

# The squares in Portugal inventory & the creation of contemporary spaces

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Informed by the research work that makes up the inventory of public squares in Portugal, developed in the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Lisbon, part of the research team has developed two projects for very different public spaces: one for a church square in Bobadela, a small village near Coimbra, in the centre of Portugal, and the other one for a new square in the Azorean island of Santa Maria. The first square has been an important public space since the early Roman occupation of the site; the second is a completely new public space that was previously occupied by an urban block. The paper underlines the influences and relations between the architectural research developed in the Academy and the practice developed in the architectural Office in these two projects, i.e. how the research influenced the creation of reference spaces for the contemporary and future society.

## 1 THE SQUARES IN PORTUGAL INVENTORY

The term *praça* (square) is Latin in origin - *platea* – and it is used to identify a public space of an exceptional character that is morphologically distinct from the channel-like spaces that streets make. However, very different spaces correspond to this apparently clear morphology, covered by varied nomenclature and which in some way are not a cultural constant.

Although squares may not exist in certain cultures, in the West they are, by nature, an urban quality prerequisite. This importance dates back to the myth of the Greek *agora* and Roman *forum* as spatial supports for civic institutions of which we believe ourselves to be the heirs.

The fact that, in the late Middle-Ages and the Modern Age, the square has served multiple functions – commercial, political, social and religious – bordered by the public and private buildings of greatest importance in the city, has consolidated its collective character and has given it extra importance in comparison with the other urban public spaces. Its hierarchical superiority is evident in any type of fabric, not only due to the functions it supports, but also due to the finite nature of its space, its relative size or quality of its architecture, regardless of the origins behind its shape.

Nowadays, in spite of everything, the traditional square has retained much of its urban role. Although with new outlines, its production as an urban feature after the Modern Movement has seen it linked to

what many were already calling “a nostalgic symbol for a lost urban quality”.

By taking on the job of fact-finding, graphic restitution and illustrating the main examples of squares in Portugal, our intention is for our work to be a representative body of the diverse typology, the state of development, dimensions and usages of this so particular a type of public space. Our approach was one of taking exceptional public spaces that are generically labelled squares, even if the varied terminology in Portuguese differentiates between them, such as: “o largo”, “o terreiro”, “o campo”, “o rossio”, which in English equate to “the square” or “the public square”. We excluded spaces that typologically act as a channel, like a street. If spaces, originally or at one time or another, had a clearly identifiable sub-type or affectation, as they developed the clarity of these distinctions often became foggy.

As urban features, the selected spaces are an integral part of the urban fabric, possessing a formal, functional hierarchical relationship with the other features that they comprise. In this way, analysis cannot ignore the context, and the spaces chosen were always approached as being part of a whole.

Our benchmark reference work was the *Encyclopédie de l'Urbanisme*, coordinated by Robert Auzelle and Ivan Jankovic, whose preface describes the work as “an irreplaceable instrument of work and culture”. We believed that this study could meet these same objectives.

In this way, our aim was twofold in the way we approached the topic, that is, studying one of the

components of the urban layout through classical representation methods of the structures, as well as using auxiliary illustrations and characterisations, carrying out analysis with all the due rigour of our field, yet remaining legible to the general public. On the other hand, it can serve as an instrument for practising urbanism, as well as teaching it, insofar as it studies the selected spaces in a methodical and comparable way as being examples. Its operational nature rests on the ability to be a reference for designing contemporary urban structures.

## 2 CONTEMPORARY DESIGN OF SQUARES

### 2.1 From research to practice

Informed by the research work that makes up the inventory of public squares in Portugal, published in 2007 and developed in the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Lisbon, part of the research team has developed at the same time two projects for very different public spaces: one for a church square in Bobadela, a small village near Coimbra, in the centre of Portugal, and the other one for a new square in the Azorean island of Santa Maria.

The first square has been an important public space since the early Roman occupation of the site; the second is a completely new public space that was previously occupied by an urban block.

Although the context and objectives of each project were different, the morphological recognition of each place was the common initial step of the design approach, with a similar methodology to the public squares inventory. Therefore, each space was represented with classically drawn features, such as plans and cross sections, as well as photographs of the environment, considering perspectives deemed to show the characteristics of the space, outstanding features and notes on details or the space's way of life, and a synthetic characterization text dealing with the urban nucleus, looking at historical development and morphological characterization, mapping the morphology of the space, its origins and its main uses.

