

# Architect Migrants from the Former Soviet Republics to Western Europe: A Blind Spot of Eurocentric Historiography

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## Abstract

This paper questions the representation of the interrelationship between 'peripheral' national and Western European traditions in architectural historiography. It does so by examining the impact of architects who migrated from countries of the former Soviet republics on the architectural practices of Western Europe in the twentieth century. In their respective countries of origin, these architectural migrants have retained their position in national architectural culture, while in the general accounts of Western European architectural history they form a part of their host countries' history. In Western European historiography, their national and local architectural background is ignored.

One could state that there is a blind spot in European architectural historiography because the influence of migrant-architects has largely been misunderstood. This paper argues that this blind spot should be analysed in terms of cultural and post-colonial studies. Following Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, we suppose that the migrants' culture should be described in Western European architectural history as that of the 'other'. According to the concept of Alexander Etkind and Dirk Uffelman, the integration of architectural migrants in Western European historiography should be understood in terms of internal colonization.

To reveal the blind spot in architectural historiography, this paper analyses the reception as well as the biographies of three architectural migrants: Berthold Lubetkin (UK), originally from Ukraine; Nikolay Zagrekow (also Sagrekow, Germany) and Nikolaus Izselenov (France), both originally from Russia. Our research into the architects' biographies in 'peripheral' national and Western European historiographies, aims to clarify the disjointed nature of the interpretations in the respective discourses.

This paper explores the cultural mechanisms of denial of 'peripheral' influences on the canonical architecture of Western Europe. It allows architectural historians to evaluate the potential of a new historiography of architectural migration.

# Peripheral and Central Stances in Portuguese Architecture Culture

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## Abstract

In his acceptance speech for the 2011 Pritzker Prize, architect Eduardo Souto de Moura explained how, when he began practicing after the 1974 revolution, the affordable housing shortage in Portugal demanded his (belated) modernist approach: To 'build half-a-million homes with pediments and columns would be a waste of energies'; postmodernism, he added, made little sense where there had 'barely been any Modern Movement at all'. A 'clear, simple and pragmatic language' was needed, and only 'the forbidden Modern Movement could face the challenge'. Moura's words perfectly encapsulate the country's post-revolutionary architectural culture tropes, which dominated published discourse since: modernism, not postmodernism, deserved a place in 1980s Portugal *because it had been resisted by a conservative dictatorship*; this also explained why it was absent from international architecture surveys.

The exception were the works of two other Portuguese exponents, Fernando Távora and Álvaro Siza, co-opted by survey authors since the 1980s in their drive towards global comprehensiveness: Kenneth Frampton, William J. R. Curtis and most recently Jean-Louis Cohen all have celebrated these architects' site-sensitive, vernacular-infused modernism, occasionally straight-jacketed into critical regionalism constructs. Such recognition was promptly embraced by contemporary Portuguese architects and critics, eager to see their culture associated with a 'good brand' of regionalism, resistant and profound; most felt it was the 'bad', retrograde regionalism of the 1940s that, manipulated by the regime, countered modernism. Thus a two-pronged 'forbidden modern movement' / 'redeeming critical regionalism' tale flourished in Portugal.

By borrowing the conventions and constructs of international historiography in a politically sensitive and conscience-searching moment of national life, contemporary Portuguese architectural culture effectively narrowed its own relevance to a handful of names and works, thus flattening the country's diverse forms of modernism: from the tentative to the mature, local, cultural, technological and material specificities determined a richly textured production that requires scholarly re-examination.

## Keywords

Modern movement, critical regionalism, postmodernism, historiography, Nuno Portas, Bruno Zevi

**Neo-Modernism in Portugal (ca. 2011)**

Eduardo Souto de Moura, it could be said, is a rising star in the international architectural firmament, coming from a peripheral culture that only recently attained widespread recognition. It therefore seems natural that, in his 2011 Pritzker Architecture Prize acceptance speech, meant to be read in Washington before an international audience, the architect gave a sketchy, potted-history-sort-of' account of his background and circumstance. Yet for all their (intentional) lightness these words epitomise, in a nutshell, the narrative that Portuguese architects and architectural historians (most often, themselves architects) have been peddling, home and abroad, for the last four decades. Indeed, they offer the opportunity for an analysis not only of their mediate and immediate meaning, but also of the ways in which architectural cultures at large are determined, in the present, by acquired knowledge and preconceived ideas passed on over generations with their own, now obsolete outstanding issues.

