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**Chronicle of a death foretold: o r when a National Monument fails its status**

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# JOELHO

# # 06

## A QUESTÃO DO PATRIMÓNIO / THE BUILT HERITAGE DEBATE

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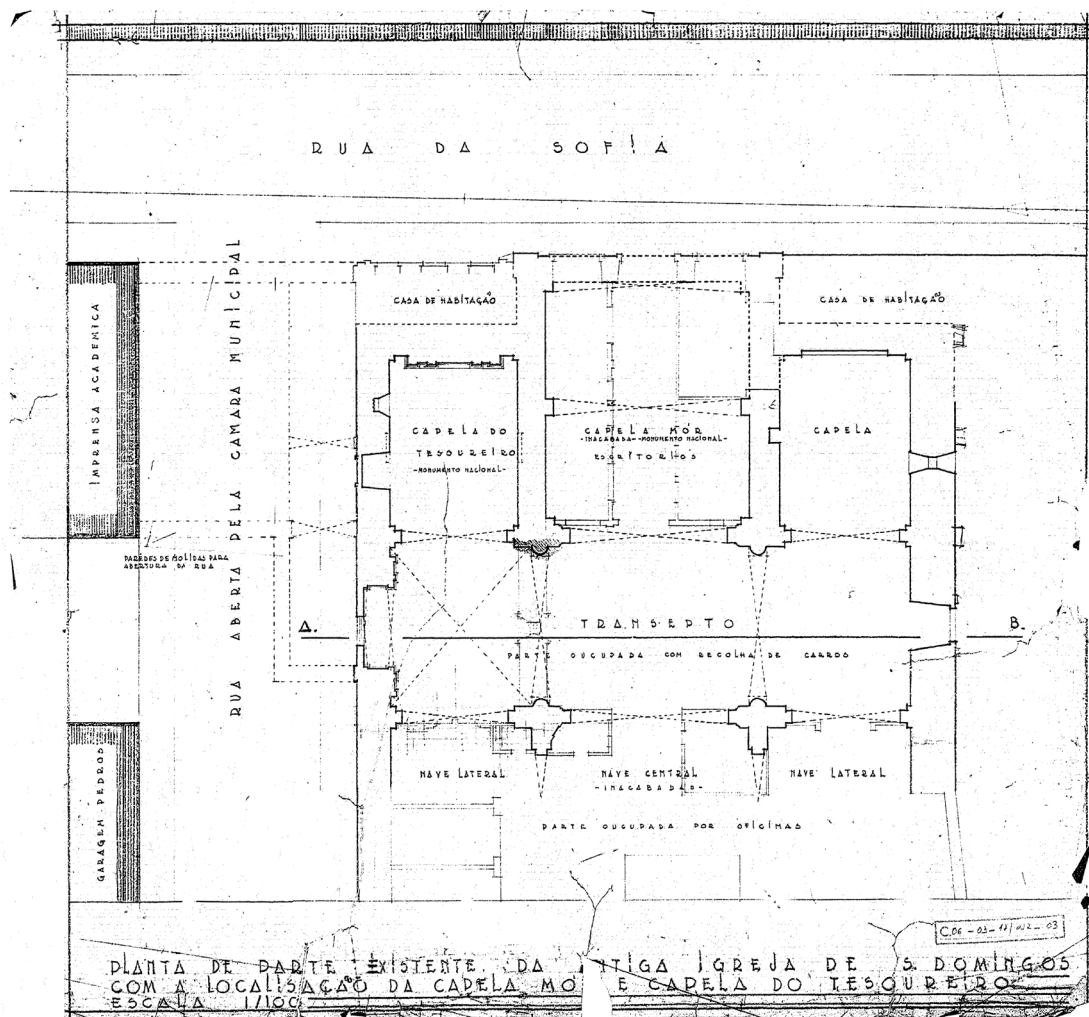
*Exposição*

República: Arquitetura,

Universidade e Cidade

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**Chronicle of a death foretold.**  
**Or when a National Monument**  
**fails its status.**



The main goal of every heritage application is to achieve a nomination status to safeguard a property and guarantee its protection so that future generations may inherit some important values that contributed to creating a collective identity.

