

Museums and centres of contemporary art inside historical buildings: three cases in Portugal

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Abstract

In Portugal, the majority of art museums are installed in buildings that were originally conceived for other uses. The adaptation of historical buildings into museums reveals a great complexity because, besides restoring the pre-existing constructions, it is necessary to respond to the multiple requirements of today's museological programmes. In the specific case of museums and centres dedicated to contemporary art, the conversion of old buildings becomes even more demanding, given that the collections undergo permanent updating and, at the same time, the museological space plays an experimental role associated to the dynamics of artistic creation.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the main issues relating to this type of heritage renovation, starting-off with a brief perspective of the European context, followed by the analysis of three paradigmatic projects in Portugal: Museu do Chiado – National Museum of Contemporary Art, Lisbon, Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso Municipal Museum, Amarante, and Centre of Visual Arts, Coimbra.

Keywords: heritage architecture, adaptation of historical buildings, museum architecture, Portuguese contemporary architecture, museums and centres of contemporary art.



1 Introduction: scope, object and method of the work

In considering that art museum architecture is a very contemporary and culturally relevant subject, namely when connected to the rehabilitation of buildings, agglomerates or sites with renowned heritage value, the purpose of this survey is to investigate the potential and contingencies of adapting pre-existing buildings to museological spaces dedicated to contemporary art.

When approaching this subject, a crucial question mark promptly appears: up to what extent is it possible to make the preservation of the architectural identity of the original buildings compatible with the programme complexity of contemporary art museums and centres?

In order to answer this question, we propose a brief explanation of the problem at a European level, followed by a description of the Portuguese museological scene, where three exemplary projects are studied: Museu do Chiado – National Museum of Contemporary Art, Lisbon (Arq. Jean-Michel Wilmotte, 1988-94), Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso Municipal Museum, Amarante (Arq. Alcino Soutinho, 1977-88) and Centre of Visual Arts, Coimbra (Arq. João Mendes Ribeiro, 1997-2003).

As a conclusion, an analysis is made on the contribution of these museums towards the rehabilitation of the Portuguese architectural heritage and towards the urban renovation of the areas where they are located, also stressing the main identified limitations, in what concerns the adaptation of the spaces to the museological activities carried out by the institutions.

As to method, it is important to mention that this article was based on the investigations undertaken by the authors in the areas of museology/museum architecture and Portuguese contemporary architecture. This text mainly resulted from the research in progress within the scope of the PhD thesis of Helena Barranha, on Architecture of Contemporary Art Museums in Portugal, registered in the Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto (Supervisor: Prof. Carlos Guimarães; Co-supervisors: Prof. Ana Tostões and Prof. Raquel Henriques da Silva), expected to be concluded in 2007. Parallel to, the assessing article depicts several essays conducted by Ana Tostões, within the scope of history and theory of the Portuguese architecture in the 20th century, especially [1].

2 Adaptation of historical buildings into contemporary art museums and centres

In the second half of the 20th century, in Europe, the rehabilitation of buildings with historical/architectural value, by adapting them to new uses, appears as an unavoidable fact, as a result of the increasing public demand to safeguard architectural heritage. In a time when cultural tourism is stating its position as one of the most promising economic sectors, the issues regarding heritage and museums reach an unprecedented projection.

The broadening of the heritage sphere within contemporary culture has largely widened the range of building-types susceptible of being listed and rehabilitated. At the same time, the evolution of the concept of museum itself has



impelled the multiplication and diversification of programmes and spaces, justifying the adaptation of all types of constructions for museographic purposes. Thus, the idea expressed in different international charts and conventions on architectural heritage that monument conservation is always favoured by its adaptation to a purpose which is useful to society [2] is represented, in a somewhat expressive manner, in the museological universe.

However if, on the one hand, installing museums in ancient buildings has become an opportunity to rehabilitate architectural heritage, rescuing it from the potential abandonment and granting it new uses, on the other hand, the re-use of listed buildings tends to be a controversy issue, especially when we are facing complex problems which frequently cannot be fully completed in the pre-existing spaces. In reality, during the last decades, the museological programmes have progressively become more demanding in terms of area and space flexibility for, besides meeting the traditional duties of study, conservation and exhibition of assets, the current museums carry out different complementary activities within the cultural, educational and leisure scope. Simultaneously, the sophisticated operation of these institutions requires larger areas for safety systems and administrative services. The formal and spatial characteristics associated to certain historical buildings may impede their adequacy to the museographic programme and, therefore, in many cases, the extension (with the construction of a new wing, building, volume, etc.) becomes inevitable. On construction works for extension and renovation of grand art museums in Europe, see [3].