This primordial physical and social interpretation of the place was the key for the design and transformation of each of the public spaces.

### 2.2 Adro da Igreja, Bobadela, Oliveira do Hospital

#### 2.2.1 Background

Nowadays Bobadela is a small village in the Beira. What is so particular about it is that it marries the organisational and formal characteristics that can be seen in similar places with the architectural structures of a Roman city. This reality enables us to understand its origins, which date back to the establishment of a city of the Roman Empire. We do not know the name of this city today, nor do we know a great deal about how it developed with time, the points that stand out being when it was the municipal seat with a charter awarded by King D. Afonso III and, after the administrative reforms of the 19th century, when it was integrated into the Oliveira do Hospital Municipality.

The urban layout reveals the tension between the orthogonal nature of the Roman city, which can be seen in the alignment of the central area's buildings and the two backbone axes, one North – South which enabled the urban development of Senhora da Luz, and another East – West squashed in between

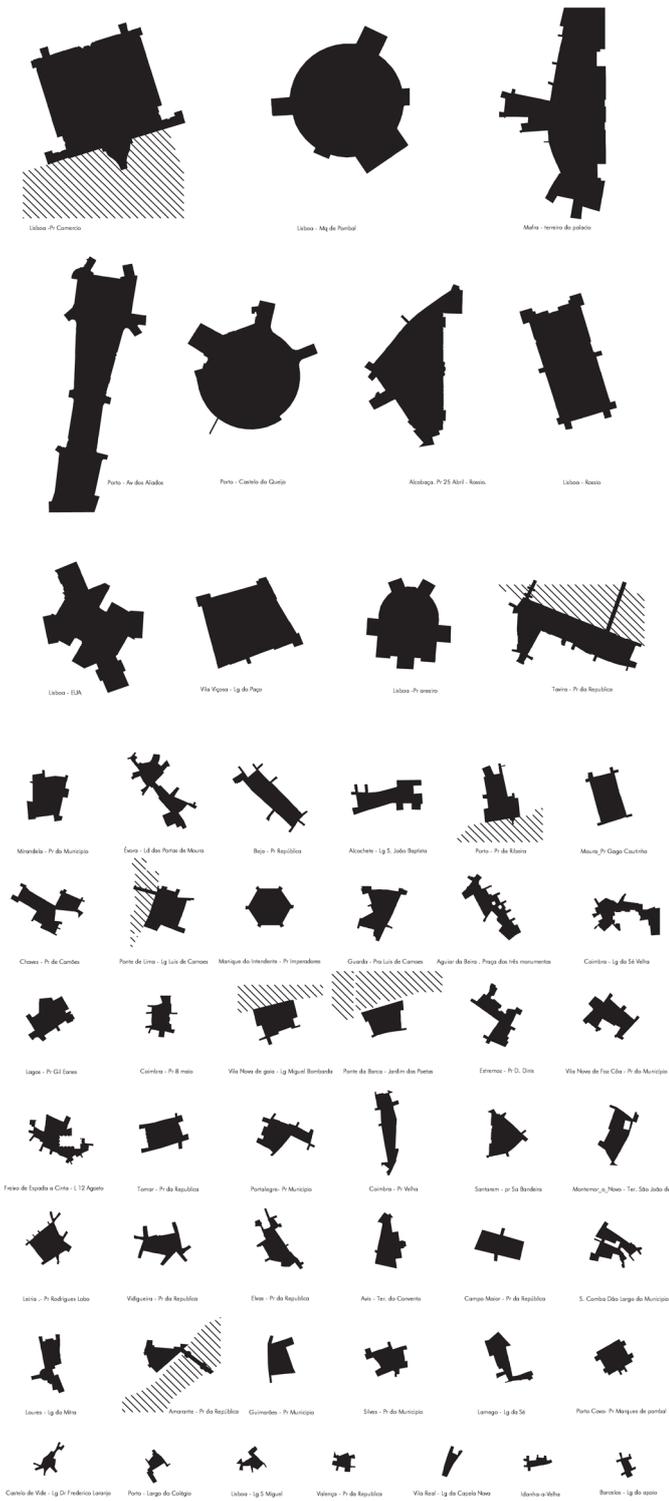


Figure 1. The Squares in Portugal - A Public Space Inventory. Squares layout comparative table.

the arch and the cemetery road, and the buildings and walls shaped by a snaking road, opened at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which encompasses the more central nucleus adjoining the Mother church.