However, that legacy depends on how and what should be protected, which implies a previous selection, which means a policy. To achieve this, any approach to classify a property should be based on a collective reflection about its significance. So, a patrimonial nomination is a juridical and legal status that attributes a value to a place as “heritage”. Nevertheless, that title may not be sufficient to guarantee the property’s most appropriate recognition, understanding or even appreciation of those who manage it, who use it.

The aim of this article is to study the quality of the declassification decision approved concerning the *Church of São Domingos (Capela-Mor)*, in Coimbra. It had been a National Monument since 1910, with a part included within the limits of the property nominated World Heritage by UNESCO, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, 2013.

To achieve that purpose, this work intends to analyse the *chronicles* of the technical and the historical process by examining them in relation to some pertinent texts that have contributed to the evolution of the concepts and the practices in the field of heritage.

It is not this paper’s intention to judge the decisions that were taken and justified technically and then accepted by those with the highest political responsibility. But it is this work’s intention to study this process so that heritage players may be better prepared to confront and deal with similar situations in the future. Heritage is a profitable resource that should be promoted and it is the community, in this case, the global one, that could lose the attributed value status by a long-predicted death.

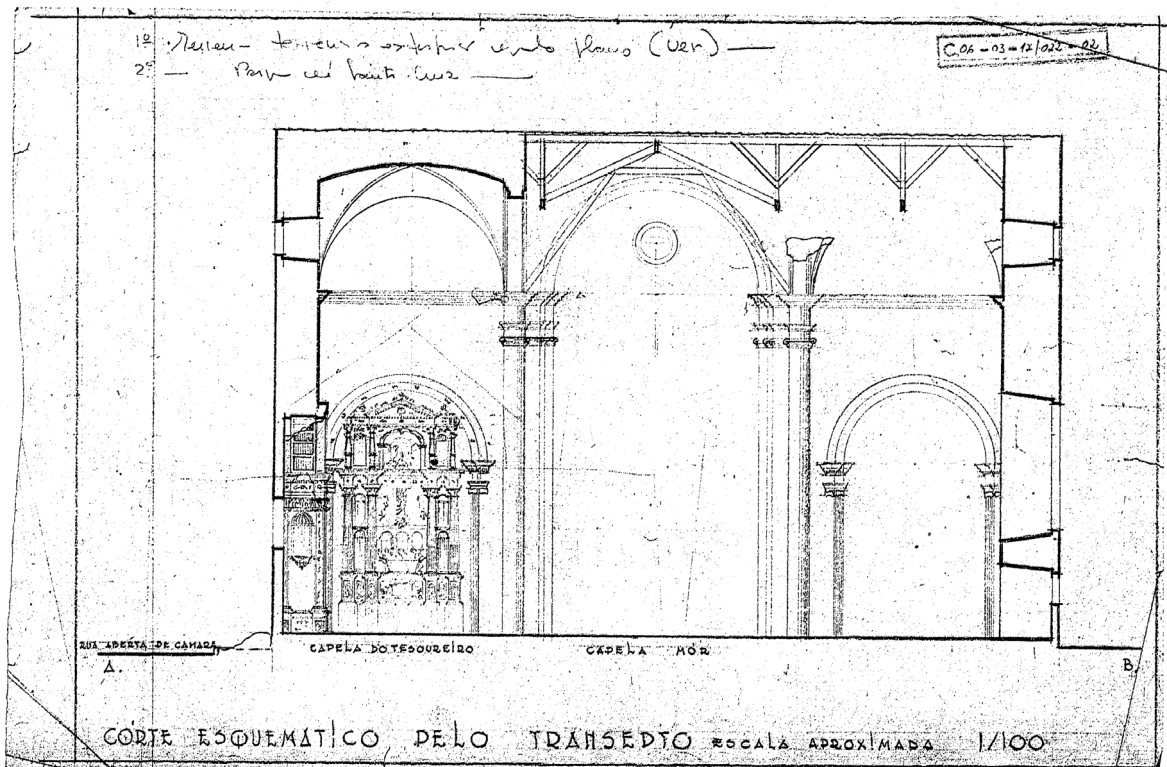
In this sense, it is our understanding that the most responsible stakeholders, such as the community itself, should be more vigilant for the future, because its common responsibility to pass on a value that was important for the creation of their cultural identity in the past, that it is still important and should, presumably, be important tomorrow.

