University City of Coimbra: ‘tabula rasa’ as a project methodology

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JOELHO

#08

IDEAS AND PRACTICES FOR THE EUROPEAN CITY

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University City of Coimbra, 'tabula rasa' as a Project Methodology

Introduction

Portugal and its image experienced a re-foundation process in the 30's and 40's of the 20th century promoted for ideological propaganda, which expressed itself as a profound regulation of urban intervention, lead by the Ministry of Public Works and Communications.

Simultaneously, the University of Coimbra, a national symbol and an overseas cultural exchange platform, had to follow that change for modernization, which represented the national capacity of entrepreneurship and evidenced the nation's strength and power on the international political stage and also its global influence.

The upper part of Coimbra, the *Alta*, suffered a significant transformation due to a process occurring from 1934 to 1975, manifesting it by turning into a *mono-functional citadel*. These transformations started in the 40's, when several demolitions, determined in the master plan, marked the beginning of the works.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the project's purposes that were used throughout the process of transformations from that period of that part of the *Alta* in the University City of Coimbra (UCC), taking into account the role that public space assumed in the new urban spatial organization. Through analyses of the master plans of the University City works, it is possible to verify the connection and fusion between the university citadel and the city, that is, between the university space and its urban context.

While, in Europe, *tabula rasa* was a consequence of the destruction caused by war, in Portugal it was a project methodology to achieve the necessary space for construction. That was quite evident in this case, where the "blank slate", so precious for the creative process of the Modern Movement, was made possible due to an assumption of power by the state.

Contextualization

Any intervention in a city should be a conscious action respecting the city's own space and urban context, which has been absorbing different transformations throughout its history. In that sense, an urban space could be read as an evolutionary text representative of: the urban policies, the sociocultural dynamics and the technological knowledge of each contemporaneity as well. So, it is the result of transformations and development, not only of its evolutionary urban morphology, but also of the evolutionary practices of appropriation by its populations and communities.

However, some events permit us to consider new solutions and new approaches, mainly those which are the consequences of a traumatic loss, self-imposed or not, of broken bonds and emotional links or habits that everyone establishes in their own comfort zone and environment. And the destruction wreaked in several territories during the wars in the 20th century provided the foundations for a growing consciousness about the sociocultural legacy that is a city, especially, a European one.

Fig. 1 Master plan of COCUC, Luís Benavente, 1939 (IAN-TT, 1997, p. 21).

Although, in Coimbra, that consciousness was reversed and contradicted when the government of the dictator Salazar decided to construct a new UCC, upon the old original one that had performed those functions since the 16th century. The UCC was projected as a space isolated from the rest of the city and above it, like a citadel, which watches over its surroundings to protect and create a refuge. However, the creation of the university citadel imposed an invisible delimiting line on its urban context that has a real impact on its own autonomy in the city.

Firstly, the first and second master plans and the contextualization of the theory behind them (similar to the theory of Athens Charter of 1931¹) before the urban transformation of the *Alta*, since 1934 to 1940 are considered. Secondly, in contrast with the former, the theory related to the master plans of the third Commission of Works (CAPOCUC²), since 1941 to 1975 (similar to the concepts of Athens Charter of 1933³), and its decisions and actions are highlighted concerning the *tabula rasa* project methodology assumed since the very first design to construct the new UCC.

This case, simultaneously, leads us to think about the influence of a political decision concerning a city and its capacity for resilience, making it able to absorb any urban intervention with the passing of time. If each decision, that is taken for a specific space in a specific historical time, with some contingencies, has urban consequences within its urban context, then this case is pertinent. The decisions taken were related to a way of thinking about the city and the dichotomies of the 20th century and also changed the paradigm for understanding the city.

Coimbra between Athens and Athens

When in 1934, the Minister for Public Works, Duarte Pacheco, decided to construct the University City of Lisbon, Coimbra protested vehemently and demanded public investment for the UCC (Capela & Murtinho, 2015; Correia, 1946; Rosmaninho, 2006).