The imbalance in the overlapping churchyard and forum can only be perceived through the different paving, as features that were of major importance in defining the Roman space cannot be seen today, such as the large temple located under the foundations of the 17<sup>th</sup> century mansion house. The continuing existence of a urban place in Bobadela that has brought urban centrality for almost two millennia is exceptional in urban development. Despite each cultural period's changing roles, when loss of meaning justified removal of many of their buildings, one common space bolstering this evolution remains visible. The churchyard is still the small urban nucleus' most important space, marrying religious, administrative and social functions. It stands out as a symbolic, emblematic space for its inhabitants.

### 2.2.2 Framing

The remaining structures of the old Forum of the Roman city have a clear presence in the central area of the village, composing part of the whole built ensemble along with the church, manor houses and vernacular buildings. Although it has lost its significance and suffered a process of dismantling for about fifteen hundred years, it is still possible to understand the importance of the Roman city by the amount of existing traces, namely the east entrance of the Forum, the Roman Arch of Bobadela, classified as a national monument.

The space is demarcated to the south by the Mother church, an edifice that was rebuilt in the 18th century, and a massive old cedar tree, to the west by a sober 17<sup>th</sup> century mansion, to the north by a building constructed over the forum's north-eastern wedge, which is presumed to have been the Curia of the Roman city, whose walls include, together with reworked Roman features, constructions from differing periods, two highlights of which are a Manueline door and a protruding porch.

The eastern limit is not very well defined or consolidated, with various building and walls hugging the road's north – south axis. The Roman arch giving access to the forum plays the leading role as the composition's central feature. It stands out from the other major significant features, such as the pillory, the cross and even the small columned stretch.

### 2.2.3 Design

With the intervention undertaken in Adro da Igreja of Bobadela in 2006 it was intended to create a specific and identifiable space, able to merge in the same place two very different urban objects - the

churchyard of the village and the Forum of the Roman city - allowing both its formal and functional coexistence, synthesized on an intervention that seeks an outstanding qualified architecture.

The planned rehabilitation will aim to give a new role to this area that plays, in the urban context of the village, collective functions of great importance. Thus, we intended to enhance the historical and aesthetic value of the set, aligning it with the daily life of its inhabitants, current depositary of these values.

The project stems from the strengthening of the Roman Forum elements and its compatibility with the existing urban context of Bobadela, valuing the buildings better architectural quality and mitigating the impact of dissonant buildings.

As the principles of the intervention are based on an enhanced reading of the Roman pre-existences, it proved essential in methodological terms, confirming the idea formulated for the reconstitution. In this sense, places of archaeological survey were indicated strategically upon, focusing especially on the churchyard area and the likely limits of the Forum. The result of this operation and the traces found justified occasional adjustments in the development of the project.

The information obtained from the archaeological surveys has reinforced in the design of the square some hypotheses initially placed, particularly with regard to the constitution of the eastern gallery and the south limit of the ancient Forum, as well as rectify some intentions from the preliminary study of the project such as the drawing of the eastern extension of the *cardus*.

