

MONTE DA QUINTA

The “Monte da Quinta”⁽¹⁾ project involves a set of buildings and surrounding outdoor spaces with different uses – residential and other buildings related to the agriculture carried out there, on land belonging to Niza Mariano S.A. agricultural society in Alandroal, Alentejo, in the south of Portugal on the border with the Spanish province of Extremadura.

It is a stunningly beautiful region⁽²⁾ of undulating hills alternating with valleys full of olive trees and grazing, and where the highest points offer breathtaking views over Spain.

The authenticity of this beautiful untouched region is maintained in its people, traditions, architecture, handicrafts and food, as well as with the novelty of the “great lake”, as the Alqueva reservoir has come to be known, which is attracting growing numbers of visitors,⁽³⁾ and creating new projects, employment and breathing much-needed new life into the area.

However, as well as the visitors, the region is attracting new residents - and not just those who come to spend the weekend or for a holiday, but those who view the region as a place of the future, where they want to stay for a large part of their time, to invest and create wealth.

This is the case with Monte da Quinta’s owners, who are involved in large projects in the agricultural and tourism sectors. When they arrived here from the north, they found a run-down estate: the main house was still standing, but the outhouses were little more than a collection of broken-down walls.

As soon I saw this farmhouse, just after I had been contracted to renovate it, I came across some curiosities: while the buildings are typical of the region – in both their construction and architectural style – there was something strange about them as a whole: something “not quite right”. The shape of the chimney on the main house, which was more common further to the southern of the Alentejo although not uncommon in the region, seemed rather unusual and out of place, especially in a detached farmhouse rather than in a village house. The type of masonry – rustic mortared stone – was also unusual for the region insofar as clay was used in the mortar.

We soon discovered the previous owners hailed from the Beja region to the south, where these apparently uncommon aspects are much more common. At the beginning of the last century, their builder had decided to create a house that looked similar to those found further south.

In the project I designed, in keeping with the owner’s wishes, I decided to restore the main house using traditional construction materials and techniques, while we chose to mix it up for the outhouses (with the exception of a very strange building used to house animals a little further out from the other farm buildings) – creating reinforced concrete structures and breeze block walls with traditional wooden frame roofing with red ceramic tiles. In fact, the extremely poor condition of these outhouses was perfect justification for this decision.

For the architectural design and type of spaces I followed the vernacular architectural model of the region, making changes only when necessary to adapt the buildings to the more contemporary standards of comfort, just as with the construction – insulation, infrastructure networks, etc.

The rustic shale walls were left bare almost throughout the existing buildings as a way to enhance their uniqueness following the restoration. They were topped off with a locking lintel.

The extension vestments were coated with a plaster compatible with their supports, and, in order to ensure a texture similar to that of whitewash, were smoothed with a spoon rather than with a trowel. The vestments were then covered with a smooth white emulsion paint.

The roofs were constructed using treated wood and then thermally insulated with extruded polystyrene. Cement sheets were then attached, on top of which red ceramic tiles treated with water-repellent were fitted. The ceilings were created using water-repellent plasterboard sheets that were then painted with white emulsion. The wooden floors in the main house were covered with tiles to improve the thermal insulation in the normal manner of this region.

The interior walls were constructed to an appropriate thickness with bricks and all internal vestments plastered, stuccoed and painted with emulsion.

Glazed tiles were used in the fully-equipped bathrooms and kitchens.

Most of the floors were covered with traditional rustic and water-proofed floor tiles.

The window frames were fully renovated, with new timber bays and smooth, clear and transparent double-glazed units installed and internal painted wooden shutters fitted.

The interior and exterior doors are also made of wood which was then painted with synthetic enamel.

The buildings enclose a space that opens out towards a valley in the south and the west. We decided to make this space attractive, with a pond, orange trees and a place to relax in next to the fire or in which to simply enjoy the fresh air, the view and the fantastically clear star-filled skies on warm summer nights.

We built a porch onto the guest extension to provide shade from the sun on hot days.

Next to this porch we renovated an old oven that is now fully functioning.