At the occasion, this was the core of Souto de Moura's argument:

After the [1974] Revolution, once democracy was re-established, there was an opportunity to re-design a country that lacked schools, hospitals and other facilities, and most of all half-a-million homes. It would certainly not be the then-fashionable postmodernism to provide a solution. *To build half-a-million homes with pediments and columns would be a waste of energies, for the dictatorship had already tried to do so.*

Postmodernism arrived in Portugal [in the 1980s, yet we had] *barely had any modern movement at all.* That's the irony of our fate ... What we needed was a clear, simple and pragmatic language, to rebuild a country, a culture, and *none better than the forbidden modern movement* to face this challenge.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of a 'forbidden modern movement' in Portugal, as purported here, serves Souto de Moura's own personal agenda: it especially suits a need to justify the architect's own post-postmodernist (or neo-modernist) design stance. A proponent of minimalist architecture reinterpreting Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's pursuits in late-twentieth-century fashion,<sup>2</sup> he chose to pick up the modernist project where it had purportedly been cut short by a conservative dictatorship – the key point here being that modernism, not postmodernism, deserved a place in 1980s Portugal precisely *because it had been resisted, in the mid-century, by a conservative dictatorship.* To insist on the notion that modernism was crushed by dictatorship – 'forbidden' – becomes essential to argue for the need to go back to it and reinstate its formal tenets.

In effect, to say – and write – that there was no modern movement to speak of in Portugal is commonplace today among scholars, students and

practitioners of architecture in the country: general literature on the period<sup>3</sup> insists that when the movement was budding in other parts of Europe, Portugal lacked schools, media, dissemination and debate opportunities, and importantly, instances of architectural theory production. The established narrative maintains that the nationalistic, anti-collectivist political concerns of the Estado Novo regime,<sup>4</sup> which were especially ponderous between the late 1930s and late 1940s, efficiently resisted and repressed modern architecture. The dominant narrative also suggests that when its grip was finally released in the 1950s it was too late, the world having changed, modernism being subject to scrutiny and critique, no longer viable unless thoroughly reworked. The trauma of official repression is embedded in architectural culture in Portugal, and a chronicle of heroic 1950s modernism – the work of architects who managed to overcome official constraints and belatedly realised their modernist beliefs, against all odds – has been left largely unquestioned. Originally mediated by the designers themselves, in inflamed manifestos depicting the need for a 'battle of modern architecture'<sup>5</sup> to be fought against conservative architecture, the 'battle' narrative has since been acritically appropriated by later-day scholars<sup>6</sup> and entered the national mainstream discourse, constituting a useful crutch for conversations on twentieth-century architecture, both at café tables and university lecture halls.

How did this notion of a 'forbidden modern movement' become so engrained in the Portuguese national architectural consciousness?

**Ephemeral Modernism (since 1978)**

In order to understand this, we need to look at the way architectural history was written in Portugal in the late 1970s, particularly at the role of architect and critic Nuno Portas (b. 1934) in the process. Portas was an important figure in Portuguese post-revolution architecture: among other reasons, for his initiative, in a brief tenure as secretary of state (1975), to create a public support mechanism for community-participated housing schemes, the now-celebrated SAAL program.<sup>7</sup> With close intellectual ties with the Italian scene, and a keen, self-professed interest in Italian post-war 'realism', in 1967 he initiated the Portuguese-language edition of Bruno Zevi's *Storia dell'architettura moderna*, writing the preface to volume one; in 1978, Portas wrote an additional chapter to volume two of Zevi's survey, devoted to Portuguese architecture, when this second volume was finally published.<sup>8</sup> Portas's own chapter, titled 'The Evolution of Modern Architecture in Portugal: An Interpretation', became one of the most influential texts in the country's architectural education and culture. To this day, this 40-year-old essay is recommended in reading lists for architecture-degree courses there.