The period for the implementation of the ideal of a delimited area for the constitution of a university city in Coimbra was from 1934 till 1975. It is possible to distinguish two different moments during this time related to the theory of dichotomy proclaimed in the two Athens Charters, experienced by the group of architects that were chosen to develop the master plan of the UCC.

The first moment overlaps the first and second Commission of Works (COCUC⁴), from 1934 to 1940, which contain the theoretical approach defended by the Athens Charter of 1931, “to build in the constructed city”, meaning that the urban context is a fundamental principle for the project design.

The architects Raúl Lino and Luís Benavente were nominated to study an urbanization project within the existent facilities of the university in the *Alta* for the first COCUC in December of 1934, which demanded its isolation from the rest of the city (MOPC, 1934;

Rosmaninho, 1996, 2006). This stipulation was fundamental for the future plans of the university because it was assumed that university scholars' results would be better with no external influences on the students. There should be rigorous discipline within the space designated for study, just as Ribeiro Sanches had suggested before in 1759 (2003). It is very pertinent to note the contrast between the values expressed in Sanches' concepts and ideas in Salazar's discourse in 1937. For Salazar, Coimbra, and the *Alta* in particular, was already a university city simply waiting for some adjustments and improvements, in the form of new spaces and facilities appropriate for the students and which would isolate the "holy hill" just for university activities (1945, pp. XIX-XX).

Meanwhile, the transformation of the area into a main square, or *praça de armas* according to Sanches' proposal and in a profane sense, should be contrasted with Salazar's, into a citadel, more sacred vision, he considered himself a *spiritual son of the school*⁵ (1945, p. XIX) and legitimised his desire to develop the University of Coimbra by providing better conditions. The consecration of the sacred myth becomes a glorification on three levels: the space, its image and its creator⁶.

The second COCUC began at least administratively in 1939 (MOPC, 1939) with the function of revising and reformulating the former master plan of 1936. That is why, officially, there were no architects nominated in this reformulating team. Nevertheless, Benavente collaborated in the new formulation of the plan but only in an informal way (Fig. 1).

Both Lino and Benavente had a background and a *cultural and intellectual* perspective (Bandarin & Oers, 2012; Choay, 1965), which shaped their way of thinking about architecture and took into account the urban context, in parallel with the theory of the Athens Charter of 1931⁷. They worked in Coimbra and knew the city very well (Craveiro, 1983; IAN-TT, 1997). What already existed and its importance to the identity of the place was too strong and too evident to be ignored, therefore neither of them could design a master plan of the UCC without being influenced by the urban context.

Benavente set out the principles that should guide the project: to benefit the value of the university's existent architectonic heritage in harmony with its urban context, making sure that any intervention should be done carefully and new buildings should not interfere with the historic visual perspectives which had been a permanent value for centuries (IAN-TT, 1997, pp. 51-52). More than making reformulations by demolitions or new buildings, it was essential to reorganize the layout and surroundings of the university colleges. It was imperative to redesign the structure of the urban area of the *Alta* that had lots of problems related with hygienic and sanitary conditions. Also, a concentration of the university facilities was necessary, as the pre-existing mixed urban network was an unsatisfactory solution.

However, the most significant interventions occurred in the public

space whether in the widening of the streets or in the constitution of the main axes. The proposal to demolish the houses imbedded in the aqueduct of *São Sebastião* was intended to achieve two purposes. On the one hand, to widen *Rua Martins de Freitas* (known as *Ladeira do Castelo*), which would be the privileged access to the *Largo do Castelo*, which would also be enlarged and levelled, as a spatial distribution point for the university area. This was also done to free the aqueduct, in an attempt to restore its structural, constructive and patrimonial value.

Another proposed intervention designed an access street to both the residential area and to buildings re-designed for university use, thereby highlighting the *cardus maximus* of the *Alta*, between the *Museu Machado de Castro*⁸ (MMC) and the *Colégio de Jesus*, ensuring that the landscape on the *Mondego* could be seen at the southern top without interference, since the *Pátio das Escolas* was “enclosed” by the building of the *Observatório Astronómico*. This proposal was intended to be an attempt at spatial clarification that, without imposing a physical limit and without a functional separation, gave a greater dimension to the university space in the *Alta*.

