

# Reform Follows Function?

## Reflections on the Reuse of Modern Buildings

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### Abstract

Today, we face the risk of considering that everything could be patrimony. In a world where the most constant feature is the permanent acceleration in the velocity of change, we tend to increasingly value our built heritage, as a reconciliatory mark of identity. On the other hand, our obligation to preserve the legacy we have inherited from the past must not inhibit the responsibility of building patrimony for the future: we also have to assure that the future generations will inherit the memories of the present time.

So, architects, urban planners and policy-makers must decide what is more important to protect, and how to protect it, considering different factors related to the social, cultural and economic importance of the building or site in question: age, meaning, rarity, authorship, quality, integrity, etc.

Time is a central aspect in patrimonial value, but age can be a biased factor, in the choice of what to preserve and how to preserve it. If we only focus on the age of the buildings, we will disregard recent architecture that represents an important legacy to the future.

The maintenance of the original program is also an important factor to consider in the rehabilitation of buildings; however, when facing the need to reuse, it is vital that the new program may be suitable to the pre-existing building. In an intervention on the twentieth century patrimony, this question presents a delicate issue: if the original project was conceived under the notion that 'form follows function', how can it now be adapted to a new function without undermining its very reason for existence?

This paper intends to address the question of reuse by presenting and analysing some examples of recent interventions on twentieth century built heritage that addressed this question in different ways: the Municipal Market Hall in Guimarães (José Marques da Silva, 1926-50), the 'Cité Frugés' in Pessac (Le Corbusier, 1924-27) and the Tea House at Leça da Palmeira (Álvaro Siza Vieira, 1956-63).

### Introduction

This paper aims to present function as an essential factor in the preservation of twentieth century architecture, considering that if a building was conceived under the notion form follows function<sup>1</sup>, any inadequate reuse can undermine its very reason for existence. So, rehabilitation should consider primarily the maintenance of the original use, but when it is not possible and reuse is necessary, it is vital that the new program is suitable to the characteristics of the pre-existing building.

The analysis of the three examples presented in this paper is mainly concerned with the issue of function, in its many variables. It is only directed to questions of form and space in the particular aspects that are related to program, use and meaning.



**Fig. 1.** Marques da Silva, Municipal Market Hall, Guimarães, Portugal, 1926-50 (photo by the author, 2016).

### **The Municipal Market Hall in Guimarães (Portugal).**

In 1926, José Marques da Silva was invited by the Municipality of Guimarães to design a new Market Hall on a site where a seasonal market had been held since the nineteenth century. His first proposal, presented one year later, was still influenced by his studies at the Paris Beaux-Arts School<sup>2</sup>. In 1930 the construction begins but, just two years later, Marques da Silva presented a new proposal with important differences in the language of the elevations, showing a clear influence of his visit to the 'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs' at Paris in 1925<sup>3</sup>. Also, the immediate surroundings changed, when the construction was still underway.<sup>4</sup>

After the architect's death, in 1947, the project was completed in 1950 under the supervision of his daughter Maria José Marques da Silva and David Moreira da Silva (her husband). The ancient uncovered market square was surrounded by the new building on two sides, opening commercial stores in the elevations facing the pre-existing Paio Galvão street and the new Conde de Margaride Avenue.



**Fig. 2.** Marques da Silva, Municipal Market Hall, Guimarães, Portugal, 1926-50 (photo by the author, 2016).

After decades of use and weathering, the building presented an evident state of decay<sup>5</sup> in the beginning of the 21st century and would become outdated for its function. In 2007, a new municipal market hall was built in a nearby area. This political decision had provoked the protest of the market vendors, of their clients and of the city population in general<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, the old Market Hall was abandoned. Being an important

component of the image of both streets and because it marks an important shift in Marques da Silva work, the patrimonial value of this building should be treasured; but this importance (and the undeniable quality of its design) was not enough to justify a policy of protection<sup>7</sup>.

The only spaces that still remain in use are the commercial stores open to the outside. This operation was well intended and aimed to preserve the building while giving its internal space a nobler function: it would be a new urban square, animated by the location of a new museum, the Platform of Arts and Creativity (finished in 2012)<sup>8</sup>. However, this reprogramming and urban and architectural reform may be criticized in view of adaptivity. The old building has lost now its internal purpose and most of its meaning, while the new museum lacks the potential impact that it could have if it were located facing a public space directly. The old market square, which cannot be qualified as public space, it is now an undefined place, forgotten by the general population, where the memories of the old Market Hall compete with the new condition of being an antechamber for the new museum.



**Fig. 3.** Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, '*Quartiers Modernes Frugès*', Pessac, France, 1924-27. Image of two '*Quinconce*' houses: the one on the left was recently recovered according to the initial project; the one on the right still presents dwellers alterations (photo by the author, 2009).

