Pre-Existence and Project – Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library

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Abstract. The Portuguese architecture – from traditional architecture to nowadays – is universally famous for the attention that gives to its territorial implementation. The way the architecture is placed in a particular location, as well as the way the location is changed by the presence of the architecture – the way it is redefined – are questions inherent in any architecture, particularly the Portuguese architecture, which has responded with special care in general terms. This document aims to investigate the pre-existence in architecture, to see it as a starting point and an essential tool that allows the creation of unique projects. The purpose is to obtain a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the topic in question, in order to understand the processes that create buildings and cities through the ruins. Tavira is a Portuguese city in the district of Faro, region and subregion of Algarve, and one of Algarve’s cities that has a strong tradition regarding its built past. It is in this context of a strong urban identity that Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library is implemented. The architectural proposal is born in the old prison of Tavira, built in the 20th century and converted into a municipal library. Thus, we intend to study and investigate the potential of Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library and, based on its analysis, to substantiate the explanation of the project, its architectural strategies and solutions.

1. Introduction

The main aims of this article are: a) to choose an architectural work which is a case study characterised by a contrast between different times and periods; b) to understand and analyse the work chosen, considering the main areas of architecture and their relationship with pre-existence and project. The intention is to develop an analysis which can contribute to the understanding of a project that lives and is born from the permanence of the past and through the ruin.

The present work was developed in two phases: Research, through a document of a theoretical basis that includes an investigation oriented to the analysis and contact with the reality and the past; and written reflection, drawn to understand the project strategies and the way the architect established a relationship between the pre-existence and the project. This graphical part was always fed and stimulated by the theoretical reflection that supports a specific understanding of an object of study and its materialisation.
2. Drawing connections, building guidelines
Tavira is one of the cities in Algarve-Portugal with more tradition regarding its built past. It is in this context of a strong urban identity – in an irregular placement limited by Poeta Isidoro Pires street and Comunidade Lusíada street – that Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library is implemented (figure 1).

In this project, the architect Carrilho da Graça creates lines that connect the building to points and significant orientations in the territory where it is implemented. Those are lines drawn in the sketch of the project, topographic marks and visual strings that work as links with the territory. Tavira Municipal Library is physically connected to the territory and it is oriented towards certain landmarks, especially São Sebastião Hermitage. This is a small Baroque temple topped at its rear by a semi-spherical dome and an interior filled with paintings, carvings and images of the 18th century. Apart from complying with the demands of the program of needs, the role of the building is to establish ties with its surroundings, to set routes and to convey visual connections – to build a platform which does not hamper the view over the territory.

![Figure 1. Aerial view Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library, 2005, Tavira [1]](image)
The architectural proposal is born from the old prison of Tavira, it suggests the construction of a new building around the existing one, therefore, it builds a volume limited by the two streets and the parcel.

3. From an old prison to a new library

The building with Manueline characteristics, located in the centre of the city since the 16th century, was initially known as “City Council and Prison”. Later, and considering an old aspiration of the city of Tavira, it was converted into a Civil Prison. In 1913, Faro’s Civil Government requested the Ministry of Justice for the general approval of the project of a new prison in Tavira. The only remark about the project made by the Ministry was focused on concerns regarding hygiene, which were a constant source of worry at this moment in History.

We know that in the prison of Tavira, fully functioning in 1919 (figure 2), there was a “lack of cleanliness and hygiene” [2]. However, the information collected from the reports of the Directorate General for Prison Services, from the 1950s and 1960s, presents positive news about safety: “The prison is not new. However, it was built for a purpose and it still serves it perfectly” [3]. “Only the yard does not offer so much safety, because the wall is low and there are two cells in front of the square where there is contact with the public. However, this prison serves its purpose. It is clean and tidy [4].

The cultural heritage that would lead to the creation of a library in Tavira is linked to José Joaquim Jara, who was its main promoter. “The City Council received three contos (Portuguese currency) to build a school and buy its furniture (...). The same City Council received the books I had at home, to be used in that school, and three more contos so they could buy more manuals and scientific books and for other expenses needed to build a library in that same school, which would be used by the students and the public” [5].