However, in addition to the master plan presented not freeing the UCC from existing buildings, despite the many demolitions proposed, it did not promote its isolation either, therefore the design was not capable of representing the government’s aspirations (Correia, 2015). Thus, the first plans of 1936 and 1939 were rejected by Duarte Pacheco because of not corresponding to the ideological purposes of him.

The Minister already had other plans, with other solutions, expressions and languages. Several national and international events were happening and being prepared (Acciaiuoli, 1998; Almeida, 2002), giving rise to a so-called *ephemeral architecture*⁹ (Telmo in Telmo & Santos, 1938) that fulfilled the aspirations and designs of a true *Estado Novo* imposed by Duarte Pacheco.

The *tabula rasa* paradigm as a project methodology

The second moment corresponds to a mono-functional citadel, theoretically close to the Athens Charter of 1933, which can be differentiated into two phases: the first, from 1941 to 1966, during which the interventions were more purposeful, and the second, from 1967 to 1975, with more resigned and conformed actions.

The third attempt to carry out a plan that corresponded to the Minister’s ideals took place in 1942 (Fig. 2), by the CAPOCUC (named in 1941). The head-architect Cottinelli Telmo was responsible for the various general plans, from 1941 to 1948. His successor, the architect Luís Cristino da Silva (until 1966) allowed the construction of the works to be continued according to the guidelines in Cottinelli’s master plan and continued with the trend of a *monumentalist* character¹⁰.

Fig. 2 Master plan of CAPOCUC, Cottinelli Telmo, 1942 (Correia, 1963).

CAPOCUC can be considered as a continuation of the previous Administrative Commissions of the Portuguese World Exhibition (CAPOEMP¹¹), between 1938 and 1940 (CNC, 1939, p. 5), held on the occasion of the commemoration of the nation's centenaries (Acciaiuoli, 1998) and the commission working on the plans for the marginal area of Belém (CAPOPIZMB¹²), between 1941 and 1945. In fact, the *atelier* located in the *Praça do Império de Belém* for the first CAPO, was used as main *atelier* for the others two commissions (from now on it is referred to as the *atelier de Belém*). While the first CAPOEMP had an ephemeral mandate, suitable for only one exhibition, the other two functioned longer and more consistently than the requirements of the urban programmes in question.

In any case, the three master plans were based on the same choice concerning the operating guidelines and the methodological and conceptual approach were delineated in a kind of *tabula rasa*, which was made possible by several demolitions, a reflection of the ministerial support that the *atelier de Belém* had (CNC, 1939, p. 6), because, *designing degree zero is an essential and constant value of the modernist movement* (Zevi, 1982, p. 41). In this case, the process of the transformation of the existing urban fabric was only possible through a complex process of the demolition of buildings, the reorganization of streets and extensive topographic remodelling (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

Analysing the three plans, the assumptions claimed by Cottinelli Telmo about the straight line can be verified as a *symbol of order, of orientation, of the goal attained, of apprehension, of dignity* (Telmo, 1936, p. 24). The architects at the *atelier de Belém* imposed a particular kind of monumentality, order and axuality through the design of the several projects. For the head-architect it was essential to institute a new order on the picturesque disorder, by means of the geometrical imposition and creation of a new image or scenario in the existent urban context, thus restoring its lost dignity to the city (Telmo, 1936).

In formal terms and spatial conception, the UCC's master plan is similar to the University City of Rome – built on a level area, where the buildings assume a hierarchical and compositional position for the adjacent spaces, *with disciplinary memory as a strategy of approach and justification*¹³. Taking advantage of its local topographic conditions, the UCC's master plan assumed the overlap and imposition of a monumental

Fig. 3 Alta's demolitions in several streets and Largo da Feira (AAEC, 1991, p. 95).

