

ESSAYS ON  
ART, ARCHITECTURE  
AND PORTUGAL

I HAVE A WEAKNESS  
FOR A  
TOUCH OF RED

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LARS MÜLLER PUBLISHERS

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Essays  
on Art, Architecture,  
and Portugal

XEROX  
A  
BUILDING  
WITHOUT QUALITIES

Long before the *Bürolandschaft* became the space-form par excellence of the business environment, the office and the warehouse (its next of kin in the history of building types) shared common ground, as the designated office rooms for the clerks were, more often than not, residual storage space. One can identify the first users to proclaim the need for modern office space with the trading establishments of the Hanseatic League in the seventeenth century, while only a century before the prosperous Cosimo di Medici had already commissioned Giorgio Vasari to execute designs for the Uffizi, the administrative bureau of the thirteen magistracies of his Florentine Grand Duchy.

Notwithstanding this, when one tries to trace the development of office space, one has to confront its complex nineteenth- and twentieth-century history—one that goes hand in hand with the so-called First Industrial Revolution. This is epitomized by the vast cotton warehouses and mills built in Derby, Leeds, Manchester, Glasgow, and by the London docks. These were highly imposing structures for the time, and among others, they certainly made an enduring impression on the young Karl Friedrich Schinkel during his English sojourn, as years later his Packhof project for Berlin clearly indicates.

Originally, the idea underlying this building type was to mask its function in the city: an objective that was partly due to a sense of shame that was widely felt regarding the lack of pedigree entailed in commercial activities, and partly due to the shrewd strategic advantages which the flexibility of a repetitive and conventional facade would offer. Hence, regardless of the diverse activities and functions in progress—storage, production or bookkeeping—the eminently respectable facade of commerce resented showing its messy entrails. However, this state of affairs only lasted until the century witnessed the rise and dominance of a society based on commerce and services, as is most clearly evident from the embryonic efforts of the Chicago School in creating a facade that was at once “honest” and functional in relation to the city.

The corporation had by now acquired an institutional status of comparable importance, if not superior, to the state. Corporate headquarters became—in a cliché that is in fact all too true—“cathedrals of contemporaneity.” The monumentality once associated with the civic institutions of the community—the theater, the university, the museum, the church and the library—was soon replaced by the corporation, both in scale and allocation of resources. This was so much the case that by the end of the century, the economy proved that the stock market value of the corporation had little to do with the number of floors of its office buildings, let alone the need for them.

But alas, under the prevailing dominance of real estate funds, the newly born “cathedral” became now essentially “leasing space,” and in consequence, the coveted name on the top billboard became just another contract clause. Thus, along with executive fringe benefits, the trim corporation was divested of its glamorous headquarters.

At a time, such as our own, when qualities are understood as evaluative criteria regulating judgment as such,

rather than as descriptive criteria prior to any specific judgment of aesthetic achievement, it is our privilege to discern the quality of no quality. This is to say, anonymous languages absorbed and assimilated with critical distance. From this standpoint, we can declare that an architecture that respects the necessities, which does not strive for an effect, and which is not contrived, is a quality in itself.

At precisely the moment when one is obliged to come to terms with the fact that the era of virtually limitless investment in the corporate building is over, Promontório Arquitectos’ most recent contribution to the office building repertoire of Lisbon, the headquarters of Xerox Portugal, displays its significance as an architectural intervention, both in its directness and in its generosity of spirit. Directness, because it established the program with only the most minimal moves. Generous, because the original program was augmented by a large atrium at the heart of the building. All who work in this environment could not but experience this vast breathing space as the modern surrogate of an impluvium permeating every part of the building. This combination of necessity and pleasure can be described as the essence of this project.

In the wake of the World’s Fair of 1998, much has changed in the urban landscape of the Portuguese capital. The architecture of the fair clearly enhanced Lisbon’s standing as a center of international commerce; what is more, it encouraged corporate as well as individual investment in a site that has all the amenities of contemporary life while being little more than a stone’s throw from the old city.