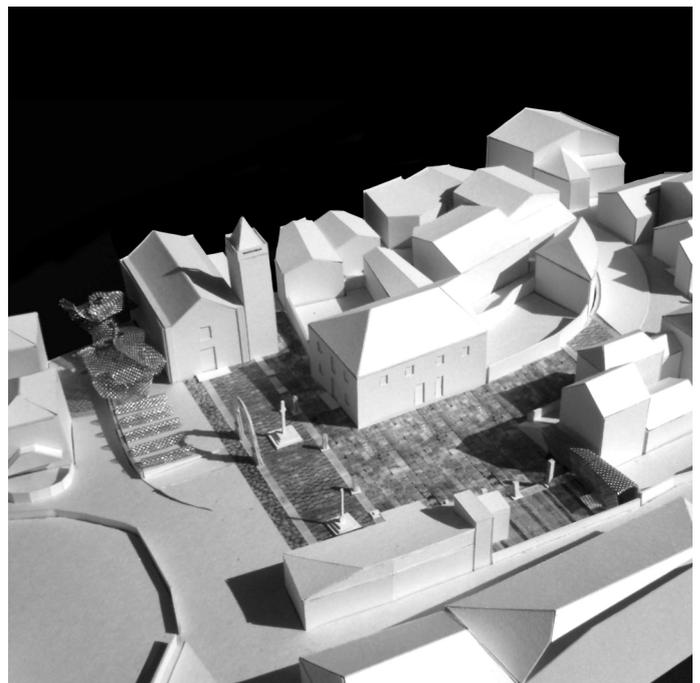


Figure 2. Adro da Igreja, Bobadela, Oliveira do Hospital, Coimbra. Project model.

The solution is based, firstly, on the laying and recovery of pavements in the precise limits of the Forum, identifying the outer causeway, the outer wall, the gallery, the alignment of the colonnade, the courtyard and the basilica. These pavements are visually distinguished by the stereotomy of the granite pieces, in shape and size, noting clearly the alignments and accusing greater regularity in the gallery carpet than in the courtyard. The basilica, translating an interior space, is paved in recycled wood, with a level gap in relation to the ancient Forum courtyard pavement. The remaining spaces that did not belong to the Forum building are, as a rule, paved on the continuity of existing pavements.

Secondly, the solution proposed the strengthening of alignments using vertical elements, of which should be highlighted the rise and consolidation of the Forum northern wall, the elevation of the eastern wall of the Forum between the parish house and the road and also the placement of columns in the eastern alignment of the ancient colonnade and the north wall of the roman basilica.

Thirdly, we intended to create articulation elements between the Roman and contemporary structures, such as the ramp on the alignment of the arc, an operation that required the relocation of the local pillory from where he was placed in the remodelling carried out at the beginning of twentieth century, in the alignment of the cruise cross. In this context, the design considered the extension of the boxwood garden by the east wall, the resulting composition designs with rigour small living spaces on a sand bed box.

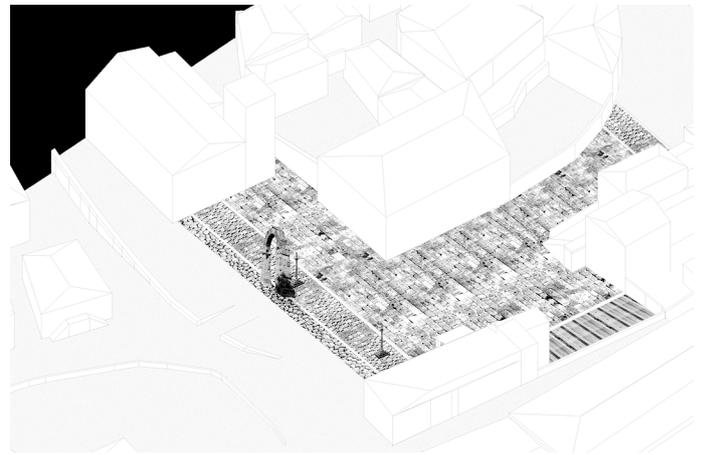


Figure 3. Adro da Igreja, Bobadela, Oliveira do Hospital, Coimbra. Pavements render.

