

**LOCAL TRADITIONS OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND THE NATIONAL
IMAGINATION:
THE CASE OF THE ALGARVE, SOUTH PORTUGAL, IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

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In the first half of the 20th century, the Algarve's built-environment singularities were useful in both Estado Novo nationalistic constructs and Portuguese architectural modernism's project; but what was the role of local agency and politics in the process? This paper focuses on the fishing and canning-industry town of Olhão: a unique "Moorish-like" townscape made to represent the entire region in state propaganda, its presumed traditional features were translated into government infrastructure programmes, from low-budget housing to school building. Yet this was not merely a top-down construct: questioning superficial assertions of the reach of central dictums on regional style, I investigate the role of local actors in creating, supporting and sometimes resisting their building customs to offer a more comprehensive reading of the politics of tradition in a specific context.

PREAMBLE

The Algarve is not only the southernmost region of Portugal or its most exploited by the tourism industry. It is a distinctly Mediterranean (North-African) region in an Atlantic country, geographically, historically and culturally differentiated – an “historical region” that was part of the Umayyad Caliphate between the 8th and the 13th centuries and was kept under the Portuguese crown as a separate kingdom until the 19th century. It has been both part of the country's national identity and of its “otherness” since long.

The region's traditional building forms – clear-cut volumes with pared-down walls, overall whitewash, “cubic” masses, flat or simple composite roofs – were essential in marking its specificity: a key that was consistently played to identify the region, by chroniclers, commentators and travellers, well before learned architects started to concern themselves with the values of the “vernacular”. This specificity of regional building customs developed, over time, into a characteristic that was unique among Portuguese regions: it attracted the attention both of picturesque-driven, conservative observers – seduced by the exoticism of fantasised Moorish traces on European soil – and of 1920s

modernists who, as in Capri, Ibiza or Santorini, found in the Algarve examples of modernism *avant la lettre* and hence a suitable lineage for their pursuits.

Because of this particularity, modernism played a central role in the construct of a contemporary building identity in the Algarve that claimed to be both modern and based on traditional regional features. The regional and the modernist seem to have been “naturally” reconciled in the Algarve – not placed in opposition but in convergence. Yet beyond this tidy narrative, largely centre-nurtured, lies a rich and complex web of negotiations, exchanges, misunderstandings and conflicting expectations between a centralised state with its cultural apparatuses (the Estado Novo dictatorship regime, 1933-1974), its metropolitan architectural and urban planning interpreters and the regional-local agents and their practices.

THE MULTISIDED CONSTRUCT OF A BUILT IDENTITY FOR THE ALGARVE

Traces of a prolonged Muslim presence and centuries of cultural and geographical differentiation from the rest of Portugal helped define the Algarve as a “historical region”¹ attracting the interest of travelers, geographers, ethnologists, writers, and poets, since the 18th century. Traditions and customs of a secluded, mainly agrarian society with archaic traits gave the region an air of exoticism within the European context. The built environment played an essential part in this perception: from an early date, authors were consistently impressed with local building traditions, namely simplicity of forms, surfaces and domestic spaces, punctuated with distinctive decorative detailing (Fig. 1): in the words of an early travel guide’s author, “The cottages in this kingdom [the Algarve] are generally much neater and cleaner than in other parts of Portugal, and the manner of building chimneys is quite peculiar and by no means untasteful.”²

Chimneys, “elegant and graceful as minarets”,³ were to become a regional icon of the Algarve, and a part of every architectural interpretation of its identity – along with low-rise houses with pared-down walls, timber screens in windows “which allow seeing without being seen”, terrace and mono-pitch, tiled roofs, and whitewash entirely covering surfaces, “this beaming whiteness” which every account highlighted.

The picturesque and poetic sides of Algarvian buildings dominated popular descriptions, conveyed in travelogues and practical handbooks, which tended to concentrate on form: seen as related to natural conditions and local culture, but essentially as source of aesthetic impression; a “responsive aesthetical approach”⁴ to vernacular architecture, in which the aesthetic experience by the observer, as a detached consumer, is foremost.

Writings by art historians, ethnologists, poets, writers and geographers all testify to the interest disciplines other than architecture had in the built identity of Algarve; in effect, such writings contributed to the normalization of its image along well-defined lines. This image of an abstract, generic vernacular that had quite peculiar features in the Algarve was instrumental in the nationalistic project of the early Estado Novo regime.

