicated part of his life: collective housing.

Abstract: Nuno Teotónio Pereira, realism, architecture, social, activism.



Full Article

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Neither evil or good
Has yet vanished in vain,
It all burned and was light,
But it isn't enough

Arseny Tarkovsky, *So Summer is gone*

Architect Nuno Teotónio Pereira was one of the protagonists of the reflection on the place of architecture and its collective experience in Portugal. As an architect, he was interested in the interior space of the house, in its forms and perception of it as a city, and also in a vast notion of the term territory – at the end of the day, the conceptual sequence of the modern view of the world.

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The concept of *realism* guided some of the most significant architecture committed to public housing produced in Spain, Italy and Portugal. Josep Maria Montaner finds the antecedents of *realism* in the philosophical work of Aristotle (384-322 BC), in the social narrative literature of the 19th century, and also in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* of 1848, in the sense that "one seeks reality,

trying to find a contemporary and authentic reality, far from conventions, stereotypes and established norms (...) an existential reality.”ⁱⁱ

Realism sought to refocus the questions of the recipient of the architecture and a way out from the theoretical impasse generated by the propagation of the proposals of the Modern Movement, while maintaining a connection to the modern project. Architect Ernesto Rogers, from Milan, with his theoretical production allowed the debate of that time to restart a relationship with history, rehabilitate the concept of *tradition*, maintain a continuity with the modern project, and not allowing the architecture project to lose touch with *reality* - that is, not to lose touch with the men and women who would inhabit the public and private spaces, with a certain collective memory of the city that shaped the community. This tension between tradition and modernity allowed architecture projects to make cultural and social values prevail over technological ones.ⁱⁱⁱ This non-technological stance enabled the rehabilitation of the concept of *tradition* and social valorisation of the community. One idealised making architecture not based on technological values, but rather on an idea of cultural valorisation of materials and spaces. Architect Nuno Teotónio Pereira was responsible for establishing a passage, a connection, between the postulates of the Modern Movement and an idea of *realism*.

The Survey on Regional Architecture was carried out at the last possible moment to fully record a world about to disappear. (...) What happened is that, due to their duties and confronted, on the one hand, by the censorious narrowness of the Portugueseness of the Salazar regime, and, on the other hand, by the borderless radicalism of the international style, they felt the need to look for roots in the most vernacular architecture.”^{iv}

Euphoric winds of change and progress, dominated by an individualistic and disorderly logic, swept the Portuguese land in an effort to erase the marks of a

past that had to be buried forever. Ignorance and a distorted notion of patrimonial values, in force at the time - both cultivated by the Salazar regime - gave way to the de-characterization and destruction of a long established built area.”^v

However, it is necessary to go back to the reception to the Modern Movement in Portugal to better frame the concept of realism. Based on the belief of the possibility to construct a reality based on domestic architecture, the principles of the Modern Movement aspired to found a new living experience based on social, artistic and technical presuppositions. Collective housing would be the programme that had the capacity to extrapolate with regard to the problem of urban density, the problem of semi-rural dispersed complexes, the precarious conditions of the disadvantaged classes, and, inevitably, the denunciation of real estate speculation.^{vi} This is where architect Nuno Teotónio Pereira stood, trying to affirm, in a pioneering way, a new approach to public social architecture.

“The construction of housing developments will not achieve its social objectives without a quality standard at project level. Quality in the interior design of houses, quality in the forms of grouping dwellings, quality of insertion in the territory.”^{vii}

In the 1940s, the concept of the Radiant City launched by Le Corbusier was gradually generalized, associated with the dissemination of the Athens Charter and the complementary strategies of densification through verticality and zoning in the allocation of functional areas in the territory. The Athens Charter was translated into Portuguese in 1944 by Nuno Teotónio Pereira and Costa Martins. This started a public debate on habitat, urban form and collective housing based on premises different from previous ones, embodied in meetings, publications and whose discussion culminated in the organization of the first architects’ congress in Portugal in 1948.

"At last, architects should be asked to work to clarify authority and opinion, to improve their technical knowledge and to become more aware of their time, to

fight without compromise against all harmful pressures and temptations for the integrity and purity of the architectural work.”^{viii}

During the same period, a semi-public body was created, integrated in the Ministry of Corporations, with the objective of using capital from Social Security, which would provide new solutions within the framework of collective housing architecture, and a much more ambitious scale of action – the Federation of Pension Funds responsible for Economic Housing.

According to Nuno Teotónio Pereira, this body reflects the adaptation of the Salazar regime to the new geopolitical condition that emerged from World War II. The objective of the programme was covering the territory, which had as its main beneficiary no longer the working populations but the middle class.

"In order to face the country's underdevelopment and a reinvigorated opposition ... the regime has undertaken a number of reforms (...). It was in this context that the Federation was created, with the task of promoting the construction of multi-family buildings of a social nature under a lease (...) with the maximum structure of ground floor and 3 floors.”^{ix}

The link between the modern European tradition (of the Modern Movement) and the local culture had several international contributions influenced the Portuguese context in the 1950s and 1960s.