Fig. 5 Plan of CUC, Cristino da Silva, 1954
(UC, Process of WHA UC-AS to UNESCO: AUC,
CAPOCUC, File 364).

But the *Escadas Monumentais* still have another symbolic purpose – direct access to the reception area reserved for those who intend to ascend to the “select persons” of the nation (Salazar, 1945, p. XXII). In this sense, the concept of “University City” assumes the connotation of a university citadel within the city by eliminating urban functions, that the organization of space was the purpose for the “specialization” of university functions within the stipulated limits¹⁴.

A second phase, already signalling a resignation and later conformity, was assumed from 1967, with the appointment of the architect Vaz Martins (until 1969, with the end of CAPOCUC), ending with the conclusion of the last building in the master plan, in 1975. A resignation to the evidence that, despite all its design strength and monumentality, the project implemented would no longer correspond to the new demands looming on the horizon that the University would have to respond to in the last decades of the millennium.

Conclusions

There was a diachronic sequence corresponding to the proposals for the construction of the UCC during the process of intervention on *Alta*, which involved different sets of plans, presented by the two teams of architects.

The first moment corresponds to Raúl Lino and Luís Benavente’s plans, the intervention in the *Alta* tried to be an exercise of “building in the constructed city”, establishing a dialogue between the pre-

existing and the new. In a second moment (the UCC's master plan), which corresponds to the design and construction of a mono-functional citadel, exclusively for university use. In this moment two differentiated phases may be observed: the former, a more vigorous proposal and the latter a more resigned and conformed activity.

The purpose of the intervention carried out in the *Alta* during the 20th century is still experienced today. The wall imposed by the citadel on the old city was replaced in the Cottinelli's master plan by the street, which in this case is not an element of connection but rather an element of rupture with the city space, contributing to the isolation of the UCC. The difference of scale between the university space and its urban context with adjacent private constructions was promoted by the ideological imposition of the *Estado Novo*. Through its design, it becomes a contribution to achieve an intentional spatial rupture and a redefinition of the urban landscape, using the contrast between the conceptual and formal scale and also the language of architecture.

In Coimbra, the concept "university city" prevailed in the master plans proposed, although its concept was not overtly discussed. The sense of the violence of the implementation of the UCC, in its contemporaneity, extended for many decades and is commonly assumed to have been injurious to the country. It is pertinent, however, that in one of the most detrimental moments to its condition as a city, in terms of the permanence and spatial continuity, it was assumed as a (university) City when a delimiting line was instituted by the settlement of the mono-functional citadel.

If, at first, the *tabula rasa* methodology was a sign of progress, it quickly turned into a sense of the loss of spatial identity, without the territorial and spatial markings that had been permanent features until that moment. There was only resignation concerning what had already been done, from then on.

The project methodology of *tabula rasa*, or the creation of a completely blank slate, the new start, promoted by the *atelier de Belém*, is pertinent for its dichotomies, paradigms and choices that influenced the spaces, the uses, the behaviours and, above all, the life of the city.

In the present case, the imposed urban development works, which were not very respectful of pre-existing heritage values, are part of the basis for the subsequent recognition of the University of Coimbra – Alta and Sofia as a World Heritage Site (Fig. 6), due to their contribution to the history of architecture, the city and the country. In a total of 21 classified buildings in the designated area of the UCC, 6 have been the subject of renovation / extension within the scope of this extensive urban operation, which has significantly transformed an important and central zone of the city of Coimbra. And that remembers what Yourcenar has set out in writing, *Time (is really) that mighty sculptor* (1996).

Fig. 6 University of Coimbra – Alta and Sofia
World Heritage Site (UC, Process of WHA UC-AS
to UNESCO).