### **The 'Cité Frugés' in Pessac (France).**

The design for the '*Quartiers Modernes Frugés*' was commissioned to Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret in 1924 by Henry Frugès, a Bordeaux industrialist. He presented an irresistible invitation: 'I am going to enable you to put your theories fully into practice (...) to reach really conclusive results as regards the reform of low-cost housing'; Pessac should be 'a laboratory': the client authorised the architect to break 'all conventions' and 'abandon all traditional methods'<sup>9</sup>. It was an ambitious enterprise: the initial plan aimed to build 135 houses and a commercial square, on a plot of 38,882 m<sup>2</sup> purchased by Frugès in the outskirts of Bordeaux.

For Le Corbusier, this was the first opportunity to apply his ideas, both on urban planning and on low cost housing. He designed his first '*cit  jardin horizontale*'<sup>10</sup>, with the aim to provide affordable houses for the working class while experimenting with his ideas on standardized construction. The houses, destined to the workers of Frugès industries, should provide 'domestic and social hygiene (...), air, light and water (...) trees and gardens (...) and hence become the catalyst for happiness and pleasure'. The layout of

the buildings was studied to achieve a collective quality in the site: 'External spaces are fused into one whole (...) minimising physical boundaries between the gardens'. The four types of dwellings ('Isolée', 'Quinconce', 'Arcade' and 'Gratte-Ciel') were conceived as different compositions of the same pre-fabricated elements, based on a five-meter grid<sup>11</sup>. The construction process implied the use of advanced technologies that presented several problems: the 'concrete spray gun was hard to use' and the pre-fabricated windows 'did not always fit the voids left in the structure'; besides, 'neither architects nor engineers had proper provision for drainage'<sup>12</sup>. Due to these difficulties (and other administrative complications), the construction lasted longer and costed much more than anticipated.

Pessac was officially inaugurated in 1926, but only 55 houses were completed, the rest was never built. Frugès went bankrupt in 1929 and emigrated to Algeria and so 'the plots of land were sold off slowly, one by one, without a coherent development plan'<sup>13</sup>. Besides, as soon as the first dwellers began to inhabit the houses, they began to transform the purist architecture 'in all sorts of individual ways', like 'walling up ribbon windows, filling out terraces, dividing up the open-plan rooms, and so on'<sup>14</sup>.

The decline of Pessac continued until 1974, when a new dweller, William Héraud, rehabilitated his Arcade house. This was listed as a historic monument with a protective zone around it of 500 meters<sup>15</sup>.

Since then, a slow process of restoration of the district began. With the participation of a local architect, Jean-Luc Veyret, a lot of effort was made in the restoration and maintenance of the houses and of the public spaces, with the intervention of the dwellers associations<sup>16</sup>.

Visiting Pessac today, we can see what appears to be a flawless operation: the houses and spaces are being restored according to Le Corbusiers project, trying to concretize his vision for the Cité Frugès. Nevertheless, and besides the practical problems that affect the dwellers of a modern masterpiece<sup>17</sup>, other questions can be raised about this interesting experience.

Le Corbusier's purist ideas caused a dramatic clash between the aesthetics produced by rationalist ideals and the taste of the dwellers, in housing programs designed in the first half of the twentieth century. This aspect should be carefully considered, as it relates to an important subject of the theory of architecture of the second half of the twentieth century: the question of cultural and anthropological relativism and the importance of the participation of future dwellers of the housing projects in design decisions<sup>18</sup>. In the sixties and seventies, authors like Aldo van Eyck, Lévi-Strauss, Bernard Rudofsky, Henry Lefebvre, Josep Coderch, John Turner, Christopher Alexander, John Habraken and Giancarlo De Carlo (among many others...) addressed this issue, with theoretical and/or practical work. Even Le Corbusier admitted, later in his life, of the Pessac experience: 'you know, it's life that's always right and the architect who's wrong'<sup>19</sup>.

So, Pessac can be considered a very important testimony of this clash between life and architecture<sup>20</sup>; it could be more meaningful to preserve the altered image of the some of the buildings, in contrast with the others, that were restored according to the original project.

### **The Tea House of Boa Nova at Leça da Palmeira (Portugal)**

The Tea House of Boa Nova (at Leça da Palmeira, near Porto) is an early yet iconic work of Álvaro Siza Vieira. Initially designed in the office of Fernando Távora, as an entry to a public competition (in 1956)<sup>21</sup>, Siza's proposal was constructed between 1960 and 1963 and was immediately recognized as a masterpiece<sup>22</sup>.

After decades of successful use and a minor rehabilitation in 1989-92 (following a project by Siza), the building was closed to the public in the beginning of our century. When it was classified as National Monument, in 2011, it presented several signs of decay due to the passing of time, aggravated by a few acts of vandalism and robbery.

