

ABSTRACT

1. AIMS OF THE THESIS

The aim of this thesis is clearly operational. I have attempted to describe as completely as possible the vernacular architecture of the villages of the Portuguese Alentejo as a distinct entity, including town planning and architectural aspects and their nuances from region to region.

I realised this was a very broad subject (as broad as the Alentejo itself). I am also aware that this thesis would be much more complete if it were to include contributions from other specialists besides an architect (who despite the best intention in the world is subject to obvious limitations in terms of time and material when faced with a task of this size). I was nevertheless determined to proceed, partly because my relationship with the Alentejo is also an emotional one: I have a deep love for the region and for its beauty, uniqueness and authenticity. I love the people, who are pure, open and cheerful. They are also proud of their culture which, despite the gloomy times in which we live, they unrelentingly preserve and cultivate through a process that is by no means backward-looking or melancholic; on the contrary, it is full of creative energy and life.

I do not doubt that our planet and our species are in urgent need of new paths and new practices in agricultural and industrial production and in the way we organise ourselves in our villages, towns and cities. In this respect the Alentejo offers us an extraordinary lesson, reminding us of basic notions of the organisation of civic space and the preservation of the environmental heritage, the countryside, rivers and mountains. This process may take various forms, yet it conserves all the essential aspects of its riches in a wholly serene harmony between Man, the land and the universe, allowing us to nurture the hope of a healthier and more joyful future for humanity.

It was this hope that drove me to undertake this study, in the further hope that it can be an operating manual for all those intending to intervene in the villages, towns and cities of the Alentejo, and that it can also serve as a starting-point for more extensive research into such an engaging subject.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to proceed with this Herculean task within an inevitably limited time frame, I first began the fieldwork of gathering information – drawing, taking photographs, recording and experiencing the places and their traditions, “drinking the wine and eating the bread”. I shared in the local festivities and traditions while at the same time collecting bibliographical information at the regional and specialised institutions and consulting the wide range of literature available on the subject.

I also considered the regional division on the basis of the geographical and cultural characteristics, rather than the administrative division, which is not so interesting for a work of this nature. This approach to the subject deliberately focuses first and foremost on aspects of the formal structure of the places, and the urban and architectural typologies, and only deals with the other (socio-economic, historical etc.) aspects insofar as they help to clarify the former.

I took account of my own experiences as an architect in this region, with the vicissitudes peculiar to the profession, and tried to draw from these experiences the lessons that many of

those who shared them have offered me. There are also many professionals, such as masons, metalworkers, stone-cutters, master builders, carpenters and joiners and many others, who keep alive the precious knowledge of the art of building. All over the Alentejo, too, traditional crafts live on, despite the destructive spread of industrialisation taken to the extremes of stupidity and self-destruction.

3. THE TERRITORY

Although in terms of history and geography the Alentejo is a unique territory in the Iberian context, it nonetheless shares certain characteristics with other regions of the peninsula. As a whole, the elements that contribute to this uniqueness clearly justify the classification of the region as one that is very distinct from the others. They also leave a strong trace of territorial and cultural identity to all those who wish to learn more about it. Generally speaking, this strong mark of identity is not a “thing” that is learned through first impressions; it is rather that the Alentejo, once properly experienced, wins us over for ever through the power of its authenticity and beauty.

Occupied by Man since prehistoric times, the Alentejo has lived through the various historical periods, from the times when its main harbours were sought by Phoenicians, Greeks and Carthaginians, to the Roman conquest and the Moorish occupation (which left deep marks), and to the medieval and modern eras up to the present day.

It has always been a relatively poor region, very much characterised by the sweeping plains and peneplains covered by the Mediterranean forest of cork and holm oaks and interspersed with areas of olive groves (vines, cereal crops and irrigated fields are more recent phenomena). The mountain ranges are the exception to the general rule. For several centuries there were extensive areas of uncultivated land, and property usually consisted of large estates dotted with farmhouses (*montes*) and white villages, huddled together and often enclosed in medieval defensive walls.

It is therefore a mostly agricultural region, with very rare centres of industry and one port – Sines – of considerable (and growing) importance in the Iberian / European context. The population density is low – the lowest in the country, with about 23 inhabitants / km² – and in decline, due to the continuing job demand in the coastal regions, especially in the Greater Lisbon area.

The climate is harsh and extreme – low temperatures (sometimes below zero) in winter and over 40° C in the summer. On the same day the temperature can vary from 7° C at night to over 30° C at midday. It is a dry region with little rain.

The soils are varied. Clay is the most common soil type, while in some regions limestone (the Estremoz region is famous for its marble), schist and granite predominate.