- 1 → Due to the considerable levels of destruction resulting from the 1st World War, the first Athens Charter “was drawn up in the proceedings of the 1st International Conference of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, in 1931, where some theories and experiences, particularly the Italian, for example Gustavo Giovannoni’s, were debated” (Capela & Murtinho, 2015, p. 129). The conference was organized by the International Museums Office (21st–30th October), in Athens and for the first time, the city was understood as a whole with Giovannoni’s rationale (Jokilehto, 2005), rejecting “the idea of a ‘historic centre’, as a hermetic place protected from further urban influence; on the contrary, the whole city should be developed and considered as an integrated system of spaces and linked places” (Capela & Murtinho, 2015, p. 128).
- 2 → Comissão Administrativa do Plano de Obras da Cidade Universitária de Coimbra.

3 → The second Athens Charter was a contrasting perspective to the Athens Charter of 1931, about the assumptions of the construction of cities. It "was drawn up in the proceedings of the 4th International Conference of Modern Architecture, in 1933. It is also known as the Town Planning Charter, which said that heritage should be taken into consideration if it could contribute to urban development" (Capela & Murtinho, 2015, p. 129). The Modern Movement theory highly influenced by Le Corbusier's rationale, developed a "new ideal for the city, which denied the academic style of copying the past for the existent city" (Capela & Murtinho, 2015, p. 128). It was based on the tabula rasa approach, developed by Le Corbusier, expressing the ideal way to build a new city upon the ruins of the traditional one and considering the blank slate as "the only solution capable of meeting the social, hygienic and moral requirements of a European city" (Capela & Murtinho, 2015, p. 128).

4 → Comissão de Obras da Cidade Universitária de Coimbra.

5 → Salazar chose to be presented in some sculptures and statuary with the insignia of a Professor of the University of Coimbra (Amaral, 1938, p. 25), using the seventh ideological myth of the foundation of the Estado Novo, the catholic essence of the national identity (Rosas, 2012, p. 328), to consider himself "the chosen one" to govern the nation (Salazar, 1945, p. XXI), which happened from 1932 to 1968.

6 → "In the citadel the new mark of the city is obvious: a change of scale, deliberately meant to awe and overpower the beholder. Though the mass of inhabitants might be poorly fed and overworked, no expense was spared to create temples and palaces whose sheer bulk and upward thrust would dominate the rest of the city. The heavy walls of hard-baked clay or solid stone would give to the ephemeral offices of state the assurance of stability and security, of unrelenting power and unshakeable authority" (Mumford, 1961, p. 65).

7 → The Athens Charter of 1931 leads to the well-known text of the Venice Charter, adopted in the II Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, in Venice (from 25th to 31st May of 1964), where Luís Benavente played an active part collaborating in the production of the document.

8 → Benavente took part in the Commission of the works of the MMC.

9 → The experience at national and international events, such as the International Exhibitions of Paris (1937), New York and San Francisco (1939) and the Portuguese World Exhibition (1940) or the exhibition of Modern German Architecture in Lisbon (1941), created a dynamic allied with the constructive impetus applied to the whole country. This dynamic did not disappear without culminating in the Exhibition of Public Works of 1948, where the first Congress of Portuguese Architects took place.

10 → These architects would be responsible for the guidelines and general indications that were assimilated in the specific projects, where many architects intervened, such as: Alberto Pessoa, Baltazar de Castro, Lucínio da Cruz, Walter Distel and Cristino da Silva.

11 → Comissão Administrativa do Plano de Obras da Exposição do Mundo Português.

12 → Comissão Administrativa do Plano de Obras da Praça do Império e Zona Marginal de Belém.

13 → Piacentini defines that to work the organization of space was the purpose of the project; working with the architectural and volumetric composition and evoking the conception of the agora and the forum (Persitz, 1936, pp. 12-20).

14 → This intervention had other repercussions at the level of the expansion of the city. It was necessary to relocate all the residents of the Alta, who had been displaced by the extensive demolitions therefore social and residential neighbourhoods were built in Celas (1945-1947), Cumeada (1945-1951), Lomba da Arregaça and Fonte do Castanheiro (1946-1950) and Conchada (1948-1952) (Rosmaninho, 2006, pp. 324-327).

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