

“PUBLIC SPACES IN THE LISBON BAIXA: VITALITY AND IDENTITY OF PLACE”

The theme dealt with here could hardly be more topical for us Portuguese or, more especially, for the inhabitants of the city of Lisbon.

In effect, the area which has come to be designated as the “BAIXA OF LISBON” or the “POMBALINE BAIXA” corresponds very roughly to the area recreated under the supervision of the Minister of the Crown, Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo - the Marquis of Pombal - with the support of the Eng. Manuel da Maia, and planned by Eugénio dos Santos e Carlos Mardel, in the reign of King José I, just after the great earthquake of 1 November 1755 and the violent fire which followed and which almost destroyed this city. Since then and for some two hundred years, the area maintained its IDENTITY almost intact, despite various intervening catastrophes, both natural and “artificial”.

Now, by contrast, and most acutely since the beginning of the 1970s, the “BAIXA” has been losing its VITALITY, victim to a hurried economic “development” without rules and a policy of urban and heritage management which - worse than inexistant - was disastrous.

• URBANISM AND VITALITY

The “heart” of Lisbon, the “BAIXA”, has always conjoined the functions which make it a place *par excellence* for trade, meeting, festivities and social and leisure events, together with a those which make it a site of preference for the head offices of Government, City and private sector organisations, simultaneously with an important residential component.

At the same time, the area’s relationship with the river Tagus is particularly important, given that, ever since the earliest human settlements there, the link to the sea has been a dominant factor in siting and in urban development.

The three components - HABITATION, COMMERCE AND SERVICE (PUBLIC AND PRIVATE) AND LEISURE, combined in a balanced way, have made the BAIXA a favourite place for both residents and visitors to Lisbon. Since the Pombaline reconstruction, which added discipline to the structure of the old medieval town, they have formed a very coherent, planned URBAN ECOSYSTEM which has, over the years, permitted an evolution (or CONTINUITY) in its IDENTITY, safeguarding memories and references.

The Pombaline Reconstruction Plan was renovating in its concept of enlightened inspiration and respected the existing structure of Parishes or Districts and the memories of the most significant urban spaces - TERREIRO DO PAÇO, ROSSIO, RIBEIRA DAS NAUS, and CAMPO DAS CEBOLAS.

The idea of an ECOSYSTEM applied to urbanism, while not original, well illustrates the notion that, in these fields, the parts characterise the whole: the global is comprised of various particulars (from the most inconsequential and almost imperceptible to the most evident).

On the other hand, the way in which this area of the city of Lisbon has evolved, from the era of Pombal until only a few years ago, shows that the idea of an urban ECOSYSTEM, of an IDENTITY of location, of a GENIUS LOCI, for a particular place, does not necessarily imply a static form. On the contrary, the idea allows CONTINUITY which, safeguarding IDENTITY, lies at the heart of VITALITY.

One can almost establish the following formula:

$$\text{IDENTITY} + \text{CONTINUITY} = \text{VITALITY}$$

It is clear that the historical significance of certain places or monuments is highly charged with the symbolic representation of a particular culture, epoch or important event in the history of a people - for example, the Egyptian Pyramids, the Coliseum in Rome, the Acropolis in Athens, the Piazza della Signoria in Florence: in such cases, maintaining IDENTITY must be the main concern.

In this context, the idea of CONTINUITY only makes sense as a form of transmission from generation to generation, of something much more specific and crystallised that is its own meaning and symbolism, that constitutes in itself its own VITALITY and which, for reasons of historical rigour, we should above all CONSERVE.

Going back to the POMBALINE BAIXA today, we find a profound imbalance among its functional-urbanistic components:

- Excessive occupation by services accompanied by the abandonment of residential space.

This phenomenon is typical of major urban centres and in recent years has assumed alarming proportions here. The desertification that takes place outside working hours leads to all kinds of marginal and criminal activity, that in turn keeps away the last few resistant people who have persevered in recognising the potential for pleasure and residential convenience.

Simultaneously, these excesses in the imbalanced way the BAIXA is used during the day, lead to a nightmare of chaos and congestion in traffic, public transport and utility services.

Although official policy has lately recognised the urgent need to restore the balance that once existed between LIVING and WORKING, in practice, save for rare exceptions like the reconstruction of the Chiado after the great fire, it keeps on pumping money into pseudo solutions extending the infrastructures. Thus, projects like the development of underground parking and road tunnels simply continue the destruction the area's character, instead of concentrating efforts in searching for real solutions aimed at the core of the problem and creating initiatives to stimulate the residential sector.

The serious fires that have taken place in this very sensitive area of the city in recent years, most importantly, in the CHIADO in August 1987 and the City Hall just some weeks ago, might well have been less disastrous had more people been living in the area: the alarm would have been raised earlier and the higher density of occupation would have provided many more interior walls to retard the spread of fire.

The systematic destruction and disappearance of the personality of the BAIXA is illustrated in the transformation of traditional shops and cafés, where much loved "fin de siècle" and "bon chic" cafés, drenched in historic atmosphere (Brasileira do Rossio, Chave d'Ouro, Ferrari, etc.), are replaced by McDonald's, Megastores and other plagues of the uninformed, indiscriminating mass consumerism, unfortunately so typical of our time.

The few heroic survivors are cafés like the Martinho da Arcada or the Brasileira do Chiado, survivors by their own merit and through the support of stalwart customers who help to preserve the unique charm, historical memory and cultural reference that it is still possible to live and feel in such places.