3.1. URBAN X ARCHITECTURAL / BUILDING TYPOLOGIES

3.1.1. URBAN TYPOLOGIES

The villages of the Alentejo essentially developed from prehistoric nuclei, which were adopted and re-organised by the Romans and shaped by the Moorish occupation, and also from farmhouses (*montes*).

Owing to the long history of wars and battles that constantly ravaged the Alentejo until the mid-nineteenth century, especially during the Christian Reconquest and the consolidation of

Portuguese territory through violent disputes with neighbouring Spain, many villages were surrounded by walls (some still quite well preserved), which limited urban development.

The core structure of most of these villages, regardless of the importance they have been taking on as a result of their development, is based on the combination of Roman and Moorish cultures, as well as the Jewish communities which should not be overlooked. The villages grew beyond the medieval walls and encompassed the market areas (*rossios*), which over time were transformed into squares. Existing thoroughfares were extended, the (also pre-existing) urban grid typologies were adopted and the chapels were absorbed. There is, therefore, a clearly predominant organic or vernacular quality to the grids, in spite of the linearity that (despite the Moorish occupation) the Romans left as a profound characteristic in these villages.

The contact that the Portuguese monarchs D. Afonso III (1210-1279) and D. Dinis (1279-1325) had with the walled towns (*bastides*) in southern France also left their mark on these places. Nearly all of them won their “administrative autonomy” during the reigns of these monarchs through the granting of charters. The modern era also brought a degree of prosperity to the region – largely due to the considerable influence of the House of Braganza which, with its seat at Vila Viçosa, controlled vast swathes of the Portuguese Alentejo. In this period some of the villages underwent outward expansion, but these projects retained most of the town structure and the mainly “vernacular” architecture while absorbing mansions and new churches into the urban grids.

The following centuries brought little that was new to the villages of the Alentejo. With a few exceptions, there were no significant changes until the mid- / late- nineteenth century, when change initially came about with the abolition of the religious orders and the consequent use of convents and monasteries as barracks, public institutions and even private houses. The period of liberalism then gave rise to the so-called “regeneration”, which placed greater emphasis on the “*res publica*” and strengthened the “*res economica*”, leading to the appearance of a number of public gardens, industrial units (few in the Alentejo except in Portalegre and even then of little significance in the national context) and new “urbanisations” for single-family dwellings.

The Alentejo remained rural, as it always has been and still is. Its villages reflect this characteristic by housing the numerous labourers whose livelihood depends on agriculture.

Except for such cities as Portalegre, Évora and Beja, where various regional and central government departments and institutions are located, the other towns retained their characteristics until around the late 1960s. Up to this time the villages, towns and smaller cities were still characterised by grids that combined the vernacular with the desire to rationalise; in other words, even when there was an expansion plan it was adapted to the pre-existing format and local morphology, which accounts for much of the uniqueness of these places. The concentration of the houses and the clear distinction between the country and the village (another strong characteristic of the region) is still maintained, with the “border” areas being punctuated by walls that shelter kitchen gardens and orchards – precious assets for living in these places.

After the mid- / late- 1960s, in the wake of Portugal’s membership of EFTA in 1959, the country experienced significant economic growth. New industries were created and infrastructures (roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, etc.) were modernised. At the same time there was a significant population shift from the country to more industrial regions, mainly, in the case of the Alentejo, to Greater Lisbon. Within a few decades, the percentage of the Alentejo’s population engaged in agriculture declined from about 50% to the current 5%.

As a result of this major change, the villages of the Alentejo also underwent considerable changes. While some villages were emptied and nearly deserted, in others there was a

movement towards the outskirts, nearly always according to unsuitable (monofunctional and repetitive) models bearing no relation to local life, culture, climate and all the other conditions that have shaped the villages of the region. These so-called “new outskirts” sprang up in the form of private urban estates or “districts” planned by the public administration, depriving the pre-existing town of its individuality and only adding a worse quality of life for the residents, who now tried to make their lives here amid increasing difficulties of mobility, isolation and security, with serious consequences for public health, the territory and the public finances.

The let's say, mischaracterisation of the urban model was accompanied by a mischaracterisation of the architectural typologies – due both to the importation of models alien to the region and village and to the gradual replacement of building processes and materials. Ancestral wisdom and local products, much more suited to the needs of the population, were abandoned.

This mischaracterisation process has included interventions of an anonymous / popular nature, as well as those resulting from projects and plans produced by the local, regional and central administrations, some of which have had disastrous consequences for the quality of the places in question.