The farm includes three other buildings – an olive mill, complete with a press and storage areas, space for people working in the olive mill, and a barn for storing agricultural equipment. These buildings are situated next to those mentioned above, and complete the structures that are necessary to make this (agricultural and tourism) investment viable.

The proposed buildings will retain the form of a patio or terrace situated between the main farmhouse and another building that forms part of this project, and which can be restored to form a retail space that can be used to promote and sell the farm's produce.

Its architecture is also traditional, inspired by the vernacular models of the region, both in its design and in the materials proposed for its renovation.

During this project I have had the good fortune of working with people from the region: exceptional people who have retained an invaluable knowledge of the artisan traditions handed down from generation to generation, and which they practice with obvious love and pride alongside more up-to-date processes and techniques. This is how this knowledge is being preserved, with the growth of small businesses – workshops, etc. – in which these important aspects of regional identity are being retained while creating jobs and generating wealth.⁽⁴⁾ The Alentejo needs a lot of these people, and it could be through the many successful examples

that continually emerge that local authority and central government officials with responsibility for this area will come to understand their significance for the region's development and implement correct, effective and substantial policies to protect them, rather than promote the characterless projects that some late-19th century Portuguese writers have labelled "a provincial notion of progress".⁽⁵⁾

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Notes:

1 An Alentejan farmhouse (*monte alentejano*) is a unique habitat and descendent of the Roman villa. It is usually the focus of the large estates typical of the region. It is the equivalent of the Spanish *cortijo*.

2 "Contrary to what some believe, the Alentejo has its own beauty, although this only becomes apparent after a long association with its landscape. While the monotony of the shaded green of its "montados", the dullness of its olive groves or the yellow of its fields may provide neither joy nor rest for the eyes – the horizon, vast and severely simple in outline and sober in colour, is impressive for its greatness and its august and imperturbable solemnity. There are no great contrasts, but everything the eye can see has a rude energy. The radiant light gives the landscape a wonderful clarity. The skies, deep and high, are the blue of glazed pottery. The air's dryness and transparency invigorates and raises the spirits and makes the stars that fill the dark firmament shimmer like falling tears. The moon fills the heavenly vault, and under it you feel the soul of all things more enigmatically and more profoundly. The sunsets set the fields ablaze and fill the plains with fantastic mirages of rivers and oceans burning with purple flames. And in this immense painting, which is so full of character and of nobility, the winter casts a green blanket over the plains, which in spring are transformed into a carpets of flowers, painted with the purple of the heather and the yellow of the gorse, where the red poppies are like so many drops of blood and the wild roses bloom like cups of milk into which drops of honey have fallen.

"Almost nowhere, except to the south of Beja and before being struck by the flatness of the small waves rising from the sawmills of the Algarve, does the flat and wholly dead plain dominate. With each step it shakes, vibrates, moves and, like a wrinkled burl, folds into peneplains and plateaus; and in the unlimited extension, battered by the light, there is every now and again a large and solitary hill, upon which sits an old castle, a watchtower over the plain, the walls of which have resisted waves of assailants in blood rage, and which dominate a formidable panorama." Proença, Raúl. In: "Guia de Portugal", op. cit., pp 22-23.

3 "Many people make the Alentejo a frequent destination for their wanderings, and this developing movement has given rise to the fashion and vogue of the Alentejo. Nowadays we are almost always searching for a mythical land, seeking out our roots, for a return to the land. The great weekend migrations to these provinces ... are movements made mostly by those who see the Alentejo as a land of charm and of peace. Without our realising, we came from a largely rural world to the rampant planetary spaces with the feeling that we may be stripped of references at any moment and left with nothing in a world that is increasingly complex, increasingly uncertain and in which we have almost forgotten our own past. On the verge of being uprooted, we choose strong spaces that have an identity, and the Alentejo is one of the favourites." Saramago, Alfredo: "Livro-Guia do Alentejo" (Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, November 2007, p. 11).

4 "Little by little we need to (re-)examine the old practices and solutions, not for fate or in praise of nostalgia, but so that they can have a future". José Aguiar's prologue to "Arquitectura de Terra ~~em~~ Avis" by Inês Fonseca (Lisbon: Argumentum, 2007, p. 12).

5. I am referring to Ramalho Ortigão and Eça de Queiroz.