

# Venice Architecture Biennale 2014: Portugal to distribute “Homeland” newspaper based on housing

Nº3 July 2014

**1 Pedro Campos Costa (PCC):** The curatorial proposal chosen for the Portuguese Representation at the Venice Architecture Biennale was a *newspaper* that emphasizes the crucial role of the media in the construction of modernity. Through this medium, Portugal shares with the audience one of the most significant paths of the country’s culture over the century, which has culminated with the expressive media visibility of its architecture. Despite this remarkable journey of affirmation in artistic and cultural circles, Portuguese architecture is facing serious difficulties in terms of its position, value creation and internationalization in foreign markets. In your opinion what are the reasons for this difficulty? What changes do you deem necessary to reverse this situation?

**Jorge Barreto Xavier (JBX):** I would start by saying that, regarding the Portuguese representation in this year’s Venice Architecture Biennale, it is a bold curatorial proposal, one that is courageous given the current context of economic hardship but is not limited by the financial issues per se. The project represents a particular way of thinking, anchored in the importance of the media apparatus as a structuring element of the contemporary making of society.

In the West as well as in other regions of the world, there were moments in history when the Media did not constitute a fundamental, structuring element of social organization. In fact, the very position of the Media was different before digital networks or in pre remote communication societies. But we are all aware of how communication devices have been essential for societies at the most diverse eras of world history. The way in which the exercise of communication was carried out in the age of the post-digital network has transformed the very way in which society exists and operates. It is not an adjectival transformation, nor an instrument at society’s service, but rather an element that structures forms of making society – of being society. Using Greek terminology, it is no longer a question of *Téknes*, but rather a question of *Ethos*. Hence, using communication, a part of contemporary *Ethos*, as a starting point for the Portuguese representation, in this case, of architecture, and acknowledging the ontological meaning of communication’s presence in contemporaneity amounts to understanding architecture’s representation in the context of communication ontology. Now that Architecture is one of the possible grammars of social organization. It makes sense that, when we talk about communication and architecture, we find mechanisms of identity that can and should be interpreted together. Meaning that, when I speak of architecture as grammar. I am speaking of a design exercise - but the full scope of architecture as a social object is manifested in the use of a territory, precisely in this exercise of territorial affirmation. If we accept this definition, it is interesting to realize whether or not it is possible to have rules that are understood as a language, which would signify the acceptance of an alphabet...

**PCC:** Is that alphabet the reason for the success of Portuguese architecture?

**JBX:** I have taken a large detour to say that architecture is one of the forms that can be used to create social value. In fact, it can always be represented as a language exercise, a specific grammar and it can likewise represent, within a given Wittgensteinian reasoning, a way of conceiving architecture as metaphysics, by conceiving language before it is applied. The critical capacity of that language is always greater than the object itself. What Portuguese

architecture has achieved, especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been precisely to propose languages, grammars, objects and material representations that are discourses themselves. As a language, and this has been internationally recognized, it has achieved a capacity for reading and constructing, a status, a distinctive alphabets.

If that is so, we arrive at your question the difficulties we face in achieving a recognition that is relevant in a wider social context. It is a difficult question and one that resonates beyond architecture itself. There are specific difficulties about the planning, because one thing is to have an acknowledged architectural discourse validated in the academic context or by great international awards, and other thing is to translate those awards and acknowledgments into commissions.

**PCC: Isn't there a contradiction? So many awards amassed and then no market acknowledgement? Aren't markets supposed to always choose the best?**

**JBX:** Yes, but there is a communication effect that has still not materialized. There are fields in which Portugal is known to be a reference: cork as an element with a range of uses in several global market sectors, Fado as the Portuguese cultural identity, textile, ceramics and footwear as value-generating sectors, but when it comes to architecture, we cannot disconnect it from the authorial aspect but, exclusively speaking of commissions instead, when hiring technical experts and service providers, we are faced with a statutory problem. The symbolic representation of the average Portuguese architect in an international context still needs to be more valued through communication. The existing body of work on the academic and critical levels does not reach society as a whole, so your average Italian, English or French person does not think of hiring a Portuguese .

**PCC- But they would think of hiring an English architect, right?**

**JBX –** Because there is a kind of prejudice, that the English are very thorough, that they are very good. For that reason there is a very hard but absolutely necessary task to be undertaken in order to make it widely and generally known that the quality of the Portuguese architects' service is in fact better. This cannot be achieved straight away, it is work in progress, but it is not happening as fast as we would like since our urgency is greater than its natural evolution. For instance, throughout the years and in several areas such as designing and building of roads and bridges, Portuguese Engineering has been recognized internationally. There are a number of Portuguese companies operating in several markets because of that recognition. We need to understand which mechanisms we have to use to put Portuguese architecture in the same situation. As a matter of fact, it is less expensive to hire a Portuguese architect and the country's architecture is one of the most awarded internationally. It is necessary to widen the scope, to make this known far and wide, to share it as something natural. To turn Portuguese architecture into a Portuguese brand.