1930s Portuguese nationalism was intricately related to regionalism, these being not conflicting but compatible concepts: a province was seen as a small-scale fatherland, and regionalism was an indispensable preliminary for true patriotism, instrumental in the process of fabricating national traditions.⁵ Ethnography participated in the exploration of Portuguese regional folk culture, assembling a “gallery of typical portraits” all of which represented, in their own way, the essence of nationality.⁶ Nationhood building through ethnography, and ontological equivalence of the regional and the national, were transported from republican Portugal (established in 1910) on to the fascist period. For Estado Novo, regional diversity was devoid of conflict potential and understood as a “chromatic variation within the same.”⁷ Even the signs of strong cultural distinction – represented by the Muslim inheritance in south Portugal – were not disguised but highlighted in such *unity in diversity*. From the 1950s on, anthropologists systematised diversity, grounding national identity in Portugal’s “pluralist ethnogenealogy.”⁸ In short, national and regional identities were not seen as incompatible, either in democratic or dictatorial times, but as fundamentally complementing each other. In this frame, specific regional identities were not merely desirable: they were essential.

Within the interest for the Algarve vernacular, the small fishing and canning industry center of Olhão, with its roof terraces and observatory towers – intricate “box-of-bricks” architectural compositions (Fig. 2) –, exerted a positive fascination, shared by national and foreign scholars who debated these

features' origins and meaning. Were these a Muslim remnant or a subsequent development? A regionalism of the entire Algarve or specific to Olhão?⁹ Pictorial analogies were made, with long-lasting consequences, establishing a mythical image of Olhão as the "Cubist town"¹⁰ whose forms, in novelist Aquilino Ribeiro's words, were "as projected from Picasso's canvas (...). From one building to the next, roof terraces and façades intertwine, overlap, cover each other, dismember themselves, the laws of perspective and volume annulled by whiteness and mirage."¹¹

Local poet Dias Sancho, who picked up the label of *Vila Cubista* for Olhão in 1923,¹² employed the tones of Futurist literature to associate this urban setting with the industrious life of its inhabitants:

"The whiteness of buildings blinds! (...) and the vague, persistent, monotonous murmur bubbles on from the bright town: in her factories, in her offices, in her banks, Olhão works and thrives."¹³

From the 1930s on, written, drawn and photographed depictions of this townscape insisted on its plastic qualities but also on the *modernism* of its features. Even a chronicler from neighboring Faro, the region's capital, noted that "There is something unseen and modernist about this place"¹⁴. The invisibility of the roof, the unmediated transition between solid, geometric white walls and ethereal blue skies, reinforced the impression of a "Cubist", Moroccan appearance; the unadorned, pure whitewashed surfaces, crisp-edged elemental volumes, strong chiaroscuro contrasts, were all recognized as familiar and celebrated by modernist eyes. In other points of the Mediterranean world, similar reactions had been and would continue to be recorded.¹⁵ This most Mediterranean part of Atlantic Portugal was no exception.

Pre-mass-tourism foreign travelers in the Algarve, whose travelogues combined Western preconceptions with a Northern European cultural mind-set, associated these "white cubes" with both North African landscapes and modernist architecture, frequently in impressionistic short descriptions. The renowned English novelist and traveler Rose Macaulay wrote: "The whole effect of Olhão is exotic, beautiful, oddly modernist, with its square houses and rectangular parallel streets."¹⁶

Some underlined the way in which vernacular building forms purportedly translated, in a straightforward, truthful way, the construction techniques and materials employed, pointing to what would become a "moral marker of Modern Movement architecture".¹⁷ The generic 1930s architectural culture of non-experts became apparent in accounts that insisted on the lessons that could be drawn

from the streetscape of Olhão: “For sheer starkness of architecture [Olhão] could give points to many a modern young architect priding himself on the functional use of materials.”¹⁸ Others still, in multilayered readings that conflated stereotypes of built-environment modernity and primitivism, depicted the unexpected of this urban experience:

“Four stories those houses may run to (...); but as you stare up at them from the lanes below they take on an aspect of terrifying sky-scrapers. (...) when I myself first saw Olhão I thought of Africa and then of New York (...). There is no standard of comparison; I do not believe there is any city in the world that is like Olhão.”¹⁹

Laypeople and scholars, travelers and geographers proceeded side-by-side to describe, and seek an explanation for, such a surprising townscape. By doing so, they were consolidating a particular model for Olhão’s built identity, based on a selection of motifs: the ziggurat-like volume with limited openings, the flat roof (called *açoteia* in the Algarve) surrounded by a parapet (*platibanda*), the turret (*pangaio*) covering internal access to the terrace – often topped with another observation platform (*mirante*) – and the external stair cast over a rampant round arch. Such a model proved instrumental for formal architectural proposals, throughout the second quarter of the 20th century: Lisbon-based architect Cottinelli Telmo’s (1897-1948) house-type designs “for the South of Portugal”, published in 1933²⁰ (Fig. 3), is but one example of how the Olhão stereotype surfaced in metropolitan specialized media.

The collaboration between academics and non-academics in this construct may be seen with particular sharpness in the work of geographers such as Mariano Feio (1914-2001), Gaetano Ferro (b. 1925) and Orlando Ribeiro (1911-1997): their published views on the lineage of Olhão’s vernacular house type, although stemming from research pursued at the University of Lisbon (where Ribeiro founded a Centro de Estudos Geográficos to further the cause of Human Geography in Portugal), were in fact all based on the views and elaborations of Francisco Fernandes Lopes (1884-1969), a local doctor and amateur historian who fervently defended the “pyramidal”, vertical growth of the dwellings in Olhão to be a localism of the town.²¹ What became a construct of the center (Lisbon) was thus molded, and eventually determined, by local influence.

Ribeiro’s work establishes a particular link between the spheres of architecture and parallel fields. Having investigated the cultural background of roofing devices in the Algarve as one of the main case

studies for his groundbreaking 1961 book *Geografia e Civilização*, Ribeiro advocated the appropriation of this vernacular heritage by modern architecture, and saw contemporary practice as being on the right track in Olhão, citing a specific example:

“The açoteia and the mirante are used for storage, and on them one can find everything that would disturb the tidiness of the humble, small houses; *in the new fishermen housing scheme*, built with very good taste in the traditional style (which is a rare thing in this kind of public works...), the houses have gardens and the streets are wide enough, so cluttering up the açoteias has been officially prohibited (...). *Once this style of building is fixed, for a functional reason*, it is only understandable that its use would spread to where it is not really necessary – and many houses in the modern and wide streets of Olhão show the same roofing solution.”²²

Ribeiro’s 1961 monograph, possibly based on field surveys developed in 1955-56, praised one specific fishermen housing scheme, which had been finished in 1949 on the outskirts of Olhão, as a positive example of the replication of a vernacular model or, in his words, *style*. Let us examine its background in some detail.

EARLY SOCIAL HOUSING SCHEMES: A TESTBED FOR LOCAL BUILT IDENTITY

Orlando Ribeiro’s praise was directed at the “Bairro de Casas para Pescadores” in Olhão (Fig. 4), a very special fishermen housing scheme in the historiography of Portuguese architecture. Unlike other schemes built within the same national program across the country in the 1940s and 1950s, this one has entered the canon of Portuguese architectural culture: it did so as the work of first-generation modernist master Carlos Chambers Ramos (1897-1969), his “first act of maturity” and “the first example of a modern reading on traditional architecture” in Portugal,²³ the design being dated as far back as 1925. But this was in fact neither Ramos’s design nor of such an early date. The design, together with those of similar schemes for Fuseta (a village in the same municipality), Portimão and Ferragudo (fishing centers further west), was in fact by Inácio Peres Fernandes (1910-1989), architect for the Public Works ministry office for urban improvement (DGSU); it is dated to 1945-1946; its initial version totalled 1240 dwellings; and it was only partly inspired by Ramos’s unbuilt proposal for another scheme in Olhão, the much-celebrated “Bairro Municipal”, with only 24 homes (Fig. 5). Carlos Ramos did build workers housing in Olhão before 1925: that year, a Lisbon magazine published one “bairro operário” (workers housing scheme) by Ramos, under the heading “Regional

