

António Carvalho

Foreword by
Gennaro Postiglione

Introduction by
Juhani Pallasmaa

Architecture as Space for People

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to Margarida, Mia and Mateus

António Carvalho a Contemporary Modernist

Gennaro Postiglione

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António Carvalho: Architecture as Space for People emerges as a necessary book right from the first pages, supplying with information and works about a practice which has not gain the press notoriety that so far it would have deserved, despite the fact of being a small office with a limited number of built works, roughly two per year during the last thirty if we consider both large public commissions and small private ones. For all, it is possible to recognise a high level of design and construction, being always well executed despite dimensions (large or small), clients (public or private), locations (urban or rural), materials (bricks or concrete), typologies (buildings or parks), showing how the architect is confident with any work condition and how is able to imprint his own vision/idea of architecture in each commission gained.

What is presented in the following pages, can at least be grouped in three main fields of investigation that correspond to three different periods of the office activity, manifesting the evolution of a specific and independent idea of architecture elaborated ultimately only in/by the built work, somehow refusing abstract theoretical statements for a more articulated "operational criticism".

By "operational criticism" is meant studies designed to gather knowledge of architectural works but actually finalized to the legitimation of own practice. The notion of critical research implies the creation of a fertile bond between theory and practice. And this in a context in which criticism means denoting specific considerations on the essential conditions and limitations of potential knowledge and taking practice into the void between project (as a mental, subjective process and a concrete one) and criticism (as an abstract, objective and detached process).

To the first group, mostly built in the 90s, belong works such as The Camping Park Monte Alto (1992-94), the Tea House and Garden Teles de Vasconcelos (1992-94) and the House Monteiro (1993-97), where it is possible to recognize a search for geometry and construction not unaware of North-West European architecture experiences in the field of the individual home. Actually, it seems some of the work could belong either to modern Belgian tradition for the use of bricks and curved volumes or to John Hejduk volumetric research. At the same time, echos of Post-modernism are also traced in the way buildings are figuratively connoted even though there is always a totally independent elaboration of the composition able to take distance from the highly figurative works of Post-modern architecture.

The second group, mostly belonging to the end of 90s and the beginning of 2000s, manifests a search for a dialogue between the legacy of modernism and the one deriving from Portuguese traditional architecture and on some extent with the pioneer of what could be defined critical regionalism,

the master Fernando Tavora (1923-2005). The one who started an investigation on Portuguese house tradition composition without any stylistic or nostalgic interests to define new way to be at the same time Modern without erasing the past proposing his personal answer – via built work – to the paradox stated by Paul Ricoeur in his Universal Civilization and National Cultures (1961), later also quoted extensively by Kenneth Frampton in his Towards a Critical regionalism (1983): "how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in the universal civilization".

This is actually what Carvalho tries out in the body of his work during these years, from the Bar and Shop in Guarda (1996-2004) to the Park Mata do Cabo (2003-07) or to the University Rectory Landscaping in Covilhã (1994-96) where the craft work for the paving and the precise design of rest areas in connection with specific vegetation or views show a strong knowledge of Portuguese landscape, identity and building tradition.

Last but not at all the least, there is the group of the most recent works dating from the middle of 2000 up to now where it is possible to recognize the design maturity of António Carvalho architecture and where the link to external legacies become much more subtle and intimate. In these works his Portuguese identity is melting with his global network putting him in the major line of what could be considered Modern contemporaries, architects who have decided to work in the line of Modern Movement masters refusing to take part to the many architectural discourses that have characterized the debate in the last twenty years. From deconstruction to new monumentalism, from parametric and generative design to the so-called "generic architecture", just to mention some of the most influential ones.

Similarly to what other Portuguese or international colleagues have done, he has rooted his work in the language of modernism. Stereometric volumes, limited palette of materials, preference for clear-cut openings, contraposition of building elements, sequences of columns in connection with elongated roofs, and so on. For sure the presence of Alvaro Siza lesson is evident and somehow inevitable but it never becomes overwhelming and it is set back as common ground for all his latest work. As an architect in his maturity, Carvalho has accomplished the idea to finally open up a dialogue with the immense legacy of Siza that could have been too heavy to handle in the previous years, when the risk of making his architecture become a sub-product of the master's work was very strong. Now the dialogue is "au pair", with the respect ought to a master but at the same time with a total autonomy of expression, allowing him to achieve results of a great value such as Cemetery extension (1999-2001) and the Swimming pool (2003-07), both in São João da Pesqueira, or the High School (2010-16) in São Domingos de Rana, Cascais.