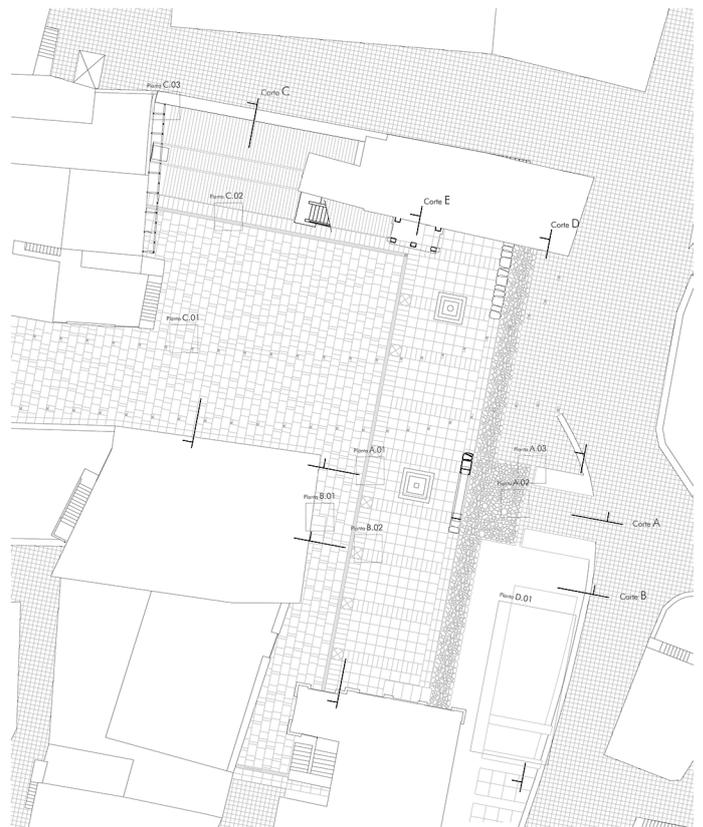


Figure 4. Adro da Igreja, Bobadela, Oliveira do Hospital, Coimbra. Plan of the project.

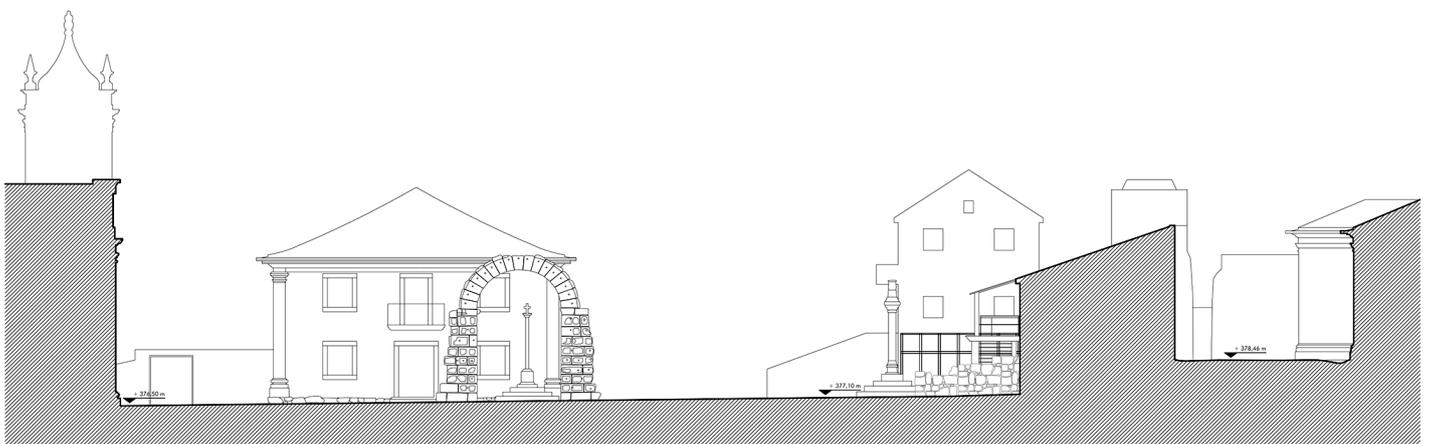


Figure 5. Adro da Igreja, Bobadela, Oliveira do Hospital, Coimbra. Cross section of the project.

## 2.3 *Praça Gonçalo Velho, Vila do Porto, Santa Maria, Azores*

### 2.3.1 *Background*

The urban nucleus of Vila do Porto is the foundational settlement of the human occupation of the Azorean Islands and dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The main street that departs from the fort on its southern edge and runs along the ridgeline of the “hump” where the village sits structures both the urban layout its image. One of the features of this structuring urban axis is to be dotted by exceptional public spaces, squares that invariably are aggregated in pairs, one on each side of the main street.

Located on the southern and more ancient part of the urban nucleus, the urban block that gave origin to the new square had undergone a slow and progressive process of ruin, keeping standing only a small number of warehouses on its south edge. The space was open, without any kind of treatment and led to an informal occupation of car parking.

