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THE GOOD PORTUGUESE ARCHITECT – TROPICALIZING COLONIALISM: A CRITICAL READING OF THE POST-COLONIAL NARRATIVE OF “PORTUGUESE ARCHITECTURE”

Tiago Mota Saraiva



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Post-colonial studies have taken a central role in problematizing identity, and, accordingly, in political debate. From a European perspective, these post-colonial studies are among the most important areas of knowledge for constructing the future of Europe and its relationship with the world. However, there is an academic and political struggle over knowledge at work: it is no coincidence that elements of recent far right movements build their own narratives on the basis of the colonial past, whether understood through extreme denialism or through reconstituting a pedagogical and benign vision of the colonial state.

Clearly, knowledge and culture possess the necessary tools to expose denialist currents which are thin and ignorant. However, the increasing entrepreneurialisation and financialization of universities has opened up an arena for historiographical reconstruction which, although not exactly new, has gained prominence in Portugal in the last ten years. This article will not deal with this dispute from a generic point of view, which would have to reckon with the historiographical significance, beyond the academy, of projects such as Rui Ramos’ History of Portugal (1), or the popularization of learned studies by the celebrated Francisco Manuel dos Santos Foundation. Rather, this piece will attempt to deal with the creation of a depoliticized and aestheticized academic idea of “Portuguese architecture” in Africa during Portuguese colonialism.

This narrative of “Portuguese architecture” does not come from within post-colonial studies. But – whether because it is connected to a singular, propagandistic, easy to digest discourse, or because it helps to secure research funding – giving authenticity to the idea of “Portuguese architecture” has required new stories about “Portuguese interventions” in colonial territories.

Research, publications and exhibitions produced in this context have left no room for doubt or critique. These reached their zenith of national pride with *The universalists – 50 years of Portuguese Architecture*. This exhibition was inaugurated in 2016 under unique financial conditions, in the context of commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation’s office in Paris. (The exhibition later moved to the *Casa de Arquitectura* in Matosinhos.) In an interview with Ana Sousa Dias, published in *Diário de Notícias*, its curator, Nuno Grande, described it boldly: “Portugal has something to teach a Europe in crisis: the idea of a universalist condition written with a small u, not a big U” (2). In terms of Portuguese colonialism, Grande defended the actions of the colonial State through the notion of the exceptionalism of Portuguese colonialism: “we always tried to adapt ourselves to the other” (3).



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Ana Vaz Milheiro, in the collection published as *Nos trópicos sem Le Corbusier* (4), does not take the same triumphalist tone as Grande. Yet she too cannot resist attempting to identify a certain *tropicalized portugueseness* characterized by the adaptation of metropolitan models to particular climactic or geographic circumstances. This proceeds as if it were possible to cleanse architecture of the context in which it acts, and of everything that surrounds it. Questions of disciplinary politics, practice and context, the conditions imposed by the regime, and the strong political and ideological positions of the majority of Portuguese architects, whether for or against the regime, are all made secondary to a reading that privileges “the architect” as an aesthetic and technical subject. Milheiro does refer extensively to the “Colonial Act” of 1933 (5), and to the character of the “civilizing vehicle” of house construction in colonization and the politics of the New State. When she analyses the architecture itself she does recognize that local production was influential; small details serve to confirm a thesis that what was locally available can inform a reading of a site. However, she doesn’t account for multiplicity, and does not call into question the power of the abstract idea of “Portuguese architecture”.

Critical readings of this line of thinking, and the construction of alternative narratives from within disciplinary architecture, are rare in Portugal. It is from the sphere of the social sciences that some breaths of fresh air have emerged. Nuno Domingos – who studies colonialism, memories of colonialism and the relationship between the writing of history and the idea of national identity – published an essay in 2015 in the *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* (6) about how the history of colonial architecture and town planning are part of a reconstitution of the representation of national identity.

However embryonic the discussion of post-colonialism may be in Portugal, forty-five years after the beginning of decolonization and the end of the fascist regime it is important to register that we should at least be in a period of many possible pathways and breakthroughs. What is most noteworthy in the field of architecture is the construction of a practically hegemonic vision, institutionalized both in the heart of architecture’s academic strands and in most representations of Portugal produced under the tutelage of the State. This historical vision always presents itself as “non-historicist”, but rather “of the architect”. Equating Rui Ramos and Fernando Rosas, it declares itself, thanks to a lack of political training, to be independent of disputes over the writing of the history of Portugal. It does not open any space for putting forward questions of class and race, or for the consideration of the role of liberation movements or the militancy of Portuguese architects in revolutionary organizations. None of these are considered relevant in terms of distinct practices and identities. Finally, this hegemonic



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construct makes no reference to international post-colonial studies, even those specifically dealing with architecture (7).

Two factors underpin this position. Firstly, a fear of being pigeon-holed into studies of propaganda and national pride, and secondly the fear that their scientific credentials will be questioned in a way that they cannot control. This trend of work aspires only to Portuguese hegemony, and rarely even risks reaching out to other lusophone countries. When it does, it is more in a descriptive than a theoretical mode, with little relevance to post-colonial studies at a global scale.

It is true that this dominant vision of one element of 20th century architecture – that produced in the former Portuguese colonies – derives much more from a militant desire to construct a contemporary national idea of “Portuguese architecture” than from a conscious attempt to rewrite history. Its evolution, though, tells us a great deal about what goes on in academia and, therefore, about the kind of intellectual and social system that we can seek to construct.

(1) Monteiro, Nuno Gonçalo; Ramos, Rui; Vasconcelos e Sousa, Bernardo (2012) *História de Portugal*, Esfera dos Livros.

(2) Grande, Nuno (2016) “[Compreender a herança do pai sem a matar](#)”, interview in *Diário de Notícias*, April 13th. (Accessed April 20th 2019).

(3) *Idem, ibidem*.

(4) Milheiro, Ana Vaz (2012) *Nos Trópicos sem Le Corbusier - Arquitectura luso-africana no Estado Novo*, Relógio D'Água Editores.

(5) Legal Decree n° 22:465 of 11th April 1933, in which, among other colonial principles, is inscribed Article 20: “The state can only compel indigenous people to labour in public works of general interest to the collective, in occupations whose results will belong to them, in execution of juridical decisions of a penal character, or for the fulfillment of fiscal obligations.”

(6) Domingos, Nuno (2015) “Colonial architectures, urban planning and the representation of Portuguese imperial history”, *Portuguese Journal of Social Science*, Vol 14 n° 3. Lisboa, p. 235-255.

(7) In these terms, as well as the many research centres and publishing houses that have dedicated themselves to post-colonial studies, it is worth highlighting many of the essays and articles published by multiple authors in [The Funambulist – Politics of Space and Bodies](#), edited by Léopold Lambert.

Translated by Archie Davies



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