This civil effort contributed to the creation of a new urban scene comparable, albeit on a more modest scale, to the Docklands development in London, Battery Park in New York, and the Olympic precinct in Barcelona. However, the inherent problem of these ‘instant cities’ does not so much

depend on the specific design of the 'star' buildings, as it does on the quality of the urban amalgamation that will inevitably surround them. And while the former is most often warranted by the reputable design of the international architect, the latter can only be guaranteed by a native design culture with sufficient integrity to overcome the provincial premises of gaudy developers. That would be the case of the notable interventions in Barcelona which took place under the enlightened patronage of Mayor Pasqual Maragall, and certainly less in the case of London, which was without direction from the administrative apparatus of the mayor's office until recently (the office itself had been eliminated during the excesses of the Thatcher era), let alone an enlightened one.

One might say that the Lisbon Expo '98 stands somewhere in the middle in relation to the enhancement of design criteria. Regrettably, this arose fairly late in the process when most developments were already severely compromised with projects of lesser quality. Alas, one cannot but feel that the moderne pastel architecture that thrived under this belated *Kakania* had the glorification of the rise of a Portuguese Euro-bourgeoisie as its guiding premise.

As one turns left from the imposing Praça do Comércio, just below the picturesque Alfama quarter, the road along the Tagus becomes clearly visible as a border between two urban authorities. Eschewing municipal control, the waterfront is strictly regulated by the Lisbon Port Authority—a board that enjoys a position that is autonomous with respect to the rest of the metropolitan administration. The Expo broke with this situation, as it was placed on the waterfront along with a magnificent park whose exotic flora attested to the effects of a firmly entrenched colonial imagination. Indeed, it is against this riverfront backdrop that the Xerox group chose to establish its Lisbon headquarters.

In the architectural landscape of the area, with the excellence of Álvaro Siza's canopy and the variety of modern idioms (SOM), complete with a new railway station by Santiago Calatrava, each intervention can either be seen as adding to, or subtracting from, the specific urban character of this new quarter. Promontorio's contribution to this overall morphology is nothing short of inspiring. Each and every element in this architectural idiom of the East Mediterranean is translated, carefully and thoughtfully, to the curve of the gentle hills overlooking the Tagus estuary at the West End of the Old World.

The commission was the result of a shortlist competition promoted by the Portuguese representatives of the Xerox Group. Given the bustling traffic intersection of the plot, Promontorio's proposal was articulated as a U-shape, with two parallel wings of offices connected by a third services block (auditorium, showroom, refectory, etc), arranged around an atrium. Slightly receding—since one of the wings protrudes to meet the jagged site—the entry facade on the North side is marked by a four-bay loggia that makes for a column in the middle. The latter, a displacement of person from the center emphasizing the architects' position of striving after a contemporary idiom that is just as classical in the restraint of its order as it is defiantly Mannerist in its hierarchy.

This glazed loggia offers the vision of an immediate panorama of the atrium. As one moves through the building, this impressive early view will remain constant. With over 800m<sup>2</sup> and articulated by a full five floors, the spatiality of this monumental atrium addresses not only the functional requirements of circulation and reception, but also the less evident need for silence and contemplation in the working space. Yet, despite the growing tendency for privatization of civic space and the narrow-minded notion of functionality of property developers, the eminently public character of this

atrium allows us to anticipate that it will be a space of event, open to the city in unexpected ways.

The design concept is based on the idea of repetition and monolithism, as it is made evident in the modulation of the exterior and interior facades. The severe monumentality that emanates from this compositional system suggests a representational transposition of the load and bearing running across the building, with its mineral skeleton resting on a heavy stereotomic plinth. Thus, far from being a literal representation of structure—since the “true” structure is in fact only partially coincident with its simulated counterpart—the overarching aim of the project seems to be the tactile and visual representation of a *mise en scène* capable of generating a solid and stable urban type-form. This configuration suggests a return to massive tectonics, in that the fragile tympanums of the modules—with the glazed membrane alternating externally with zinc cassettes and internally with wood paneling—derive their visual support from a powerful skeleton of pre-cast concrete elements evocative of the classical post-and-lintel system.

Meanwhile, a discreet phenomenon of randomness springs from the position in which users leave the glass encased blinders, one that is indicative of the unrestrained and physical presence of dwelling. This disciplined variance brings to mind Mies van der Rohe’s concern with the effect that the curtains would produce in the glazed wall of the Seagram building, thereby restraining them to respective positions of open, half drawn and fully closed. Here, as in Mies, the seemingly contradictory assumption between repetition and randomness is overcome by the fact that this erratic gesture is restrained within and by the compositional grid.