It was also possibly the first-ever published 'interpretive' survey of modern architecture in Portugal,<sup>9</sup> with Portas taking pains to present his work as that not of an historian, but of an architectural critic – down to the word 'interpretation' in his title. He composed his chapter with telling

subtitles: 'I. The Obscure Decades' (mid-nineteenth century to mid-1920s); 'II. The Ephemeral Modernism' (the interwar period); 'III. The Resistance' (ca. 1943–61); and 'IV. The Relative Openness / Release and Unavoidable Cleavages' (from 1961 on). The narrative thread is as clear as the author's consummate Marxist discourse on the power structure in Portugal and how this dictated the fortune of modern architecture. As many since then, Portas was concerned with trying to find the reasons for – indeed, to come to terms with – the failure of early modernists and the late 1930s nationalistic-conservative backlash. Reflecting on possible reasons for 1930s ('ephemeral') modernism's weakness in Portugal, he found this was due to the lack of conviction as much as to poor training and the weight of established convention: 'the first heroes of our story later confessed to having had too many misgivings on whether to choose modern or traditional' architectural stances.<sup>10</sup> This was a key aspect to Portas's interpretation of Portuguese modernism's short life: it was crushed not only by a change of heart in the regime itself – which turned towards nationalist conservatism after having welcomed modern architecture in many early public works – but also by the volatility of its protagonists, who adhered, with self-serving promptness, to nationalist ideology in those unstable pre-war years.

Portas was a very history-prone critic. To a keen interest in Portugal's 'ephemeral' early modernism, its 'cultural roots' and misfortunes,<sup>11</sup> Portas contrasted in the 1978 chapter his long-held critical stance on the 'narrowly Franco-Germanic and Brazilian "functionalist" understanding' of the modern movement in the post-war years, seen as an 'explicit or implicitly etiolated route' – and his preference for practices stemming from the Nordic countries, 'polemical Italy' and the seismic effect of Team X's proposals on CIAM in the late 1950s.<sup>12</sup> He recalled how as an editorial board member of the journal *Arquitectura* (1957–71) he participated in a collective effort to maintain 'reflection on history and criticism as forms of intervention in the course taken by architectural events – and other kinds of events.'<sup>13</sup> Through his work as an architecture critic, Portas claimed his own role as a resistant in the tough final decades of the dictatorship, as a (very *Zevian*) believer in the social remit of architecture and its history and culture.

Portas concluded the final, 'relative openness' section of his 1978 chapter with a clue to why the figure of Álvaro Siza (b. 1933) was already being appropriated by international architecture culture:

With his personal route, [Siza] is the first Portuguese auteur, in a few centuries, to [see his work echoing] beyond national borders out of his own merit, as international critics over recent years have recognised the singularity of solutions and design intelligence in his itinerary, which aim straight at the linguistic crisis of contemporary architecture, currently an orphan of its great masters.<sup>14</sup>

It is at this point that we can start to see the national and international narratives on Portuguese architecture converge. At around the same time as Zevi's Portuguese-language edition was published, a new tag was about to gain currency in international scholarship that would fit particularly well with the direction Portas's interpretation of the fortune of modernism in Portugal pointed to: enter critical regionalism, through which Portuguese architecture eventually let itself be narrowed into a section of the global canon.

### Critical Regionalism, Portugal's Saving Grace

It has been repeatedly noted that critical regionalism should be positioned in its context – intellectual, historical and geographical – to be properly understood: a supranational construct, developed by a metropolitan scholar working in Anglo-Saxon academia and built upon examples from lesser-known contexts and works by hitherto little-known designers. In the context of the early 1980s its purpose, as Keith Eggener put it, was that of a double critique of both 'the placeless homogeneity of much mainstream Modernism and the superficial historicism of so much postmodern work'.<sup>15</sup> In other words: critical regionalism was as much a retrospective account of by-then 30-year-old critical stances – of post-war architects reacting against the widespread hegemony of mature international style formulas while seeking to maintain and extend the validity of modern architecture – as it was a reaction to its own time, signalling a widely-felt need for an alternative to postmodernism; an alternative that showed that the modern movement was not buried under its own orthodoxy, it had found ways to persist in locally-sensible practices, in the past, and could continue doing so.