At this time, architect Bruno Zevi published in 1945 the book *Verso un'Architettura Organica*, defending a non-authoritarian architecture (reactive to the recent totalitarian past in the country) and based on the social, psychological and technical valorisation of the architect's activity. A proposal for the creation of a more *authentic* architecture ensued - a term that in this context was associated with a desire for *realism* and a move away from the ideas about the serial abstraction that characterized the Modern Movement. Nuno Teotónio Pereira, the architect who translated the Athens Charter, was also the architect, along with

Nuno Portas, who sought a path towards a non-authoritarian, and, supposedly, authentic architecture.

“It is in this perspective that the housing problem for the largest number must be addressed. It is not just a question of quantity; there is an equally important qualitative aspect, generated by the same quantity, and which implies structural changes, imposed by the transition from a grassroots-based society in urban centres to an urban-based society. (...) To face the problem of housing for the largest number, it will be necessary to build many hundreds of thousands of houses – a quantitative aspect; but, above all, something else will have to be solved: for whom do you build them? where to build them? how to build them? And even more: building, not exhaustive sums of houses, but balanced and organized urban groups”.^x

Throughout the 1960s there were several colloquia where the topics of habitat, housing and the city were approached. This was the case of the "Colloquium on Habitat", held in Lisbon in 1960, organized by the National Union of Architects, which presented the achievements of the Economic Housing in the framework of the Federation of Pension Funds and where French sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lawe, a specialist in urban sociology and a critic of the standardized proposals of the Modern Movement, was invited to participate.

The Plan for the Extinction of the Islands in Porto, the Olivais-Norte Plan in Lisbon and the works of the Federation of Pension Funds were analysed at the event, and various types of housing organization and urban morphologies were proposed, alongside the block model, the isolated vertical block, the distributive system in gallery or the typology of the house-patio.^{xi}

In 1962, issue 76 of the *Arquitectura* magazine published an article by architects and engineers, including Nuno Teotónio Pereira and João Braula Reis, on this problem. The article, entitled "Basic problems posed by the study of Economic



Housing^{xii} resulted from a presentation at the National Colloquium on Labour, Cooperative Organization and Social Security. This presentation contained no proposal in architecture or urban planning. The article addressed the issue of financing, land acquisition, and demography, concluding that the situation was serious and that "economic housing only makes sense if it is guided by a social objective"^{xiii} that is transversal to all social classes.

The Restelo Plan of 1970 (buildings with a 1972-1975 plan) by Nuno Teotónio Pereira and Nuno Portas was the project where horizontal density was presented as a manifesto of street valorisation, in an affirmation of an alternative matrix to the dominant way of construction. This project was informed both by the historical city (comprising various chronological and civilizational periods) and by the European experiences of modern architecture before World War II. The Plan envisaged the construction of a neighbourhood in an area of 12 hectares. This zone had two distinct urban matrixes in immediate proximity. The first one, the Garden-City, is found in the Restelo neighbourhood, a result of the Ajuda Plan of Faria da Costa. The second, the matrix of the Athens Charter, is in the speculative high-density version of the housing and commercial buildings known as Torres do Restelo, designed by architect Zinho Antunes. Nuno Teotónio Pereira's proposal sought to synthesise the two matrices, proposing to overcome one and the other, resorting to the low horizontal height and the resumption of elements of the historical city as the street-corridor, the wide areas, the passages, with visual drives to the Tagus River. It is a summary of the path as an architect, thinker and activist - a possibility of connecting the historic city to the modern tradition.

Nuno Teotónio Pereira was one of the Portuguese architects whose work allowed counteracting a verifiable reality in contemporaneity that is poor in meaning and fragile in terms of responsiveness. His work and the teaching-studio he created

sought an existential reality and an alternative to the progressive gap between the territorial order and the possibilities generated by theoretical production. Reading his writings and visiting his built work is an invitation to share the collective values allowed by architecture.

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ⁱ This text will be published, with the authorization of the journal Estudoprévio, in the book *Evolução das formas de habitação plurifamiliar na cidade de Lisboa*, published by the Lisbon Municipal Council.

ⁱⁱ Josep Maria Montaner, 2003, p. 108.

ⁱⁱⁱ Victoriano Sainz Gutiérrez, 2011, p. 36.

^{iv} Nuno Teotónio Pereira [1987] 1996, p. 214.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Carlo Aymonino, 1976, p. 65.

^{vii} Nuno Teotónio Pereira [1992] 1996, p. 251.

^{viii} Nuno Teotónio Pereira [1953] 1996, p. 19.

^{ix} Nuno Teotónio Pereira [1983] 1996, p. 206.

^x Nuno Teotónio Pereira [1969] 1996, p. 80.

^{xi} Ana Tostões, 1997, p. 170.

^{xii}, Álvaro Alexandre; Gastão Ricon; João Braula Reis; Nuno Teotónio Pereira and Paulo Nunes, 1962, p.47.

^{xiii} Ibid p. 50.