In contemporary art museums, adding to the already mentioned requisites is the fact that collections undergo permanent updating and that the museological space has a laboratorial vocation, connected to the current artistic creation. This way, space versatility should include the plurality of scales and plastic supports inherent to 20th century art and the ongoing revision of the exhibition contents or new perspectives on the collections. The capacity of adaptation to different temporary exhibitions and complementary activities is a key factor. Also relevant in project terms is the fact that many of the practices related to contemporary art have contributed towards the revitalization of the historical city, in such a manner that the museum tends to act as anchor of urban dynamisation.

In spite of the ongoing difficulties in compatibility between the increasingly more ambitious programmes and the limits of the pre-existing buildings, in Europe many museums, galleries and contemporary art centres are located in converted buildings. The original types are varied and include palaces, religious and cultural buildings, industrial structures and current urban agglomerates. Amongst the most relevant examples are: the Reina Sofia National Museum Art Centre, in Madrid (former hospital, converted into a museum through successive interventions, between 1980 and 2006, by several architects: Antonio Fernández Alba, José Luis Iñíguez de Onzoño, Antonio Vázquez de Castro, Ian Ritchie and Jean Nouvel), the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris (constructed in 1937 for the Paris International Exhibition, it was renovated by architects Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, 1999-2002), and Tate Modern, London (former Bankside Power



Station, transformed into museum by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, 1994-2000).

It is yet worth noticing that the conversion of ancient buildings into modern art museums is a consequence not only of public strategies for rehabilitation of architectural heritage, but also of the search for alternative locations to museological institutions on behalf of the artists themselves [4]. We thus find, within European ground, multiple examples of spaces chosen by several artists to exhibit their works, usually together with artworks from other artists with whom they share affinities, as is the case, for example, of the Tàpies Foundation, in Barcelona (former headquarters for Editora Montaner i Simón adapted by architects Roser Amadó and Lluís Domènech Girbau, 1985-90), the Vostell Malpartida Museum, in Cáceres (founded in 1976 by artist Wolf Vostell, who chose some old wool washing premises to lodge his collections), and the Arpad Szenes - Vieira da Silva Foundation, in Lisbon (old Silk Factory dating from the 18th Century, renovated according to the will of the painter Maria Helena Vieira da Silva by architects José Sommer Ribeiro and Richard Clarke, 1990-94).

3 The museum as factor for rehabilitation of the Portuguese architectural heritage

Similarly to other European countries, it has been set as a tradition in Portugal to install art museums monuments or notable buildings often located within the historical city centres. In fact, in Portugal, museological interventions in heritage architecture seem to be considered unavoidable situations, for the reuse of buildings seems to be a constant in Portuguese architecture. The chosen case studies represent three successive decades of qualified interventions, which have been confirming the potential and stimulus represented by the reuse of ancient buildings. We can therefore speak of a direct relation between the evolution of the museum/art centre programme and the concepts and attitudes towards heritage.

The adaptation of historical buildings for museological purposes started standing out in Portugal in the 19th Century, namely after the extinction of the Religious Orders, which led to the new use of religious equipment. Still today, some of the main Portuguese museums can be found in ancient convents, monasteries, episcopal palaces and seminars, as is the case of the Grão Vasco Museum, Viseu; the Évora Museum or the Faro Municipal Museum. There is also a considerable number of institutions located in old palaces, such as the National Museum of Ancient Art (which has also come to integrate part of the old Santo Alberto Convent), in Lisbon, or the Soares dos Reis Museum, in Porto. As to art museums installed in industrial premises, one may mention the Arpad Szenes – Vieira da Silva Foundation, in Lisbon, and the Portimão Municipal Museum. Regardless of the original type of building, it is a fact that museums tend to rehabilitate buildings with architectonic and urban relevance.

Only in the mid 20th century did the construction of buildings created from the project to serve as museums become a reality, such as the José Malhoa Museum, Caldas da Rainha (project by Paulino Montês and Eugénio Correia,



1940 with extension works from 1950-57) and the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon (architects Alberto Pessoa, Pedro Cid and Ruy Jervis d'Atouguia, 1959-69), an exceptional project from the museographic point of view, and also in terms of cultural proposal and urban and landscape integration. Among the most recent accomplishments are the Exhibition Centre/Design Museum, in Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisboa (Vittorio Gregotti and Manuel Salgado, 1988-93) and the Serralves Museum of Art Contemporary, Porto (Álvaro Siza Vieira, 1991-99).