In 2012, the Municipality commissioned Álvaro Siza to completely rehabilitate the building and its surroundings for a restaurant; the work began in May 2013 and the renewed Tea House opened to the public in July 2014<sup>23</sup>.

Confronted with the necessity of intervention in his own work (designed 50 years ago) Siza had hesitated to accept, facing the temptation of 'correcting' the initial design. However, he decided he would try to maintain the integrity of the pre-existing building, as if it were projected by another architect, arguing that 'in a rehabilitation there is a mandatory requirement, which is, in my opinion, the absolute integrity. You shouldn't change things'<sup>24</sup>.



**Fig. 4.** Álvaro Siza Vieira, Tea House, Leça da Palmeira, Portugal, 1956-63 (photo by the author, 2007).

At first sight, this seems an exemplary process: the rehabilitation of a monument, designed by the architect that initially projected it, with the concern of preserving the integrity of the original building while maintaining the original program.

But in this last aspect, it is doubtful that the rehabilitation can be considered a success: with the new concession, the restaurant became expensive and elitist<sup>25</sup>. Before, when the bar of the Tea House was open to the public, everyone could go there to drink a beer or a coffee and be dazzled by the building and the beautiful view to the sea. Now, it only functions as a restaurant, and its paying customers are the only ones that can have a meaningful experience of the space<sup>26</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

These three examples addressed the question of function in different ways, but had one thing in common: reform did not follow function.

In Guimarães and Leça da Palmeira, the economic viability of the operation (allowing the physical restoration of the pre-existing building) was perhaps the decisive argument in the municipal decision; but if the importance of preserving the original use was considered decisive to the operation, the outcome could have been different: to maintain the old Market Hall in function (restoring it) and to build the museum elsewhere, in Guimarães; to maintain the Tea House as a popular bar and restaurant, in Leça da Palmeira...

In Pessac, although the original program is maintained<sup>27</sup>, the image that is being restored never existed, not even in the early years<sup>28</sup>. So, this construction of a perfect purist Cité

Frugès can be related to the ideas of Viollet-le-Duc, who stated that restoring a building could be 'to re-establish it in a historic state that may never have existed'<sup>29</sup>.

If we consider that the Pessac experience also had a pedagogical role in the theory of architecture of the twentieth century, its function was, partly, modified.

## Biography

Born in 1966, Porto, Portugal.

Architect since 1992 (Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto).

Master in Planning of the Urban Environment since 1998 (Faculties of Architecture and Engineering, University of Porto).

PhD in Architectural Culture (School of Architecture at the University of Minho, 2011) with the thesis *The Choice of Oporto: contributions to update the idea of a School*.

Assistant Professor of the Master in Architecture of the University of Minho, Portugal.

Author of several architectural projects and published texts.

<sup>1</sup> The title of this paper, 'reform follows function', alludes to this famous 1896 statement of Louis Sullivan; see Louis Sullivan 'The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered', ed. José Manuel Rodrigues (et. al.), *Teoria e Crítica de Arquitectura - Século XX*, Lisboa, Caleidoscópico / O.A., 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Marques da Silva began his studies in Paris in 1889 and obtained his Degree of Architect from the Beaux-Arts School in 1896. For further information on the life and work of the architect and a detailed description of the history of this Market see António Cardoso, *O Arquitecto José Marques da Silva e a arquitectura no Norte do país na primeira metade do século XX*, Porto, FAUP, 1997, 505-510.

<sup>3</sup> António Cardoso, 'Marques da Silva, as primeiras e últimas obras', António Amaro das Neves; Inês Sarmento, *José Marques da Silva em Guimarães*, IAJMS / SMS, Guimarães, 2006, 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> The Conde de Margaride Avenue was built between 1931 and 1940 prolonging the existing Gil Vicente street; see José Ferrão Afonso, Bernardo Ferrão, 'A evolução da Forma Urbana de Guimarães e a criação do seu património edificado', *Guimarães Património Cultural da Humanidade*, Guimarães, Câmara Municipal de Guimarães/GTL, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> The 2009 photographs that can be seen on the site of SIPA (Information System on the Portuguese Architectural Heritage) clearly show the state of decay of the building; see 'Mercado Municipal de Guimarães / Plataforma das Artes e Criatividade', accessed on February 2, 2016, [http://www.monumentos.pt/Site/APP\\_PagesUser/SIPA.aspx?id=27393](http://www.monumentos.pt/Site/APP_PagesUser/SIPA.aspx?id=27393).