- **ARCHITECTURE AND CONTINUITY**

The POMBALINE BAIXA constitutes a great architectural unity.

The buildings created by the Senate Architect, Captain Eugénio dos Santos, and by the Eng. of the Crown, the Major Carlos Mardel, were built immediately after the earthquake of 1755 and gave rise to the nomenclature “Pombaline Style”. The earthquake resistant structure was highly innovative and became known as the “Pombaline Cage” (*Gaiola Pombalina*). Foundations were built on wooden piles, the basement and first floor were in stone, there were vaulted ceilings, master walls in stone with wooden crossbeams and the rest was formed by a flexible wooden structure filled with mortar and faced in ceramic.

The general architectural composition presents a strong rhythm with façades constituted by a first floor with French windows and cast iron balustres forming a *piano nobile*, and two other floors together with a mansard roof with attics and dormer windows. Later in the XIX century this formula was altered by the substitution of a full extra floor over the cornice.

In the face of an urgent need for organised production, which a reconstruction on this scale demanded, the whole production method was systematised and all the architectural elements of this style were mass-produced, clearly limiting the variety and richness of the ornamental and decorative language. Only the XIX century with its pluralism of styles brought some variety in the ornament and decoration.

There were three types of façade slightly different in details but forming a subtle hierarchy changed gradually by the importance of the streets. The colour of the plaster in the beginning in yellow “ocre” - the “Jalde” - became more “free” and, in time also brought some variety to the façades.

VARIETY in this urban grid was also implemented by the difference and importance attained by the public and religious buildings in the main squares and streets.

Before the earthquake, the Rossio was *the* market place, the main meeting place for citizens and a centre of commercial activity, in contrast with the Terreiro do Paço, where the Royal Palace was to be found and consequently was the place where pageantry and festivities of pomp and circumstance were enacted.

The Rossio, more distant from the river and characterised by its arcades, was an ideal place for the unique combination between social activity and commerce.

The old Terreiro do Paço (this popular name is still used today), became after the reconstruction Praça do Comércio (“Commerce Square”) and, maintaining its royal function, also kept the memories of some traditional elements of the old Lisbon from before the earthquake - elements like the arcades that disappeared from the Rossio and the streets of the BAIXA.

This square dynamizes and disciplines the tradition, within the context of the political and ideological programme for the modernisation of a new society.

During the XIX century the BAIXA was consolidated in its definitive form and shape, always following the architectural Pombaline project of reconstruction but integrating some novelties - almost invariably the result of political and fashionable whims imported by the bourgeoisie, whose power was ever increasing.

In this process, the squares and public spaces became enriched with sculptures, fountains and kiosks. Theatres appeared, as did electric light and, step by step, the cafés and shops were decorated with the cosmopolitan *chic* and *élan* of the *fin de siècle*.

The daily life of the BAIXA gained an international STATUS, ever more prosperous and vivacious and, at the end of the XIX century, new buildings were put up with an eclectic taste which, substituting the old Pombaline buildings, brought new French-inspired designs to the heart of Lisbon.

In spite of all this evolution and changes, the BAIXA kept its unquestionable unity: the scale was respected, the volumes were integrated within the existing whole, materials were kept the same - “LIOZ” stone, iron and the typical plaster painted in pastel colours. And thus the process continued into the XX century - with the appearance of the first cinematographers, the ART-DECO hotels and, later, the experiments of the first modernists in commercial establishments.

The public spaces generally kept their original characteristics until the 70s, even with the intense presence of public transport. It was then that the tendency towards the exclusive use of former residential buildings as offices began to sweep the area. The once clean, safe, pleasant area, full of VITALITY, lost its balance.

Nowadays, the urban and functional disequilibrium appears in the building programme itself, where original structures are profoundly and irreversibly altered and reduced, the function is permanently transformed into a bland monoculture of office space and materials are used completely indiscriminately and out of context. All this goes on - in contrast with XIX century or even, like them or not, early modernist works - with a total disregard for the integration of languages which, although often radically different in the past - from classical to revivalist to abstract - had always tried to understand a site, respect the *gravitas* of an important square, the alignment of a street or the dignity of a façade.

There now appears every kind of erroneous structure and alien element - the superposition of flimsy, thoughtless publicity panels and other urban furniture, irrelevant sculptures, gleaming infrastructure equipment - like some psychotic, spray-canned collage against apparently unnoticed historical material, without rules or, indeed, any thought at all. Such mindless pollution contributes to the precipitous loss of IDENTITY through a total ignorance of that respect for existing forms which had until now guaranteed the CONTINUITY and, thence, the VITALITY of the area.

The recent creation of town hall technical bureaux and the adoption of incentive programmes aimed at the conservation and restoration of buildings, while well-intentioned and well-staffed, suffer from a severe shortage of relevant expertise, effective legislation, the means to act and, most important of all, of information and advice to the populations concerned.

Portugal is a country where powerful pressure groups like the press, civic groups and active citizens' associations, which in other Western countries have had a crucial role in opposing unenlightened official decisions about the conservation and restoration of monuments and heritage sites, are almost non-existent. In this light, it is clear that the contribution which this type of international conference, together with other international initiatives, makes is extraordinarily important, not least for the stimulus it gives people like us in Portugal, who are active in the safeguarding of our national Heritage.

José Baganha

1996