For centuries, powerful people have demonstrated their supremacy through their wealth and magnanimous donations of impressive buildings or works of art to the community (Ortigão, 2006, p. 9). This was the case of the Church of *São Domingos (CSD)*, in *Rua da Sofia*<sup>1</sup>, in Coimbra, that began with the royal sponsorship and monetary resources of a patron of the arts. However, when this sponsorship ran out, the church was still incomplete.

Since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the first period of the construction of the church stopped in the transept<sup>2</sup>, no efforts that are known of were made to finish it. With the decree of 30.05.1834, the College of *São Domingos* was nationalized and then sold to private owners, which marked the start of a period of abandonment, continuous

1. Plan of the Church of *São Domingos* with the demolition of the buildings on the north side to construct the new street. Image: IHRU – SIPA, IPA.00002794.





2. Section AB. Image: IHRU-SIPA, IPA.00002794.

lack of qualification and acts of maintenance and conservation. This continued until the decree of 16.06.1910, published on 23.06.1910 that included it on the National Monument (NM) List. Isidoro de Almeida's unfinished project did not benefit from the legal instruments and mechanisms necessary to protect it until this decree, and so it became dependent on its luck and its functional role (which was, most of the time, the main guarantee for the maintenance of the building). However, the text of the decree was ambiguous due to the fact that the object defined as NM, was the sanctuary (*capela-mor*). This left the part considered most precious, the chapel of *João de Ruão*, without protection because there was no protection zone in force around the classified object at that time. This pertinent issue was solved on 20.06.1923, with the Decree 8938 that classified the *Tesoureiro* Chapel as a national monument.

In 1924, Urbano proposed a plan for the lower part of the city, the *Baixinha* of Coimbra<sup>3</sup>, promoted by the local authorities and which recommended revising the layout of the streets in this part of the city, particularly by making the CSD the right corner of a new street perpendicular to *Rua da Sofia*. The demolition of the buildings adjacent to the CSD, which served as supports for the wall, mainly on the north side (Fig. 1), became a determinant factor for the fast obsolescence of the building (Gonçalves, 1984b, p. 309). This meant that the new street, named *João de Ruão*<sup>4</sup>, despite the good intention of providing a new

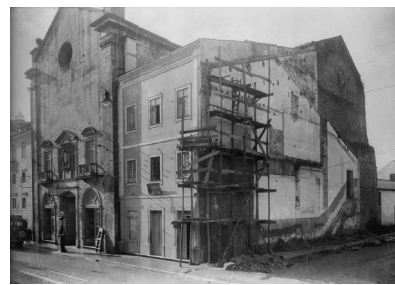
urban context for the CSD<sup>5</sup>, was simultaneously the main reason for its eventual state of ruin. This was why the *Tesoureiro Chapel* was relocated since its fortunes could not have been worse as it was being used as a bus garage (Correia & Gonçalves, 1947, p. 88) (Fig. 2). In fact, the present façade on *Rua João de Ruão*, which should correspond to the transept of the CSD, was constructed after the opening of this artery. With the construction of the street and also the demolition of its adjacent buildings, the previously hidden façade, which was now exposed, comprised of only a doorway corresponding to the first floor of the demolished building and an upper oculus which still exists today (Fig. 3).

After many events since 1940<sup>6</sup> and due to the need to safeguard and conserve the CSD, which was very likely to collapse<sup>7</sup> and the pressure from the media<sup>8</sup>, the local section of the DGEMN *Direcção Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais* (The Authority for National Monuments and Buildings) also considered the possibility of changing its use as a bus parking garage and the relocation of the *Tesoureiro Chapel*<sup>9</sup>.

Given the difficulties of a successful conservation process for the building, the solution proposed was to sell it to some entity with the financial resources necessary to maintain it. In this way, the new owner would be responsible for preserving the *Tesoureiro Chapel*, which was not in the best of states due to the loss of value as a consequence of poor maintenance<sup>10</sup>. Some institutions assumed their interest in taking care of the chapel<sup>11</sup> and after 1961, there was a proposal to dismantle the chapel and store it in the museum, *Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro* (MNMN)<sup>12</sup>. It would then be reconstructed later either on the property of the MNMC, or in Park of *Santa Cruz*. Its integration in a religious building planned under the jurisdiction of the diocese<sup>13</sup> was also considered.

