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MODERNISM AND AGRARIAN UTOPIA¹

Maria Helena Maia (Portugal)

ABSTRACT

The Iberian Peninsula was mostly rural, poor and archaic until very recently, with only a few cities whose inhabitants lived a substantially different reality from the rest of the population. This provides a background of supposed authenticity of the roots of national architectural identity with direct effects on architectural choices. One of the possible examples to understand this process is the experience of inner colonization, so crucial both in Portugal and in Spain, and the actions taken by the authorities in charge. These parallel experiences provide us with an opportunity to gain a thorough understanding of the relationship between architectural identity and the rural world. In both countries, the 1940s and 1950s were characterized by major infrastructural interventions in the territory. The modernization of Portuguese and Spanish countryside included inner colonization schemes, implementing the “agrarian utopia” purported by both Franco and Salazar. Many modern architects played a part in this process.

Rural settlements across the Iberian Peninsula clearly show different points of balance between elements of modernity and references to vernacular architecture. For this reason, they offer an ideal testing ground to question how the local architectural identity was constructed.

Until second half of 20th century, the Iberian Peninsula was mainly rural, poor and archaic, with very few cities, like Lisbon, Oporto, Madrid or Barcelona, where people lived a completely different reality from their fellow countrymen. The documentary entitled *Las Hurdes, Tierra sin Pan* by Luis Buñuel (1933) depicts those rural settlements in their pervasive misery. Buñuel’s documentary was censored, just as the survey on rural housing carried out by Portuguese agronomists in the 1940s², which reported the miserable living conditions of the rural populations. This reality was very hard to face, particularly in those political circumstances, even by a state like the Spain of the time, which was trying to carry out a land reform in line with the rest of Europe.

In Spain and Portugal, however, land reform was to wait a few decades. During the Iberian totalitarian regimes of Franco and Salazar³ – which ended in 1975 in Spain and 1974 in Portugal –, the power of large landowners was a major obstacle to the reform, despite the awareness of its necessity.

Nonetheless, the 1940s and 1950s were characterized by relevant territorial interventions, including major hydraulics works, construction of power stations and road networks which effectively contributed to landscape change in both countries. In Portugal, for example, the Salazar regime promoted a campaign for the creation of woods on non-agricultural lands. The same happened in Spain, where fast-growing or resinous species were planted as a way to exploit the less fertile or easily flooded areas.

These projects led to the establishment of several new institutions, as the Hydroelectrics ones. In Spain these also included the Instituto Nacional de Colonización (INC) [National Institute of Colonization] (1940) which was responsible for the hydraulic works required for agricultural development of land associated to inner colonization⁴. In Portugal, such tasks were shared by the *Junta Autónoma das Obras de Hidráulica Agrícola* [Autonomous Board for Agricultural Hydraulics Works] (1931) and the *Junta Nacional de Colonização* (JCI) [Board for Colonization National] (1936).

Even if plans by the Portuguese JCI covered almost the entire region south of river Tejo, only seven colonies⁵ were actually implemented, all located on State-owned or common lands (*baldíos*). In the latter case, new settlers sometimes met a strong opposition from local inhabitants, who felt deprived not only of the common land (granted to the newcomers or used for afforestation) but also of ancestral grazing areas. This was a rejection factor which, in some cases, was aggressively extended to the new settlers. In Spain, INC’s action was undertaken on a much larger scale, as testified by the ca. 300 existing *pueblos*.

Undoubtedly, despite the many similarities, these processes had a different evolution in each of the two countries.

In Portugal, most of the colonies were planed during the 1940s and began to received settlers in the first years of the 1950s. Only Boalhosa was built later. Afterwards, new rural settlements came to a halt, as it was preferred to upgrade already existing villages and to support hydraulic works which were to improve agriculture.

In Spain, the 1940s were also characterized by experimental pilot interventions in farms purchased by the State for the purpose; the period from the 1950s until the mid 1960s was characterized by a more pragmatic/technocratic approach, resulting in the construction of new settlements, some of which required expropriation of previous landowners. In the mid 1960s the investment on new settlements tended to be replaced by investment on agricultural improvements, quite similarly to what already happened in Portugal⁶.

In both countries, landowners ended up being the greatest beneficiaries of the construction of new roads and hydraulic infrastructures: their lands became more valuable, while they could also take advantage of the new workforce made available by the settlement of rural workers.

Implying as it did inner colonization, the agricultural policy of both countries, was clearly in line with Franco's and Salazar's rural utopias which brought about a dramatic landscape change.

In Spain, inner colonization may be seen as a land counter-reform, in that it nullified Republican policies with the political and social aim to "ideologically ruralize the proletariat"⁷; settling the population in the countryside meant controlling migration into the city and, consequently, mitigating the danger of proletarianization.