Until now, the ways and places of access to reading were many in Tavira. In 2002, the City Council established an agreement with the General Directorate for Book, Archives and Libraries. Since then, it is part of the Portuguese Public Reading Network.

![Figure 2. Civil Prison of Tavira, built in 1916 and deactivated in 1972 [6]](image-url)
4. Building on the built

Making architectural work a constant reflection about the architecture itself has always been one of the most fertile ways to achieve works of valuable quality. Self-relationship was one of the characteristics and an important part of the art of the last third of the 20th century.

The connection with an explicit desire for classicism is not very effective to explain Carrilho Graça’s architectural work. On the contrary, his constant reflective attitude throughout his works is one of the most characteristic features of the way he makes architecture. It is no coincidence that the old Civil Prison of Tavira was converted into Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library, opened on 24th June 2015. This project designed by Carilho da Graça arises from the relationship of the already built. It is the relationship with the so-called architectural heritage, not in the bureaucratic or museographic sense the past usually offers, but in the sense that the production of new architectural works finds a privileged situation of continuity and stimulus.

On one hand, the solutions adopted to accommodate the new library in an orderly way are completely connected with the understanding of the building where an action is being taken. On the other hand, it is also true that other architectural works were also considered when giving a specific shape and, especially, meaning, to the system of resulting spaces.

The solution chosen keeps the pre-existence (figure 3), according to Carrilho da Graça: “It is essential to pay global attention to the spaces and buildings, their spirit and matter. To preserve and to refurbish to the limit, respecting what we really like” [1]. Given its medieval feature, a style used naturally in castles and fortresses, it seems that Revivalism was adopted. Nowadays, the old prison’s façade shows the past and memory of the building that existed before in a scenographic way, transformed into a library today.

![Figure 3. Axonometric of Civil Prison of Tavira](image-url)
5. The beauty and geometry

The project of converting the old Civil Prison into Tavira’s Municipal Library involves an architecture which does not intend to reflect necessarily the chaos of our social and urban environment. Carrilho acts as an intermediary, who creates spaces of serenity and rest, using his weapons: shape, geometry and matter. The architect does not avoid the complexity in the functional resolution of the programs, but he works with guidelines of brightness and economy of means until he reaches the most precise arrangement in the plan and the sequences of routes – stairs and ramps – around a central yard that was part of the built space of the old prison (figure 4).

The prominence of the shape is clear in this work, in the exploration of its tactile and visual plasticity. Using a limited range of simple and pure formal elements, the façade of the old prison is the key to Carrilho da Graça’s project. He explores tensions and transpositions in a mannerist game that looks for roots in the relationship with the territory, concentrating and integrating those relationships in a defined area within which he explores a hierarchy, puts geometry and shapes in confront or harmony, in a sensorial search for aesthetic emotion.

The discreet and controlled use of the materials, textures or even the colours, as well as the definition of the details, extend that game, concentrating or reducing the attention in a certain compositional sophistication.

![Figure 4. Plan of Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library, Carrilho da Graça, 2005, Tavira](image)

6. Thickness of the look

Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library is a landmark in the landscape. It is a place of convergence and absorption, where Baroque visual mechanisms are used. The project works as a “collage”, which preserves the façade and where blocks are added to the pre-existence (figure 5). Carrilho Graça uses visual devices that are based on the construction of a new building around the existing one, in which he tries to preserve “the poetical presence of the memory of the building in harmony” with its different spaces. Those visual and enlargement mechanisms of the project are subtle, from the reception area where a porch emphasises the entrance in the library.
The belvedere turns into an object that is contemplated, now in a residual duality of the relationship the palladian villas establish with the territory, with the dominant centre and structural nucleus of the territorial system simultaneously.

Order and hierarchy no longer materialise in axes, walls and streets, or simple lines of trees, but they are virtually suggested in the geometry of the building and long-distance framing. They define their own area through fragments of the landscape and in the city itself.