The creation of a public space in Frei Gonçalo Velho Street, part of the main axis of the village, constituted a commitment that the City Council of Vila do Porto took when purchasing a set of buildings in ruin. These void plots, since demolished, constitute assets of the municipality acquired under special conditions for the creation of a public space. The southern plots of the block, three of which were built, were acquired afterwards, thus allowing the full transformation of the urban block from private to public space.

### 2.3.2 *Framing*

The space, which was object of the intervention whose project started in 2002, is consolidated in its outer limits, as it corresponds to the simple amputation of an urban block. However, the characteristics of the built elements that define it are very distinct, existing both well-maintained buildings and in ruin, erudite and vernacular structures alike, good and dissonant architectural quality, and also contrasting dimensions.

The new urban space that was created was combined with Largo Luís de Figueiredo, a small pre-existent square, in order to form a composite set of two exceptional spaces, articulated by the street Rua Frei Gonçalo Velho, with dimensions and characteristics comparable to the exceptional spaces that already dotted the structuring axis of Vila do Porto.

Although at the time of the project the space did not serve to support any special urban function, it is bordered by one of the urban blocks classified of interest of the "Ancient Area", with buildings of public ownership in ruin, which were supposed to be transformed into one of the new public facilities from

those contained in the municipal development programs.

Nevertheless, this new composite exceptional space would always be an urban element of articulation, the nodal point between Rua Frei Gonçalo Velho and the beginning of Rua da Misericórdia, and also conforming an inflection of the structuring axis of the village.

### 2.3.3 *Design*

The project thus stems of the principle of the creation of an independent and identifiable space, referenced to an implied general evocation of the memory of the settlement itself that might be translated into an artistic element or embedded in the design of the space. It also sought to enhance the buildings of better architectural quality as opposed to mitigate the impact of the dissonant ones in a space that is to be of collective use, allowing mixed appropriations and contemplating some car parking spaces.

As acknowledged on the inventory of Squares in Portugal, the waves are used as a common composition motive of ornamentation of the pavement. Initially these waves appeared in the Lisbon Rossio and were later exported to other geographical overseas contexts, such as Brazil and Macau, or reinterpreted in more recent urban contexts, such as in the Expo'98 Rossio dos Olivais, but always as a two-dimensional design. The use of waves as a three-dimensional composition motive stemmed from the topographical nature of the space and the wish of evocating the overseas genesis of the foundation of the settlement.



Figure 6. Praça Gonçalo Velho, Vila do Porto, Santa Maria, Azores. Project model.

The solution was based on the continuity of the pavement from the main street, Rua Frei Gonçalo Velho; the progressive waving of the topography of the surface gradually increases to the intersection with the supporting wall, an element that absorbs the gap to the lower level of Rua da Misericórdia. This ripple is more evident in northern top while it diminishes to the southern part of the square in order to allow uses and appropriations that require a more straightened surface. The dynamic effect of the waved surface is reinforced by a chromatic nuance achieved from the introduction on the black pavement of a progressive white marking on the edge of each wave.

In order to accentuate the pavement, predominantly black, it contrasts with the retaining, enclosing wall, white in vertical planes.

This wall hides the parking spaces and regulates the placement of alignment trees. More than shading the parking spaces, the trees filter out the impact of dissonant buildings in the square. The rhythm of the waves and the trees is further enhanced by the water gargoyles, ripped in the supporting wall and connected to each of the trees in order to take advantage of the runoff water when it rains.

Here we introduced a dark red color note on the treatment of metals - grills, gutters, etc. - and the trees themselves - *Paulownia tomentosa* - flowering in red.

The materials chosen seek to ensure a great continuity with the flooring of "Ancient Area" of Vila do Porto, using cobbled black basalt and white limestone, recovering the vertical walls with plaster and whitewash of the village walls and using one of the species of trees previewed to be planted on the adjacent Largo D. Luís de Figueiredo. The introduction of a discreet contemporary note is given by the use of the rusted metal.

Lighting contemplates the continued existence of the street lighting framing the space, although introducing a new logic for the space itself. This accentuates the arboreal elements by illuminating their tops, and accentuates the design and shape of the floor through a skimmed light on the white face of the pavement of the waved surface, allowing an enhanced reading of the space during the nighttime.