During the two last decades of the 20th century, the museum scene in Portugal has substantially changed with the opening of hundreds of new spaces and the creation of coordination structures in the sector. (To better understand the current museological situation, see [5].) Namely, the Instituto Português de Museus (IPM) [Portuguese Institute of Museums] and the Rede Portuguesa de Museus (RPM) [Portuguese Museum Network], organisms under the Ministry of Culture. These transformations do not alter, however, the situation of unequivocal prevalence of the adaptation of pre-existing buildings in comparison to the new buildings, which stand out as the main architectural characteristic of museums in Portugal. This trend is also distinct within the scope of the museums and centres for modern and contemporary art. The three case studies justly depict this situation.

3.1 Museu do Chiado – National Museum of Contemporary Art

Museu do Chiado – Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea (MNAC) (National Museum of Contemporary Art) is located, as perceived by its name, in one of the most high-profile historic barrios of Lisbon, the area where, from the 19th to the 20th Centuries, “the Portuguese social and cultural life gravitated par excellence” (Afonso [6]). Created in 1911, the Museum is since then installed in the quarter once occupied by the São Francisco da Cidade Convent. Currently, the Museum shares the old convent nucleus with other institutions: Faculty of Beaux Arts, The Lisbon Municipal Government and the Police Force. The architectonic ensemble was listed as Public Interest Property in 1993.

The convent building, which dates back to the 18th century, was object of several construction works along the centuries. First, the MNAC was located in an isle of the old Convent, in the parlours adjacent to the Academy of Beaux Arts. Later, several construction works for remodelling and extension took place.

In 1988, subsequently to the fire that devastated part of the historical area of Chiado, it became opportune to rehabilitate the National Museum of Contemporary Art. For this purpose, a protocol was signed between the Governments of Portugal and France, which had offered to co-operate in the reconstruction of Chiado, making possible a full conversion of the Museum, whose project was then submitted to French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte (b. 1948). The architect had, already then, a notable experience in construction works for adapting old buildings into museums, having been responsible, namely, for the projects of the Carnavalet Museum, Paris (1989), and for remodelling the Richelieu Wing in the Louvre Museum (1993, in co-operation with architects Ieoh Ming Pei and Michel Macary). After termination of the



construction works, the Museum re-opened to the public in 1994, during the event *Lisbon European Capital of Culture*, under the name Museu do Chiado (Chiado Museum).

When starting off the project, the architect faced a rather heterogeneous scenario. Besides the old convents being transfigured by the construction works performed in different times, there were constructions which were subsequent to the 1755 Earthquake (namely a building which had been used as a printer, warehouse and bakery) with peculiar construction details, such as vaulted ceilings, brick ovens and chimneys. One of the premises of the proposal has therefore consisted in granting unity to the architectural group, integrating and articulating that multiplicity of spaces and, at the same time, extending the total area of the Museum.

The readaptation to new uses was one of the main challenges and, with that purpose, Wilmotte established a global reorganisation of the spaces, by creating new welcoming areas (hall, reception, cloakroom, toilets, shop/book store and cafeteria), introducing a group of new technical and administrative areas, reconfiguring the pre-existing exhibition galleries and adding to them a room for temporary exhibitions ("Oven Room") and a multipurpose room on the ground floor (Barranha and Heitor [7]). In order to take maximum advantage of the versatility of the architectural ensemble, Jean-Michel Wilmotte bet on including works of art in alternative areas to those of the exhibition rooms (footbridges, corridors, halls), having also redesigned the sculpture garden and created a new entrance.

Through a strong marking of detail and construction accuracy, the architect tried to create different ambiances according to the different types of art works, using the diversity of pre-existing materials to broaden the range of possibilities: "The superb vault room, the bread ovens, the wall shutters, represented other occasions to wake up history and establish a dialogue between old and new, through an exceptional exhibition of the collections. [...] The artificial lighting balances natural light, by emphasising the architectural elements and enhancing the art works" (Wilmotte [8]).