The attempt to transform potential proletarians into *petit-bourgeois*⁸ was an issue also in Portugal, where the distribution of land associated with internal colonization implied "cultivated folklore and an organic view of society as a response to the harmful effects of modernization. However, Salazar's 'ruralism' was imposed via powerful mechanisms of ideological indoctrination within the framework of a nationalist dictatorship"⁹.

In effect, an appropriate profile was required to be settler. In Pegões, for example, they had to be healthy, sturdy, non-alco-

Fig. 1. Carlos Sobrini Marín, civic center square, Rincón de Balasteros, Spain, 1953. © MODSCAPES – Josefina Gonzalez Cubero, 2017.



holic and presenting “conditions of moral suitability and integrity”¹⁰. In addition, they had to go through a control process on a daily basis, this concerned both their agricultural work and social behaviour. All this bears witness to the ideological pressure on the new settlers and to the institutional interference in the settlers’ life.

Agronomists played a crucial role in inner colonization of the Iberian Peninsula.

In the Portuguese case, the JCI acted as a sort of laboratory of the *Instituto Superior de Agronomia* [Institute of Agronomy] which provided JCI with directors and technical staff; moreover, a great number of students developed theses in this context.

If we consider that, in architecture, the rising of a “professional thinking” (in Vieira de Almeida’s words), i.e. that the aspiration of intervening on society in a strictly professional frame, is indissociable of and blends with the Modern Movement starting from CIAM¹¹, we should also accept that if the same attitude is evident in the agronomists’ actions, it should also be considered modernist.

The architects’ task was to design new habitats and, in some cases, they did manage to producing important achievements of surprising modernity.

In Spain, settlements were surrounded by agricultural fields and featured a concentrated layout following a set of predefined rules and programs¹². *Pueblos* and *aldeas* were always equipped with a *centro cívico* [civic centre] surrounded by houses with agricultural annexes and corral.

The civic centre was organized around a square, including several buildings with pre-defined functions. In the *aldea*, these included a mixed school convertible in chapel, a teacher’s house and a small administrative building. In the larger *pueblo*, these included a church with the priest’s house, the town hall, schools, a syndicate’s building, a playground, a cinema, a lodge, a cafe, houses for professionals, doctors, teachers, town hall secretary and around 10% for artisans and shopkeepers¹³.

Besides, the settlements’ layout was to follow the natural topography, trying to find an appropriate orientation of streets and lots, onto which houses and their annexes would be grafted¹⁴.

Fig. 2. Civic center of agricultural colony of Gafanha, Portugal, photographed from the church main door. © MODSCAPES - Maria Helena Maia, 2007.



Normally, a single architect used to design each settlement, from laying out the general plan to designing the living units, while also being responsible for the architectural expression of civil equipment. This partly explains the formal unity characterizing these settlements.

Another important aspect is the use of a town planning matrix embedding specific solutions concerning the relation between rural housing and the street network, forming urban front. When we consider how the theme of the *civic centre* was interpreted in Spain, we find many references to what had been built in connection with the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes. However, the relationship between the rural house and the centre of the new settlement, as well as the resulting townscape differs from the Italian model.

The situation was rather different in Portugal, where the Italian influence is to be found in implantation of the *casais* (as at Gafanha or Pegões Velhos), featuring tracts of farmland in association with housing, which produces a dispersed layout. All Spanish settlements have well-defined limits, ending with an urban front facing onto the open fields, whereas Portu-

guese villages are often without clearly defined limits, as it happens in the colony of Martim Rei.

In addition, where we find a *civic centre*, as at Gafanha or Pegões, it has much less defined boundaries because of the low density of land occupation. Even if some colonies were equipped with collective facilities – elementary schools, chapel, clinic (in some cases), furnace, fountain, housing for the priest, teachers, and technicians – these were reduced to a minimum and, in most cases, never implemented despite having been designed.

A publication by the *Centro de Estudos de Urbanismo do Ministério das Obras Públicas* [Centre for Urban Studies of the Ministry of Public Works] documents the existence of four main options for the organization of settlements promoted by JCI:

- a) in a dispersed habitat, whose position is subordinated to the working areas of a medium farm (casal agrícola);*
- b) in semi-dispersed habitat, combining reasons for the proximity of both working areas and centres of interest;*
- c) in a pro-concentrado [more concentrated] habitat, materializing neighbourhood and basic facilities needs;*

Fig. 3. Agustín Delgado de Robles y Velasco, Settlers' houses, Barquilla de Pinares, Spain, 1957. @ MODSCAPES – Josefina Gonzalez Cubero, 2017.



d) in a concentrated habitat, accentuating such needs and making them prevail over dispersion factors¹⁵.

In the case of concentrated settlements, although with a few variations, the layout tended to follow the contour lines, in an axial setting. Aldeia Nova, Lugar de S. Mateus at Barroso Colony and Boalhosa are good examples of such an axial structure. However, we also find more organic solutions, adhering closer to the characteristics of the land, as in Criande at Barroso.