**2 PCC: The contents of the Homeland project reveal a willingness to reflect on the real challenges of the sector that are the basis for a paradigm shift. The focus is on the territory, the symptoms of abandonment and decay which are forcing a refocus on the existing infrastructure and a search for ways of contributing to real development and improving the quality of life and competitiveness of the country. What do you think this representation has**

**done for the country, and what do you think it said about the country? Do you believe this can be a way out for architecture in Portugal?**

**JBX:** The Portuguese representation is anchored in the logic of a functioning newspaper, but the Newspaper is not the representation. The work device is materialized on paper, but the representation is more than that. In my opinion, to bring on board six municipalities from different parts of the country and to transform the debate and discussion on the territory into a set of teams working on something concrete are actions that drive the project far beyond a merely illustrative logic that many national representations tend towards. It is not a monographic work, it possesses some documental elements that illustrate reality but, above all, it is a political manifesto, in the sense of building the polis, not just in the architectural sense of the term but also in the sense of how architecture itself intervenes and interferes in the very political organization of society. We are well aware that it is so, and the grammar I spoke of is not merely aesthetical or one that organizes space according to technical knowledge, it represents what society is at that moment, its utopias and expectations. It is a social description that goes beyond the merely visible, and since this is a political proposal, I believe its intention is understandable: in addition to utopia, it contains operative features as it calls upon technical and political agents to think about the present-day negative and positive aspects of our territory. In a positive way we could talk about the acknowledged skills of the Portuguese architecture and on a negative way about what happened at the coast and in the interior, or the case of big cities and urban grids not building communities, or how the brand-new building fever created a scenario of millions of unused houses and empty office spaces, or the need for a shift towards the rehabilitation of the built heritage and therefore how that reflects politically and economically on unused space. We talked about it in Porto, in the context of a squatting simulation in Avenida dos Aliados, where we also discussed the paradox of having many families without homes and many homes without families. We cannot accept that market logic prevails over a logic of social justice. As the territory's political organization is centred on cities, agricultural space is very unlikely to ever be a source of autonomous power, rather, it is a source of power tied to the city's space. However, we cannot allow for a sort of intoxication over the concept of the city in detriment of the concept of State. Nowadays we tend to view the State as increasingly weaker and the city's identity as increasingly stronger, the fact is that the city does not have the conditions to replace the State as a political organization. There is a dangerous empty space between the State's political frailty and a growing affirmation of the city that does not compensate for the loss of State legitimacy. This void in the political fabric has allowed cracks to open up in our constructions of identity, namely in western countries. I believe that at present, we are all stunned when we witness the creation of eccentric States with actual, effective statutory capacity, as in the recent case of the Islamic State, with thousands of Europeans moving there in order to become citizens of that kind of State. It is a clear example of the deterioration of the role of State identity and cohesion, whereby other forms generate political, social and organization disruptions.

**3 PCC: The cultural sector has hesitated to become part of a national strategy together with the economic, industrial, business or even diplomatic spheres. Because it engages these different universes, architecture should be a key agent acting horizontally through culture, but this doesn't seem to have happened. What are the reasons for this? Why does it happen?**

**JBX:** It is a rather difficult question and one that I don't quite have a fully formed answer for. From 1974 until today, with the country's democratization, a growing division between erudite

and popular culture has curiously arisen. This division already existed in the previous period of 1926-1974, known as “Estado Novo”, where culture fell into the category of either erudite or popular, and the State sought to exploit both as instruments of propaganda.

In a disconnected way, this was undertaken through the creation of a national federation for joy in the workplace, or the “casas do povo” (communal recreational centres) on the popular culture front. On the erudite side stood António Ferro’s projects. Even though there was a dissociation between them, both cultures were connected to the overall idea of the “Good Portuguese People”. After the revolution of April 25, the political system no longer wanted to use culture as an instrument in an outspoken way, but political decision-makers distanced themselves from the grassroots of popular culture, and this resulted in a growing validation of erudite culture. This led to cultural policies validating, time after time, the niche interests in detriment of audiences and publics. Fruition was present in popular urban culture, for instance, through music, which no longer depended on State policy. This divergence led cultural agents in the areas of theatre, dance, the visual arts, film and even architecture to become a self-sustaining circle, validated from within but not by the wider society. This critical autophagic exercise is the reason why there have been no negative repercussions in public opinion to the fact that, over the last 15 years, the funding of cultural policies has been decreasing in a very expressive way. The negative impact that was felt came from the specialized media, the intellectual and arts circles, but there has been no backlash from the overall population. It is exactly for this reason that we urgently need the creative areas as well as architecture to engage audiences. The path before us absolutely does not lead to lowering, corrupting or degrading their creative practice. It leads to an awareness of social presence. This is not a Portuguese problem alone, but an international one with direct and perceivable reflections, as in the case of the United States, where philanthropic funding shifted from cultural initiatives to social causes, resulting from the absence of engagement between culture and society.

**4 PCC: In your opinion what is the role of this kind of events in the affirmation and visibility of the national cultural industries in a globalized world in which new polarities emerge in other geographical contexts? What can the future of Portuguese culture be in this kind of events?**

**JBX:** The Venice Biennale is an undeniable, incontestable reference, for both good and bad reasons.

I know this isn’t a particularly nice way to put it but I often say that the Venice Biennale has turned into some kind of Disneyland for artists as intellectuals, experts, critics and the media, all have Venice written down on their calendars as an absolute “do not miss event”. Of course that today we have other centres of legitimation and presence in various locations around the world that cannot be ignored, especially as far as Portugal is concerned. São Paulo is unfortunately no longer very relevant, as the Architecture Biennale has deteriorated. But, we hope that will change and that it goes back to being something interesting. Nevertheless there is no doubt over the relevance of our presence in Switzerland or Japan, China, India or the Arab countries. We need to understand how to approach South America and the United States and we need to understand the new internationalization map of architecture, together with all the cultural agents and professionals, investors and people that are connected with the dissemination and promotion of architecture and we need to establish a presence there.