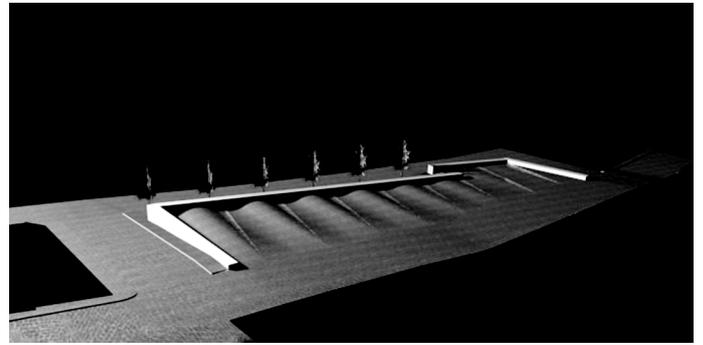


Figure 7. Praça Gonçalo Velho, Vila do Porto, Santa Maria, Azores. Pavements render.



Figure 8. Praça Gonçalo Velho, Vila do Porto, Santa Maria, Azores. Plan of the project.

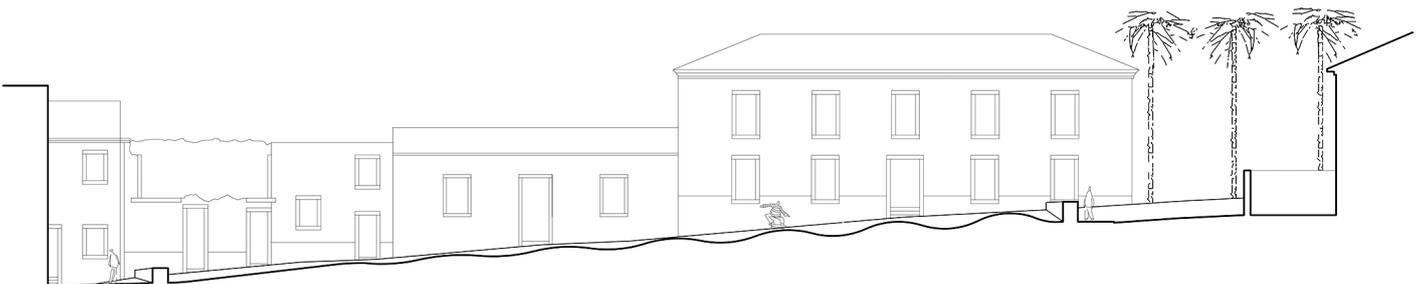


Figure 9. Praça Gonçalo Velho, Vila do Porto, Santa Maria, Azores. Cross section of the project.

### 3 MEMORY AND DESIGN

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, urbanism practice, the philosophy of intervention in cities and the idea of the city itself were showing less utopian signs than in bygone eras, due to several factors. These include the Modern Movement crisis and its models, and getting back to cities as points of reference, as well as the perspective of, if not disjunction in cities, then at least their illegibility in terms of traditional urban morphologic concepts.

In the more speculative predictions of the future of the city, the urban space as a support for human relationships, material and spiritual exchanges and even traffic has been superseded in favour of immaterial media, without either establishing the fate of the city's structures or introducing new morphologic models as a response to a different society. The 21<sup>st</sup> century city will naturally be different to the city of the previous century, I as this was from the industrial one, and this one from the city of Modern, Medieval or Ancient History. However, the inevitable end of the city that some predict is not a certainty, and what is more probable is that there will be developments towards new meanings which will contain the tensions between the city's structural legacy and its constant renovation. This object – the city – has always shown signs of obsolescence, due to its own nature and dynamics.

The policies of recuperating historical centres, so commonplace from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century on, in a process increasingly apart from the phenomena of growth that has, in most cases, shaped urban peripheries, has support not only in theoretical musings, but also in public opinion, shaped as it is by a great deal of nostalgia and opting for the safe choice of preserving this value. We should not manacle urbanity to the historic centre, nor to the inevitability that urban renaissance has to make use of past shapes. However, the structural examples we inherited, which are part of our city life, will always be a driving force in new spatial conceptions.

The cases presented on this paper configure two examples on how an interpretation methodology of the urban space developed in the Academy and consisting in the recognition of the values of the spirit of the place, read in the morphology of the urban artifact itself, may contribute for the contemporary architectural and urban design of spaces with the evidence of their own memory.

Note on images: all plans are north oriented.

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