Architecture” and presented as “a valuable step in the national decorative arts, both by its styling and by its wonderful adjustment to regional needs.”²⁴ The 15 dwellings – which Ramos designed for his brother-in-law’s Lucas & Ventura canning industry – were built to minimum standards and, with its peculiar layout in *redans*, show an attempt to address persistent problems of local traditional homes, such as the absence of natural light and ventilation in all rooms. But the “adjustment to regional needs” was, so far as the elevations are concerned, rather limited: segmental arches, four-pitch roofs and voluminous chimneys evoke a generic South Portugal atmosphere, common to the Alentejo and the Algarve, and are not features of the vernacular Algarvian house – much less of Olhão’s townscape.

In this sense, Ramos’s proposal for a second complex of social housing in the town – his “Bairro Municipal de Olhão”, of which the few surviving drawings and model photographs have been wrongly dated and conflated with the existing “Casas para Pescadores” scheme²⁵ – seems closer to being a reading of the town’s “cubist” vernacular architecture, with its compact composition of terraced houses, twin patios and exterior stairs in the backyard, whose coupling became an iconic element of modern architecture in the town and elsewhere. But a more detailed observation of the project, which Ramos published in Spanish (1930) and German journals (1931), reveals the misapprehensions of this celebrated design: for instance, in the use of patio houses – never a common practice in Algarve or Olhão –, of a communal backyard – the backyard in Olhão being traditionally private and an essential hub of domestic, family life – and, again, of the bulky Alentejo chimneys – not the tracery top Algarve chimney nor the local box-like, “balloon” chimney. This is a good example of how a generic vernacular model can be manipulated and deformed to serve a sophisticated modern architecture proposal; whitewashed, covered with açoteias and paced with arched stairs as it may have been, it still is above all a Carlos Ramos design, similar to his other work of the same period²⁶ with which no vernacular association was ever made. In many ways it evokes the image of a closed, contained, self-standing *siedlung* that conveys an uncanny sense of confinement, as if designed for easy surveillance.

Possibly there were official, non-aesthetic concerns underlying commissions and proposals for social housing in Olhão: the need to control the thriving and widespread activity of smuggling with which

seamen and canning industry workers complemented their earnings, and in which so characteristic a townscape played an important role. In 1923, the novelist Raul Brandão described how “Everyone in Olhão, rich or poor, protected smugglers and joined the trade. Never was a bolt of fabric seized on land. It would be passed from açoteia to açoteia – merely stretching your arms was enough – and it would run, if need be, the entire town.”²⁷

Ribeiro’s words on the prohibition of using the new açoteias for storage, quoted above, echo the same concern, as does the State’s extensive investment in infrastructure to survey the south coast border with Guarda Fiscal (customs police) outposts. Building new extensions of the town for social housing would have been not merely a response to the needs of a growing workforce, following a flourishing fishing and canning industry, and of improved sanitary and living conditions, hardly provided by the vernacular urban fabric; it might have been seen by local and central authorities as an opportunity to create organized and easily controlled settlements for an instable social sector²⁸, and to finally counter the centuries-old practice of smuggling in the Algarve coast.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL STANCES ON THE VALUE OF OLHÃO’S VERNACULAR

Such socio-political motivations – even in a dictatorship regime – did not necessarily imply the elimination of the existing vernacular fabric, whose aesthetic and picturesque qualities still seem to have outweighed the social and sanitary shortcomings. The first urban master plan for Olhão was created in Lisbon in 1944 by João António de Aguiar (1906-1974) and served thereafter as the first legal instrument to guide and regulate the town’s growth and renewal. Although de Aguiar had argued for the gradual elimination of the famed Olhão town centre, its houses, rooftops and turrets, on the grounds of their utter inappropriateness to modern living standards, the national Higher Council for Public Works imposed the contrary view, when it approved the plan in 1945: the old town was, the councilors claimed, where “the Moorish influx is so strongly manifested”; its modest houses, chimneys and terraces crowned by “oriental” observatory towers, although pieces of an insalubrious fabric, were traits of “purely regional architecture” of such value “that its demolition would represent an irreparable loss.” Such “rare local architecture features” should be carefully studied in a detailed partial plan, the results of which would “certainly benefit” future residential estates, and allow them to