The indissociable relationship between the public space and the built space, along with everything that distinguishes one place from another, including their shared traits, particularities and subtle differences, is totally neglected in these new interventions. The height of the buildings is not indifferent from the width of the street that serves them. The public spaces in these villages – streets, squares and lanes – and the structures of the buildings and surrounding land, with their unique kitchen gardens and orchards, are particularly beautifully and appropriately matched to their surroundings. They are now resisting, with notorious difficulty, the mischaracterisation that results from industrialisation based on mass production for large populations and from urban planning models that have been proved to be inappropriate and harmful to the well-being of the local people.

Nowadays, in spite of the pressure that these inappropriate models continue to exert on the villages of this region (as they do to some extent everywhere else in the world), there seems to be a new awareness of the ill effects of these practices and a recognition of the quality of the urban centres that existed before this “explosion” and dispersal (“sprawl”) occurred.

Little by little, here in the Alentejo too, we are starting to see public urban regeneration projects that pay more and more attention to local particularities and attempt to match traditional wisdom to contemporary needs.

We hope that this movement will become established as an ongoing practice and that it will continue to improve with every new intervention.

3.1.2. ARCHITECTURAL / BUILDING TYPOLOGIES – AN ALENTEJO ARCHITECTURE?

The vernacular architecture of the villages of the Alentejo has specific regional characteristics which, despite the nuances and particularities from sub-region to sub-region, and traits that it may share with the other villages in areas adjoining neighbouring regions, make it fair to say, with the reservations we must always express in these very pre-emptory statements, that there is a characteristic style of vernacular architecture in this region of Portugal. It might be more appropriate, in view of the aforesaid regional nuances, to speak of Alentejo architectures – in the plural.

In the shared aspects we can identify a basic model / archetype with an origin from, or clear similarities to the rural houses of the region's “montes” (farmhouses) – a house with a very simple plan, two or three rooms, one being a living room/kitchen, with its enormous fireplace,

around which people would chat, cook and prepare meals, and the other rooms which we nowadays call bedrooms.

With very simple parallelepiped volumes, the houses are nearly always low with a rectangular base. They mostly consist of one or two floors, though they may be a little higher in larger villages. The pitched roofs are very simple with one or two slopes. The composition of the houses in the Alentejo villages is also very simple, with small windows (the more so the further south one goes) and only as many as absolutely essential. The chimney is one of the most striking and unique features of these buildings; it is sometimes curiously shaped, protruding over the side of the building, set in the surface of the wall or slightly jutting out from it. The thickness of the walls is emphasised by the window frames, which are a little more inset than in more northerly regions. The various layers of whitewash on the walls also contribute to the uniqueness of these buildings. The picture is completed by the earth-coloured tile roofs with their simple eaves and plain wood and metalwork. In most of the region, a particular feature of the architecture is the colour, which has a very strong presence in the window frames, socles, corner pillars and cornices. The blues and ochres (more frequent) stand together with the dry greens and (more rarely) the almost black greys.

Everything combines to create an image that reveals very deep-seated poverty but is nonetheless extremely beautiful in its simplicity, exuding harmony and peace.

Erudite architecture stands alongside simpler buildings, making for a particularly beautiful contrast.

As always, the buildings are made from local materials. The walls are mostly lath-and-plaster and/or adobe, although rarer instances of stone and sometimes mixed-typology walls are also found. Since wood is scarce almost everywhere in the region, it is used when strictly necessary for the floors of upper storeys, roof support structures and doors and windows. Various types of arches and domes are also frequent.

The regional diversity is due both to the scarcity of building materials and to the natural (physical) conditions which vary from one place to another. While in the mountains the streets are narrower and the windows somewhat wider, in the south – in the great plains and peneplains – the streets are markedly more linear, the houses have fewer storeys (mostly just one ground floor) and the size of the windows is kept to a minimum.

Especially in the fortified villages in the regions nearer to the border with Spain, the houses are noticeably closer to one another than in other places further towards the coast.

Overall, even taking into account these subtle regional variations, the shared traits that characterise the architecture of the villages of the Alentejo and give it its unique popularity are clear to see.

4. CONCLUSION

Many of the poets who have known the region have fully understood this harmony, this peace in the communion of Man with nature that the Alentejo exudes. Perhaps it is only the poets who can summarise in a few words all the beauty and wisdom that characterises this region of southern Iberia.

In our present time of profound change and environmental emergency we must rediscover this harmony and learn from those who possess this ancestral wisdom, as we seek new solutions for the Polis, for the physical aspects of our form of organisation in society, inseparable from the human condition.