When bringing architecture into focus, we may find some similarities between Spain and Portugal, in their attempt to reinvent the rural house by adapting traditional forms to new hygiene standards, with a clear separation between spaces for people and others destined to animals. This architectural reinvention led to very diverse solutions, all sharing the common denominator of simplicity and functionality, some fully expressing an idea of modernity.

In Portugal, modernity was mainly expressed in the equipment architectural language, whereas in Spain the cubic-shaped houses clearly reflected the architectural trends of the time.

As Rabasco Pozuelo¹⁶ has pointed out when commenting on the Spanish case, this was often an ambiguous form of modernity, expressing the tension between the architects' creativity and the quest for a traditional image of the rural world.

The first settlements designed for INC, seem to reference "deformed and preconceived ideas" of Castela-la-Mancha and Andalusia settlements, thus highlighting "a generally recognizable idea of a Spanish settlement prototype"¹⁷. This is why we will find an almost generally white image, even in areas where white was not traditionally used.

In Portugal, the vernacular reference is also evident, resorting to stone in the North (Barroso, Boalhosa) and whitewashed walls in the Center/South (Gafanha, Pegões). Here however, we do not find direct references to traditional rural houses in their design. So, architecture produced in the framework of these colonization projects should perhaps be understood as reinvention of the tradition.

More similarities between Portugal and Spain become clear when we bring into the picture the inner organization of dwellings, namely the functional separation between stables,

Fig. 4. Eugénio Corrêa, school, Pegões Velhos, Portugal, 1951. © MODSCAPES – Vittoria Capresi, 1971.



working areas (agriculture-related) and living units, as well as the simple spatial organization of the interiors, with sleeping spaces separated from living areas. All such features are different from traditional solutions.

In settlements along the Tejo's Valley (Spain), for instance, the house was facing onto the street with agricultural annexes the back, arranged around a central open space. Houses designed by JCI instead integrated living units and agricultural annexes inside a common volume.

As Filipa Guerreiro pointed out, in most Portuguese agricultural colonies the house (either individual or semi-detached) acquired a unitary identity, by joining all functions in a single built-up volume; this can also be understood "as a strategy to dignify the building and its potential of *representation*"¹⁸. From our point of view, this solution shows an attempt to reach the dignified shape of the bourgeois house, in line with ideological desire to project colons into a petit-bourgeoisie lifestyle.

Finally, to conclude, it is worth focusing on the case study of Pegões Velhos, where we find a set of singular modern buildings: the church, two schools, the priest's and the teachers' houses. Dating back to the early 1950s, such buildings – originally conceived as a larger number of buildings (as we can see in the model-to-scale still existing¹⁹) – were located in a fine wooded area, having as an axis the road leading to the church. All these buildings share very singular shapes, inflecting the theme of parabolic vaults, connected to the experiments made in the same period in Spain²⁰, and inevitably reminding the Oscar Niemeyer's work for Pampulha, Brazil.

Currently, many settlements dating back to these colonization schemes have been abandoned, some are still inhabited by farmers, others have been converted into tourist resorts. Their significance lies into their bearing witness to the "possible modernity" at the moment. As such, they offer a privileged field to understand how the Modern Movement has been assimilated in the Iberian Peninsula and adapted at its socio-political and geographical contexts. Besides, these experiences largely contributed to the quest of a local architectural identity, still awaiting our full understanding and, eventually, preservation.

NOTES

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2 The *Survey of Rural Architecture* 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 only was published in 2013.

3 Francisco Franco (1892-1975) and António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970) were, until their dead, the dictatorships in power, respectively, in Spain and Portugal

4 The 20th century internal colonization process is common to all Europe and Beyond. Associated with large scale development and agricultural schemes to modernize the countryside, thousands of settlements were built. In Portugal, those settlements are usually referred as *colónias* [colonies] and in Spain as *pueblos*.

5 Milagres (c.1925/1927; c.1937/1939), Martim Rei (c.1937/1948); Gafanha (c.1942/1952), Pegões (c.1942/1952), Barroso (c.1943/1951), Alvão (c.1945/1954) and Boalhosa (c.1946/1958)

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8 Vd. Elisa Lopes da Silva, *A propriedade e os seus sujeitos: colonização interna e colónias agrícolas durante o Estado Novo*, Master thesis, Lisbon, FCSH-UNL, 2011.

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19 Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

20 Vd. Rabasco Pozuelo, P. "El nuevo Ctesiphonte. Catenária invertida em la década de los 50" in *Actas del Cuarto Congreso Nacional de Historia de la Construcción*, ed. S. Huerta, Madrid: I. Juan de Herrera, SEDHC, Arquitectos de Cádiz, COAAT Cádiz, 2005.

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