As long as modernism still had ways of developing, there was no need for postmodernism – which is why it became so important for Souto de Moura and other neo-modernists to claim that modernism was an open route, not a dead end. To stress the pertinence of such a route, it was equally important to insist on the narrative of Portuguese modern architecture as a flawed, interrupted process, requiring a continuation. Critical regionalism proposed a synthesis of extended modernism and local awareness, the possibility of reconciling the global and the local in sophisticated ways that eschewed those more literal replications of regional building features that post-war modernists derided – it was this 'reworked modernism', now codified and brought into the international arena, that fitted well with the narrative of the 'forbidden modern movement' in Portugal.

If 'true' modernism had been an impossible project in the 1920s–30s (for all the reasons above), then its 'critical regionalist' second life in the post-war decades had been the saving grace of Portuguese architecture. Souto de Moura positions himself in this lineage; in 1978, Portas – and most authors since – trace the same lineage back to the works of Fernando Távora (1923–2005) and Siza.

In his seminal 'interpretive' survey, Portas described Távora as

the first in his generation to try to theorise ... and exemplarily practice a critique of the superficial translation of [the CIAM] models, while investigating new ways of expressing – *not mimicking* – traditional materials, references to the site and other veins of the 'modern tradition' ... i.e. trying the route that pioneers of the previous generation, 15 years earlier, had not known how to explore – starting therefore, without fear or prejudice, by studying the context and the Portuguese architectures.<sup>16</sup>

This is a very similar line of reasoning to the one employed by Kenneth Frampton in his construct; in 1978, I suggest, Portas presented Távora as a 'critical regionalist' *avant la lettre*.

'Critical' was the key qualifier in a category built on binary oppositions: between a 'critically resistant architecture' and 'free-standing aesthetic objects';<sup>17</sup> between literal and non-literal (or de-familiarised) interpretations of regional traditional features;<sup>18</sup> regionalism was good only if resistant (critical), yet reproachable if simply replicating features identified with local tradition – and even dangerous as an instrument of nationalism.<sup>19</sup> This moralistic stance of critical regionalism was vital both in Portas's (untagged) characterisation of Távora's work and in that of international survey authors who began including Távora's and Siza's architectures in their texts, in analogous terms.

Siza's early work was associated with critical regionalism already in the second edition (1985) of Frampton's *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*: the Portuguese architect 'grounded his buildings in the configuration of a specific topography and in the fine-grained texture of the local fabric' but – and importantly for the morals underpinning Frampton's concept – his 'deference towards local material, craft work, and the subtleties of local light ... is sustained *without falling into the sentimentality* of excluding rational form and modern technique.'<sup>20</sup>

William J. R. Curtis, in turn, introduced Távora's and Siza's works in the third edition (1996) of his influential *Modern Architecture Since 1900* – in a newly added Chapter 26, 'Disjunctions and Continuities in the Europe of the 1950s'. These works would have configured an attempt 'to cut through the prevailing eclecticism and provincialism of Portuguese architecture, and to return to local roots ... [Távora] sought an architecture that was modern but sensitive to a unique cultural landscape, and one of the keys for him was the Portuguese vernacular which he interpreted for its general principles and types'. Curtis adds that Siza, sensitive to the 'lineaments of topography and to the spatial transition between buildings ... had *no intention of mimicking peasant architecture*, but did wish to draw on its social pattern

and sensitivity to both landscape and light.'<sup>21</sup> While passing the same moral judgment that permeates almost all scholarly views on regionalist architecture, in that 'the best of these buildings seemed able to draw upon indigenous wisdom, but without simply imitating vernacular forms: to *penetrate beyond the obvious features of regional style to some deeper mythical structures* rooted in past adjustments to landscape and climate' – Curtis did question the generalising inclusions that weakened the 'critical regionalism' construct as it recurred to 'a selection of creditable modern architects whose work embodied a vital synthesis of the local and the general – figures like ... Siza or Ando in the then recent world of architecture. Theoretical post- (and pre-) rationalisations are one thing; works giving shape to ideas, insights, and intuitions, another.'<sup>22</sup>

Such weaknesses were no deterrent to the mutual appropriation process that this paper tried to describe: the appropriation of Távora's and Siza's work by critical regionalism – a conduit for such works to enter the international canon; and the appropriation of this new category by Portuguese architectural culture, whose purpose of celebrating the lineage of at least one (small, specific) part of the country's output in the twentieth century, critical regionalism served well.