<sup>6</sup> 'Novo mercado tem condições mas não cativa clientela' (Jornal de Notícias), 2008-02-11, accessed on February 2, 2016, <http://www.jn.pt/Dossies/dossie.aspx?contentid=887185&dossier=Bolh%E3o%2C%20um%20mercado%20de%20futuro>.

<sup>7</sup> Although it is included in the Special Protection Zone of the Urban Core of Guimarães, the market itself was never classified as a building of public interest.

<sup>8</sup> The Platform of Arts and Creativity, is meant to be 'a multifunctional space dedicated to artistic, cultural, economic and social activity'; see 'Plataforma das Artes e Criatividade – Guimarães', accessed on February 2, 2016, <http://nortecultura.pt/plataforma-das-artes-e-criatividade/>.

<sup>9</sup> Marylène Ferrand et al., *Le Corbusier: Les Quartiers Modernes Frugès*, Paris, FLC, 1998, 120.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Frampton, *Le Corbusier*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2001, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Ferrand 1998, 72-73, 86.

<sup>12</sup> William Curtis, *Le Corbusier, Ideas and Forms*, London, Phaidon, 1986, 67-68.

<sup>13</sup> Those 55 houses were part of the sectors C and D; see the complete plan in: Ferrand 1998, 27, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the continual revolution in architecture*, Monacelli Press, New York, 2000, 144.

<sup>15</sup> Ferrand 1998, 113.

<sup>16</sup> 'L'Association des Amis de Le Corbusier et de la cité Frugès', the 'Commission des Habitants de la Cité Frugès' and 'Vivre aux Q.M.F.'

<sup>17</sup> 'Le Quartier actuel et futur', accessed in February, 1, 2016, <http://fruges.lecorbusier.free.fr/Quartier%20actuel.html>.

<sup>18</sup> The award of the 2016 Pritzker Prize to Alejandro Aravena confirms the importance and actuality of this theme.

<sup>19</sup> Jencks 2000, 144.

<sup>20</sup> On this subject, see Eduardo Fernandes, 'Life versus Architecture. Rationalist ideals facing popular taste, from Pessac to Malagueira', *International Conference 20th Century New Towns. Archetypes and Uncertainties*, Porto, ESAP/DARQ/CEAA, 22-24 May, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed description and critical analyses of this work see Luiz Trigueiros (Ed.), *Casa de Chá da Boa Nova*, Lisboa, Ed. BLAU, 1992.

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<sup>22</sup> See Nuno Portas, 'Casa de Chá da Boa Nova', *Arquitectura*, nº 88 (1965), 97-98.

<sup>23</sup> The new concession contract was made to Chef Rui Paula, who intends 'to embody one of the best restaurants in the country'; 'Salva da ruina Casa de Chá da Boa nova reabre como Restaurante', accessed in February, 1, 2016, <http://p3.publico.pt/cultura/arquitectura/12974/salva-da-ruina-casa-de-cha-da-boa-nova-reabre-como-restaurante>.

<sup>24</sup> Álvaro Siza, 'Conferencia para el CAH20thC', J.M. Hernández León e F. Espinosa de los Monteros (Eds.), *Criterios de Intervención en el Patrimonio Arquitectónico del Siglo XX*, Madrid, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> The Chef proposes 3 menus: the first one costs € 120 per person, plus € 75 to the wine selection; the second costs € 85 per person plus € 40 euros for the wine selection; the 'cheaper' menu costs € 80 (for two); see 'Boa Nova, conceito', accessed in February, 6, 2016, <http://ruipaula.com/web/boa-nova/menu/>.

<sup>26</sup> It is also possible to visit the building, like a monument (paying a € 6 ticket), to see (but not use) a space that evokes the memory of what was once a popular semi-public space, a Tea House open to everyone.

<sup>27</sup> Except for the 'Gratte-Ciel' house acquired by the municipality, at 4 rue Le Corbusier, which was restored and became a Pessac Museum. However, when we visit this (quite empty) Museum, we can't help to feel that it was never meant to be showed as an example of the work of its author (unlike other Corbusier houses, as Savoye and La Roche); it was designed to be a workers house, which should be economic and did not need a particular concern in the quality of the internal space. It would be more appropriate if we could visit the building understanding its adequacy to the original program, furnished like a house that is inhabited (even if it was not).

<sup>28</sup> On June 1931, Le Corbusier writes an alarming letter to Vrinat (an engineer from Frugès industries), expressing his indignation on the way Pessac 'has been allowed to go to the dogs in such a disgracefully and insane way'. Ferrand 1998, 112.

<sup>29</sup> Viollet-le-Duc was a French architect and theoretician who was much criticized by his imaginative rehabilitation of the Notre-Dame Cathedral, in Paris, and the French town of Carcassone (among others); see Françoise Choay, *Le Patrimoine en questions*, Paris, Éd. Du Seuil, 2009, 175.