According to Carrilho Graça, when we build, we are carrying out an operation of foundation or creation of references, not only in material or physical terms, but also in the same way we write a poem or take a photo. This reflective attitude of a certain “expression” is the perspective that comes before the physical act of building; it implies the placement of the point of view, the “belvedere”.

![Axonometric: configuration of the volumetry of Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library, Carrilho da Graça, 2005, Tavira](image)

**Figure 5.** Axonometric: configuration of the volumetry of Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library, Carrilho da Graça, 2005, Tavira

7. Capturing the sky

In many projects designed by Carrilho da Graça, there are elements of water outside the buildings. This happens in Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library, where the elements of water play a specific role in the program of needs, but they also play an essential role regarding the landscape and, especially, the sky. They are used as devices that duplicate that landscape, mechanisms that capture that sky and integrate it into the architecture.

The project of the reconstruction of the ruins of San Pablo Church (figure 6), designed by Carrilho da Graça, between 1990 and 1995, in Macao, tries to capture the sky as well. As in the project of Tavira’s Library, the façade is also the pre-existence that is the driving force behind the project. In
both cases, through the expansion of the empty space behind the façade, the public space is created where there was a building before (figure 7). Both empty spaces seek the concept of centrality (in the library this is evident in the inner courtyard), they are embraced by the constructions of the program. In the case of the church, the empty space culminates in the definition of the perimeter of the church and chapels, where a structure that seems tenuous puts the focus on the floor, while a series of transparencies show the underlying excavations.

Both spaces develop behind a pre-existent façade; they are the promise of air, light, life and sky. Those are things that only the look can reinvent – the look that helps to find what new places can be.

Figures 6. Reconstruction of the ruins of San Pablo Church, Carrilho da Graça, 1995, Macao [7]

Figures 7. Sections: Álvaro de Campos Municipal Library, Carrilho da Graça, 2005, Tavira
8. Nature and Artifice

The naturalist frame Carrilho da Graça tries to create in Tavira’s Municipal Library fades in the eminently artificial transience of the architecture itself. The central courtyard tries to adopt characteristics of the natural exterior space, through the placement of elements of water and trees (figure 8). This step taken by Carrilho, present in the limits of many of the courtyards he creates, seeks what is essential, but also precision, surprise and radical sensitivity, albeit with the wit of the tranquillity of Alentejo.

There is always a place and a program for each project, but there is also the desire to communicate in a certain way. In the case of João Luís Carrilho da Graça, the personal way he solves Tavira’s Municipal Library is closely related to his intention to rebuild the strength and the natural and specific intensity that underlies the territory. He develops the project with the purpose of revealing and emphasising the space that once was a place of an enclosure, assuming a courtyard, with natural characteristics that emphasise the harmony that a library should have, as an open-air space. Revealing the inherent potential of the place was the real intention in the old civil prison.

Carrilho’s search for things that can create beauty from a basic point, rather than trying to find means that artificially disguise a reality of ephemeral perfection, is embodied in the preservation of the façade and the creation of a central courtyard. Carrilho was really interested in the possibility of using the minimum means to produce great transformations or intensify qualities that already exist.
9. Conclusions
The area that was needed for the organisation of the program of the library and the reference to the heights of the surrounding buildings determine the use of the whole land with a single floor and two floors near the main facade. From this mass, we take, in negative, the volume of the existing construction. The main facade and the stone of the pavement are preserved as references of the memory of the building and, simultaneously, elements that define the space of the courtyard. The contrast with the new white plans, neutral and made of lime, results in the exaltation of the remains preserved.

The relationship of intimacy between the two constructions is recovered. It culminates in an elevated plateau, the level of the stone pavement of the old prison, which opens the facade and the empty space of the courtyard. The result of this set of transformations is the antithesis of the current situation: the space that was empty before is replaced by the built mass where the space built before is revealed in negative.

The courtyard and the facade are preserved and exposed as archaeological remnants. They are the centre of the library, the axis of the spiral where different spaces are organised.

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