Yet, by presenting this as a revisionist, critical, resistant sequel to an unachieved, flawed modern movement in Portugal – by projecting critical regionalism's generalising tenets onto the specific lines of Portuguese post-war cultural and social history – global and national historiography threw a shadow, heavy and hard to dispel, on what was produced before, alongside and after these sophisticated, attention-grabbing works.

My own work on the negotiations between modernism and regionalism in peripheral contexts in Portugal has been driven by a need to, as Sir John Summerson put it, 'look over the shoulders and under the feet of the conventionally accepted heroes and try to see what went on around them and on what they stood; and ... whether that hinterland may not contain some very adequate heroes of its own'.<sup>23</sup> In my study of peripheral Algarve, a much more nuanced, diverse picture of post-war design and building practices outside Lisbon and Porto has emerged, side-stepping the 'critical' narrative.<sup>24</sup> But the whitewashing, sterilising consequences of this reinstatement of modernism – in 'critical regionalist' garb – on Portuguese architectural culture are proving more difficult to redress when it comes to postmodernist practices there: in her recent obituary of architect Raúl Hestnes Ferreira (1931–2018), architectural historian Ana Vaz Milheiro has noted how, by daring to 'open up a glimpse of postmodernity in an "entrenched" modernist culture' in the mid-1960s, Hestnes came to pay a high price: 'Highly valorised by late-twentieth-century historiography, post-war [critical regionalist] modernism eventually smothered everything else that came since, in an anathema that we now see being gradually lifted.'<sup>25</sup>

The proposition of a theory of critical regionalism in the context of the rise of postmodernism internationally coincided in Portugal, in the late 1970s, with the aftermath of the ‘Portuguese Spring’ revolution of 1974, which made urgent the repositioning of Portuguese architects and their (‘dangerous’, complex, messy) relationship with the deposed dictatorship; one effective way to do so was to hail the ‘critical’ potential of regionalist-sensible modernists – ‘critical’ both architecturally and politically.

It seems remarkable that critical regionalism as a global category, ploughs on years after the ‘menace’ that prompted it – postmodernism – waned. In Portugal, this longevity – in people’s minds even if not words – is explained by the popularity of figures like Souto de Moura: without necessarily mentioning critical regionalism, their discourse positions Távora’s and Siza’s role in a clearly-defined action/reaction plot: failed early modernism / conservative reaction forbidding modernism / belated, ‘doomed’ post-war modernism / redemptive critical regionalist (reworked) modernism. In this plot, such figures see themselves as the protagonists of the most recent episode: ‘useless’ postmodernism / purposeful, pertinent (post-post) modernism.

Liberated from these (understandable, if contextualised) constraints, the thinking and writing of twentieth-century architecture in Portugal may attempt to be more inclusive, catholic, knowledgeable, and profound than these exceedingly black-and-white abstract views allow for.