It is often difficult to learn from a classical language without going through an intermediate phase. Elsewhere, we have seen recent efforts of this kind fall into a kind of

reactionary and shallow monumentality on the one hand, and a farcical nostalgia bordering on kitsch on the other. In this case, Promontório Arquitectos has no doubt identified itself with its Mediterranean origins, rather than the more recent German-speaking versions of these sources. Evidently, some of the solid character of the section, horizontally and vertically, is owing to a local tendency in which thickness is associated with the tradition of *firmitas*. But there is little of the new tradition of *l’architecture blanche* widely practiced by Siza’s Portuguese progeny, since Promontório has deliberately set itself out to function as a kind of laboratory practice where the articulation and assemblage of structural systems has precedence over the will-to-form.

In fact, when one looks farther than the Mediterranean, it is perhaps within the omniscient aura of Louis Kahn that one encounters the first stirrings of Promontório’s need to reconcile a form that is both modern in its relation to construction, and classical in its urban morphology; witness Kahn’s masterwork, the Yale Center for British Art, in New Haven, where a metal sheathing-cum-concrete facade is equally counterpoised by a four-storey atrium framed by a concrete and wood paneling system.

In days of much confused response to the needs and cultural aspirations of Man, it is a note of sobriety to see a building conceived in such a radically *Sachlich* spirit. Against the background of the city of Lisbon, a palimpsest of labyrinthine layers of complex configuration, along with a surface in which shapes figure the traces of thousands of years of habitation, the Xerox building springs like the calculated insertion of an uncompromising classical matrix, where the clear and pristine articulation of every member seems to reflect its relation with the city. In conclusion, we can return to the beginning of our excursus on the rise and fall of the corporate building only to find that

also there, in Lisbon, the Document Company was not immune to the downturns of the new economy, along with the need to cut costs in their new building. Alas, to the disappointment of its authors the building was curtailed by an entire floor during construction: an unforeseen development which accounts for the somewhat unresolved rooftop area, temporarily awaiting completion, as it is ironically crowned by a tennis cage that offers a perplexingly light touch to the whole ensemble.

Some of the elements—the expertly conceived underground swimming pool for example—were dictated by the client’s programmatic needs, but the essentially clear layout of the working environment, and the definition of discrete spaces in their color and texture, is the gift of the designers. It is only rarely that the demands of a client are satisfactory, both in number and specificity. The talent of the architect always calls for an ability to rewrite a given program. The needs of a project are a priori difficult to access. What we can perceive is merely a norm. The imagination is entirely dependent on subversion, conversion and reversion, if it is to perform optimally. That is, in a way that widens and enriches our horizon of expectations. From this vantage point one might say that a successful building is a thought incarnated. We cannot fail to see what was in the mind of the author at the time of its conception. Yes, a fourth floor would have added grace to this office building. It would have given it more favorable proportions. Yet this is not very important, if only because it was clearly worked out in terms of parts with intrinsic proportions. In fact, it has lost little from the set of constraints imposed by the economic conditions of a company operating in times of great economic uncertainty.

In this context, Promontório invited the artist Augusto Alves da Silva to record the building according to his own insights and mode of representation: a challenge that aimed to

sidestep the conventional status of architectural photography as ‘pure representation’ of the subject matter. To this end, Alves da Silva made no attempts to represent a complete picture of the building. In fact, he concentrated on the vast empty space and regarded it as a kind of Appian stone stage where light and shade become the true performers, changing in mood and form, in a kaleidoscopic compass that runs from the rarefied and even nebulous quality of a winter morning, to the sharp and rigorous contrasts of a sunny midday in spring.

They reproduce the building as a set of geometrical configurations, a sublime setting for ordinary life to follow. Somehow we are convinced that these intact views of the building are a part of what everyone experiences, if only subliminally, as people wander about on their daily business. Seldom has a building been so beautifully documented in its early days. The rhythm which is the result of a constant interaction between the geometry of the building and the laws that govern light gives us again the pleasure of recollection and the awareness of our own recent memories. In connection with this project, there are few experiences as gratifying as looking at these photographs, having seen the building earlier. After all, it is a difficult task for the naked eye to bring foreground and background and all the planes in-between to oscillate together as Alves da Silva has done.

Excellence is as rare as it is difficult. In the offices of Xerox in Lisbon, Promontório Arquitectos proved themselves capable of contributing a building with precisely these qualities, and in much the same way was it captured by Augusto Alves da Silva. [in *Xerox*, Prototipo Books, 2001]

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