Despite the intervention having increased the area of the Museum, the space available to carry out a programme which is increasingly comprehensive have proven to be insufficient. The solution for this problem goes necessarily through the extension of the Museum, which has been cyclically rethought. However, even with important limits in terms of space, the Chiado Museum has revealed to be a stimulating place for the fruition of contemporary art. In fact, Wilmotte managed to implement, in a considerably small area, a most complete programme with strong contemporary sense, which is revealed both in the answer to the technical and operational requisites and in the creation of an architectural proposal which represents its own time, by establishing a premeditated and profound dialogue with the pre-existing constructions.

3.2 Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso Municipal Museum, Amarante

Designed in the late 1970s, i.e., ten years before the previous case, the Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso Municipal Museum is a reference in the scope of reusing



heritage with the museological programme, occupying part of the old São Gonçalo de Amarante Convent, built between the 16th and 19th Centuries. The architectural ensemble formed by the Church and Convent of São Gonçalo has a strong urban presence, with a symbolic value, and is the main element that defines the image of the city. Part of the architectonic ensemble (Church and 1st cloister) has been classified as National Monument since 1910. This property denotes the successive work campaigns that marked its construction and the several adaptations made since the 19th century subsequently to the extinction of the Religious Orders. Deprived of its original purpose, the convent building underwent the most diverse uses (court, primary school, theatre, cinema, shops, wine cellars, etc.) until it was object of a global valorisation. For further knowledge of the history of the São Gonçalo de Amarante Convent and the rehabilitation actions performed in the last decades, we recommend the reading of the special issue of the journal *Monumentos* on the São Gonçalo de Amarante Convent, 1995.

The architectural rehabilitation process took off in 1973, with a first intervention by architect Alcino Soutinho (b. 1930), in the wing occupied by the City Hall. The project for adapting part of the building into a Museum was fulfilled between 1977 and 1988, mainly consisting in the creation of areas for the conservation and exhibition of an asset that highlights the 20th century Portuguese Art collection, based on the work of painter Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso (1887-1918).

The project distributed the exhibition spaces throughout different areas in the building, exploring the chances of ambiance differences. The ground floor included a room for temporary exhibitions, while the permanent collection occupies the whole main gallery, located on the upper floor. This is an open space, partially divided by moveable panels also acting as a support to hang paintings. The main gallery has direct access to the smaller rooms with a more reserved ambiance. In the room dedicated to the drawings of painter Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso (located in the new building separating both patios), natural lighting is subtle, for it comes only through the roof, filtered by a system of beams.

The most emblematic moment of Alcino Soutinho's proposal was the replacement of a building between the second and third cloisters. This new building, in spite of evoking the one demolished in the 19th century has a contemporary design, and is considered an example in terms of harmonious co-existence between architectural types from different times. When walking through the different areas comprising the Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso Museum, we witness the works have offered clearness and dignity to the shape and space qualities of the old convent. By re-establishing the original composition of the convent structure, the project appears almost entirely at the level of a careful interior design with strict detail study.

3.3 Centre of Visual Arts, Coimbra

The Centro de Artes Visuais (CAV) (Centre of Visual Arts), current headquarters of the *Encontros de Fotografia*, was inaugurated in 2003, during



the event *Coimbra National Capital of Culture*, corresponding to the rehabilitation of the architectural ensemble comprised by the Inquisition Patio and by the west wing of the old College of the Arts. The intervention carried out by João Mendes Ribeiro (b. 1960), between 1997 and 2003, is included, however, in a wider architectural group of buildings, constructed since the 16th century and marked by a sequence of adaptations and transformations. Integrated in the Historic Centre of the City, the mentioned group is part of the urban nucleus of Rua da Sofia, which remained, until the 18th century, as the main and noblest street of Coimbra. (Listed as Public Interest Property, since 1971. The street was opened in 1535, in the scope of the creation of facilities for the reinstallation of the University of Coimbra.)

The College of Arts building dates from the 16th century. Most of the construction works was headed by architect Diogo de Castilho, author of the emblematic Ionic colonnade of the patio in the west wing. In 1566, the College was transferred to the Alta de Coimbra area, being the premises in Rua da Sofia occupied by the Inquisition, which remained there until its extinction in 1821. The architectural group shows signs of important alterations introduced in the 19th and 20th Centuries, having successively been occupied by several public services and by private owners. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the interest for the architectural heritage of Rua da Sofia, allied to the aim of revitalising the historical centre of Coimbra, lead the municipality to invest in the creation of plans and proposals for the site. In 1997, Coimbra City Hall promoted a public competition for the rehabilitation of the architectonic ensemble, whose contract was awarded to architect João Mendes Ribeiro's project.