### Notes

- 1 Eduardo Souto de Moura, acceptance speech for the Pritzker Architecture Prize 2011, Washington D.C., 2 June 2011, <http://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/2011>. My transcript, translation and emphasis.
- 2 One of the earliest English-language monograph references for Souto de Moura’s 1990s work is Werner Blaser’s small bilingual book *Eduardo Souto de Moura: Stein, Element, Stone* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2003). Other references include Antonio Esposito and Giovanni Leoni’s three editions of *Eduardo Souto de Moura* (Milan: Electa, 2003, 2012; London: Phaidon, 2013) and André Tavares and Pedro Bandeira’s *Floating Images: Eduardo Souto de Moura’s Wall Atlas* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2012).
- 3 For one instance of this narrative stance, see Annette Becker, Ana Tostões and Wilfried Wang (eds.), *Arquitectura do Século XX: Portugal* (Munich: Prestel, Deutsches Architektur-Museum, Portugal-Frankfurt 97, C. C. Belém, [1998]).
- 4 The so-called Estado Novo (‘New State’) dictatorship regime governed Portugal between 1933 and 1974, largely under the leadership of António de Oliveira Salazar (until 1968). For English-language discussions of the social, political and cultural developments of the period, see Ellen W. Sapega’s *Consensus and Debate in Salazar’s Portugal: Visual and Literary Negotiations of the National Text, 1933–1948* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2008) and Filipe de Meneses’s *Salazar: A Political Biography* (New York: Enigma, 2010).
- 5 Such was the term used by Portuguese modernists in the 1950s to describe their fight against conservative stances in architecture.
- 6 I have discussed this process of appropriation in Ricardo Agarez, ‘Metropolitan Narratives on Peripheral

- Contexts: Buildings and Constructs in Algarve (South Portugal), c. 1950,’ in Ruth Morrow and Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem (eds.), *Peripheries: Edge Conditions in Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 209–24.
- 7 SAAL is the acronym for Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local. Portas’s work as architect and critic was recently the subject of an exhibition and attendant (bilingual) monograph, *O Ser Urbano: Nos Caminhos de Nuno Portas* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda, 2012).
- 8 Volume 1 of the Portuguese edition, based on Zevi’s fourth, 1961 edition, was published in 1970; volume 2 publication record is dated 1977, although Portas’s additional chapter on Portugal is dated 1978 in the text itself.
- 9 Portas himself explained, in a coda added to his chapter, that the first-ever survey of Portuguese modern architecture was the one included in José-Augusto França’s *A Arte em Portugal no Século XX* [Art in Portugal in the twentieth century], first published in 1974 – that is, between the publication of the first (1970) and second (1977) volumes of the Portuguese edition of Zevi’s *Storia*.
- 10 Bruno Zevi and Nuno Portas, *História da Arquitetura Moderna*. 2 vols. (Lisbon: Arcádia, 1970–7). Vol. 2 (1977), 723. My translation.
- 11 For example: in a pioneering, 1961 article decrying the imminent destruction of a significant 1930s café in Lisbon, he wrote of the absence of studies on the period and its tragic consequences. Nuno Portas, ‘Antes Que, Mesmo o Pouco que Temos ...’ [Before we lose even what little we have], *Arquitetura* 70 (1961), 49. My translation.
- 12 Zevi and Portas, *História da Arquitetura Moderna*, Vol. 2, 740–1. My translation.
- 13 Zevi and Portas, 746. My translation.
- 14 Zevi and Portas, 744. My translation.
- 15 Keith L. Eggner, ‘Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism,’ *Journal of Architectural Education* 4 (2002), 228.
- 16 Zevi and Portas, *História da Arquitetura Moderna*, Vol. 2, 732. My translation and italics.
- 17 Kenneth Frampton, ‘Critical Regionalism Revisited,’ in Maiken Umbach and Bernd-Rüdiger Hüppauf (eds.), *Vernacular Modernism* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 194.
- 18 Liane Lefaivre, ‘A Forgotten Episode in the Suppression of Regionalism’ (invited talk in the symposium *Globalisation or Regionalism?* The Bartlett School of Architecture, London, 2012).
- 19 Cf. Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, *Critical Regionalism* (Munich: Prestel, 2003).
- 20 Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007 [1980]), 317. My italics.
- 21 William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (London: Phaidon, 1996 [1982]), 482–4. My italics.
- 22 Curtis, 636–7. My italics.
- 23 John Summerson, *The London Building World of the Eighteen-Sixties* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973), 24.
- 24 See e.g. Ricardo Agarez, *Algarve Building: Modernism, Regionalism and Architecture in the South of Portugal, 1925–1965* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).
- 25 Ana Vaz Milheiro, ‘Hestnes Ferreira, a Morte do Arquitecto ‘Americano’ [Hestnes Ferreira: The demise of the ‘American’ architect], *Público*, 13 February 2018, 28–9.