I am certain that we are capable of combining the extraordinary level of civilisation we have reached, all that is good in science, art and the humanities, with a harmonious relationship with our environment so that we can have a promising future as a species.

It is in this context, or with this possibly somewhat utopian desire, that these examples of the good relationship of Man with his environment with respect to his city and his habitat, which we find in the Alentejo region, can help ensure that this change proceeds in the right direction.

At times, indeed, this does seem to be a utopian desire, when we look at what is happening in booming regions like India, South Korea or China, where these issues are by no means at the top of the agenda. The reluctance of the more developed countries with fewer social imbalances (mainly Europe and North America) to implement these changes may lead us to think that there is little chance of improving things, not to mention more catastrophic scenarios.

However, with or without hope, through a period of transition between one way of life and another, shorter or longer and with lesser or greater problems, these lessons on a harmonious relationship between Man and his environment, peace and the joy of living, such as the Alentejo still offers us, may in fact help to cement this change.

In the regional context – in the Alentejo – the study of these villages and their architectural urban pattern(s) may also improve or help to improve the way in which we intervene in these places.

To sum up, I think I can conclude that urban concentration is a more appropriate solution than dispersal, which should be countered as far as possible. On this assumption, it is clearly necessary to respect the full-empty relationship of the built space with the open (public and private) space, including the relationships of the street width with the dominant heights, the existence of kitchen gardens and yards alongside narrow streets, squares and other public spaces.

The “cleansing” trends that were so characteristic of the town planning interventions in the second half of the last century must be subjected to greater scrutiny, and an assessment must be made of what can actually be done and what must not be done.

Regarding building materials and the industry’s various traditional crafts, we must learn from past experience what can be beneficial now and in the future. This must be done without preconceptions, combining a spirit of discovery, creativity and innovation with ancestral wisdom, in order to find a new synthesis that is truly appropriate for the place in which we intervene – in environmental as well as cultural and socioeconomic terms.

Another point which has become fairly clear from this research is not exactly new and is mainly due to economic interests that are less aware of the urgent environmental issue (or find it easier to ignore it). The promotion of local industries, craftsmanship and the production of local / traditional materials will, if seen from a perspective of being “open to innovation”, bring benefits to the regional economy. This not only leads to steady jobs and settled populations but also preserves memories and traditions, and thus makes a significant contribution towards safeguarding aspects of identity and the uniqueness of the various villages and regions.

We live in an age when it seems to be unanimously accepted that western (mainly European) civilisation urgently needs to return to producing what it consumes and to depend less on other parts of the world for what is essential to it, in order to preserve its ways of life and settle local populations (preventing, as far as possible, mass migration to the big cities). This makes it absolutely essential to pay close attention to local particularities and the delicate balance between cultural and economic and social aspects.

Regarding the architecture of the buildings in these villages, my study of the types that the regional diversity offers us has also led me to conclude that a new synthesis that also includes the composite lexicon(s) with the needs or imperatives of contemporary ways of life will likewise contribute towards this goal of safeguarding and preserving local identities and particularities.

Indeed, these various aspects – town planning, architectural and socioeconomic – are indissociable and must, as far as possible, be considered together whenever we make an intervention. It is no use preserving appropriate architectural models of building and composition if we make far-reaching changes to town planning models or the underlying logic.

From the point of view of culture (in the broadest sense of the term), we must be able to adopt and promote not only, as we have seen, the renovated traditional industries and crafts, but also the balance of traditional commerce with residential districts and with the appropriate distribution of public services. It is also absolutely essential to adopt policies and take effective steps to promote functional diversity. Again, as we have seen, it makes total sense to encourage activities such as the cultivation of kitchen gardens and orchards in these villages. Monofunctional dispersal around the outskirts has proved to be one of the most pernicious evils afflicting our towns (whether large, medium-sized or small). It is absolutely essential to combat this practice of urban expansion by replacing it with what has always produced appropriate results, namely the creation of new multifunctional districts that contain the DNA, the basic structure, the fractal quality or the “*genius loci*” that the various pre-existing urban centres encapsulated.

This research also reveals that despite the passing of the centuries and all the vicissitudes of wars, abandonment and change, these villages and their varied architecture possess that quality of resilience to allow for their regeneration or “rebirth” in a new age, full of peace and harmony.

It is on this working assumption, as I have said, that I decided to develop this thesis. I am adding a contribution which, small though it may be, may serve to preserve the particularities of a region that in spite of everything still preserves much of its ancestral wisdom, crafts and traditions that can enable this “leap”, this transition to a new age of harmony, the re-encounter of Man with the land and with the values of authentic spirituality.