This last hypothesis was considered strategic because, if the chapel was integrated in the new religious centre of *Montes Claros* it could maintain its baptismal function but would remain conditioned by approval of the DGEMN<sup>14</sup> to any future alterations and any costs would have to be supported by the owner<sup>15</sup>. However, it was concluded that the diocese was unable to reach this main objective, despite architect Amoroso Lopes' ante project<sup>16</sup> and several efforts to achieve this goal. In the meantime, the chapel was, in fact, dismantled and placed at the *Montes Claros* centre. On 06.02.1965 a study was commissioned to determine its implantation in the museum MNMC<sup>17</sup>, which started on 18.05.1966<sup>18</sup>. The relocation of the chapel was problematic for reasons that have been discussed previously, namely the declassification of the CSD. This position was officially assumed by the local branch of the DGEMN, on 10.04.1967<sup>19</sup>. On 25.08.1967, the loss of the *Tesoureiro Chapel* protection zone was confirmed due to its relocation in the MNMC facilities<sup>20</sup>.

With Decree n. 516/1971, *Rua da Sofia* was classified as being of Public Interest; simultaneously, and, in the same legal document, the



3. The construction of the new street, *Rua João de Ruão* (north side) and *Rua da Sofia* (east side). Photo: IHRU – SIPA, IPA.00002794.

*Tesoureiro* Chapel was removed from the NM List. On the one hand, it is quite clear that, taking into consideration its new location in the MNMC facilities and its new role as part of the contents of a museum, its protection classification was no longer needed. On the other hand, the transfer of the *Tesoureiro* Chapel from the CSD has opened several wounds within the community, which will be difficult to heal, thus creating an even more difficult process to safeguard its patrimonial value. This lengthy process resulted in a situation in which the private owners, who then owned the chapel and must finance it, had the opportunity to alter the function and the use of the CSD building<sup>21</sup>.

It is not strange then that, on 11.05.1978<sup>22</sup>, a request for authorization to build on the CSD<sup>23</sup> plot was presented to the local authorities. This process suffered various alterations over 11 years<sup>24</sup>, with areas being projected for a shopping centre, a car park and offices in order to maximize the land use to achieve the best economic income.

On 30.08.1978<sup>25</sup>, documents were provided to illustrate and clarify the project, such as photographs and a description of the materials and colours to be used in the façade<sup>26</sup>. The document states that there would be an effort to reproduce the coat of arms of the Dukes of Aveiro as well as the *Santiago* Cross<sup>27</sup>, to be integrated in the present principal façade, in *Rua da Sofia*, even though it was not the original one. This was considered essential to a holistic understanding of the CSD<sup>28</sup>. Compliance with technical advice was also confirmed providing the proposed implementation of anodized aluminium frames, better for conservation than wood<sup>29</sup>, were rejected.

The local authorities left the responsibility for the decision to the *Direcção Geral do Património Cultural*<sup>30</sup> (DGPC) which assumed, in a technical report of 11.01.1979<sup>31</sup>, that while the principle for the building reconstruction could be considered valid, with a diversity of architectural grammar and assuming the contemporary date of the intervention, as defined in the 11th article of the Venice Charter of 1964 (Lopes & Correia, 2004), the best conditions to safeguard and valorise the former construction were not guaranteed, as they should be. Taking into consideration Brandi's conception of the unity of a work (Brandi, 2006, p. 16) and its missing parts (Brandi, 2006, p. 19), which disrupt the understanding of the unity of the work, the DGPC did not support the project and study presented. At the time, it was considered a formal hybrid that did not contribute to the desired unity of the building by taking into account the new parts of the proposed construction and their integration within the existing parts of the CSD. Nor was it integrated within its urban context and even its façade facing on to *Rua João de Ruão*, would need to be redesigned<sup>32</sup>.