In reconverting the old College of the Arts and Patio of the Inquisition, J. M. Ribeiro reinvented some of the central subjects of his research: the close reading of the contexts, the manipulation of light, the movement of people and objects within the area, the design of boxes or elementary containers, the poetry of truth in materials (inherited from the masters of the Modern Movement, namely from Mies van der Rohe) and the co-existence of opposites (old/new perennial/ephemeral, heavy/light...).

The building was recovered as part of a whole, in which the exterior areas play a leading role. In analysing the place, the memories and relicts undertake the condition of fragments that the architect interprets and enhances as such. In the CAV, the intervention is articulated between an urban scale and the precision of the design of the object by hand, annulling ambiguities resulting from the successive add-ons. And, therefore, carrying out a stronger desideratum, the one resulting from a transparency physically built between the existing and the new buildings, which has its sublime moment in the wood container that includes the technical services, the laboratories and the bureaus.

The adaptation of the building to the museological programme was based on a declared contention, dictated by the will to safeguard the identity of the previous buildings. That purpose is perceivable in placing removable pavements on the ground floor (main gallery), in order to allow the access to the archaeological findings discovered in a lower level, or in the recovery of the impressive roof structure, in wooden bearers, visible on the upper floor. In the main gallery,

destined to temporary exhibitions, the search for the flexibility of the exhibition area translated itself in designing pivoting panels that allow different divisions. The problem of space versatility has, in fact, become determinant in the project, in comparison to the reduced area available for meeting the foreseen activities.

Despite the area's limitations, the creation of the CVA ended up comprising a determinant moment in the cultural life of the city of Coimbra. The temporary exhibitions conjugate with the fruition of the architectural space, through a course that may be perceived as a contemporary installation, qualified by the comparison between notes of musealisation of the pre-existing and new elements.

4 Conclusions

The architecture of contemporary art museums, in Portugal, reveals the trend, which is common to other types of museums, to privilege the re-use of pre-existing buildings, adopting this so stimulating subject, in which the relation with the past is fulfilled in the articulation with the museum, while space to communicate the art work with the public (Tostões [9]). Conversion thus constitutes a creative stimulus for current architecture, emphasized when the space is to be used for exhibiting contemporary art, understood in the freedom and plurality of means and supports.

In the three projects presented on this paper, the reading and valorisation of the previous constructions presupposes the dialogue with current languages and materials, introduced both by the architectural intervention and by the art works. If, from the plastic and conceptual point of view, the cases analysed exemplarily settled the container/content relation, from the operational point of view some associated difficulties are identified, especially, as to the shortness of the area available for the full meeting of the programme goals. To overcome the constraints of the original division, the architects unified some pre-existing areas and designed rotary or removable walls, in order to create other choices for the subdivision of the exhibition space. In parallel, the search for flexibility caused the creation of rooms and galleries with different features, adaptable to diverse artistic objects, going from traditional painting on canvas to sculpture, installation or video-art.

In spite of these solutions making feasible a considerable variety of exhibition situations, some problems persist, namely, related to the reduced dimensions of the spaces that stops the presentation of larger sized pieces. An interesting way to solve this limitation has been to re-use gardens and courtyards for integrating art works, as happened with the CAV, with the installation of the *Longer Journeys* piece by Pedro Cabrita Reis.

Through the appropriation of this type of exterior spaces, the museums dilute the physical limits of the buildings and multiply the possibilities of relation with the urban surroundings. Bearing in mind that the buildings considered are included in historic centres, the presentation of artist proposals in public or semi-public areas still contributes to question the perception of the architectural heritage, confronting it with an expression of vanguards. The temporary feature



of these exhibitions offers, at the same time, a factor of renewal which, allied to the remaining activities promoted by the museums, tends to mobilize, simultaneously, the creators and public, impelling the cultural life of the city.

The presence of invariants and limitations cannot be the reason to diminish the intervention scope, on the contrary, this condition should act as a subject or material concurrent to the process of creating the new image. These concerns were surely the basis of poetry of intervention which tends to face the problem of continuity and, consequently, the one concerning the relation with history as primary valid demand besides the consonance or recovery of formal aspects. These museographic restorations and systematisations can be regarded as events that are part of the history of the contemporary architecture, while cultural and project stances of exceptional accuracy and expression. It is in this context that we perceive the recent historiography of the museums to closely follow-up the evolution of the intervention concepts in the heritage (Tostões [10]).

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