However, following a decision by the local authorities, on 27.03.1981, the process was granted by order<sup>33</sup> without any other information, indicating a deviant procedure, since an official statement from the DGEMN<sup>34</sup> was expected concerning some of the doubts on the part of the local council members. Nevertheless, its initial license was deferred

under number 728<sup>35</sup>. From that date on and until 1989, information concerning the requirements relating to technical inspections by entities was exchanged, the last one on 07.04.1989<sup>36</sup>, which indicated that the work had been constructed according to the approved project<sup>37</sup> (Fig. 4). In the course of the classification process of the University of Coimbra – Alta and Sofia (UC-AS) as World Heritage of UNESCO, which was achieved on 22.06.2013<sup>38</sup>, where the CSD was part of its protection zone, the Regional Entity for Culture, the *Direção Regional de Cultura do Centro*<sup>39</sup> (DRCC), initiated on 27.11.2013 the disqualification process<sup>40</sup> that took into account all the work that had been done and which de-characterised the CSD. Further, the surroundings of the church were considered sufficiently safeguarded due to the classification of the *Rua da Sofia*, which is included in the Provisional Special Protection Zone of the NM UC-AS published on 02.01.2014<sup>41</sup>. This decision concerning the disqualification of the “CSD (*capella-mor*) unfinished” taken by the Secretary of Culture<sup>42</sup> was published on 13.04.2015<sup>43</sup>.

On 17.12.2014, the National Council of Culture proceeded to analyse the declassification process. In that meeting, the arguments were similar to those of the DRCC, the circumstances that had led to the systematic process of dilapidation of the church's contents, emphasising that *the importance of composition inherent in this chapel, patent in the structure in terms of columns and capitels, among other things, increased the rarity of the same in terms of other remaining examples and therefore entails the need to pay particular attention to any rehabilitation intervention*<sup>44</sup>, concluding that what was left of its *capela-mor* is completely altered, nothing left of the temple beyond the outer wall, although modified<sup>45</sup>. The next day, the DGPC accepted this argumentation.

As all the formalities were exhausted, on the 01.04.2015<sup>46</sup>, the Secretary of State for Culture declassified the CSD as an NM, but its safeguard was that it was included, as well as the Chapel of Jesus (located on the right of the main altar of the church), under the classification of public interest of *Rua da Sofia* and as it also entered in a special area of protection of UC-AS, classified as NM and World Heritage.

On the 01.04.2015 (April fool's day), a truth became evident. The outcome had, perhaps, always been predictable and mirrors how a potentially responsible management of heritage was reduced, in this case, to a secondary role. This was proved conclusively by the evident passivity displayed in the acceptance of the disqualification of the patrimony. This whole process tells the story that led to the death of a monument that, in essence, if it had been protected would, today, mark a turning point in the Portuguese history of the Renaissance.

It is a terrible shame that this monument has not been used in a way, or given the respect that its historic or artistic character deserves, to ensure its duration until today<sup>47</sup>. In light of the Venice Charter (Lopes & Correia, 2004), transferring part of the monument such as the *Tesoureiro Chapel* (Fig. 5) should never have been allowed since



4. The present view of Rua João de Ruão (north side) and Rua da Sofia (east side). Photo: Vítor Murtinho.



5. The *Tesoureiro Chapel* integrated in the MNMC facilities. Photo: Vítor Murtinho.



the restoration of the original location was always a possibility. Thus, the principle prescribed in Article 7 of the Charter that “*the monument is inseparable from the history, which it is testimony of, and also the context in which it operates*”, should have been respected.

After studying the documentation relative to the process of the CSD, one comes to the conclusion that not all is what it seems. Instead of safeguarding the monument it seems that private interests were put first, in other words, the conditions were created that would lead to the irreversible dismantling of a monument, such as the CSD. This is the reason why the entire process leading to this conclusion may be described, as the chronicle of a death foretold.

- 1 → The former convent of São Domingos in Coimbra has references since 1227 in a place called Figueira Velha, next to Rua da Sofia, with its settlement near the Mondego River. Cf. Almeida *et al*, 2012, pp. 483-488.
- 2 → Cf. Borges, 1980; Borges, 1987; Cacegas, 1767; Castro, 1867; Gonçalves, 1984a.
- 3 → Cf. Calmeiro, 2013: 87. In 23.04.1925, the local authorities of Coimbra approved the street plan to establish a new order and spatial relation with the Tesoureiro Chapel (Loureiro, 1964, p. 34).
- 4 → At the request of the local authorities, in 07.04.1949, the new street was named after the sculptor of the Tesoureiro Chapel, João de Ruão (Loureiro, 1964, p. 34).
- 5 → In 09.11.1939, the local authorities decided to expropriate a building, to open the new street next to the lateral wall of the Tesoureiro Chapel (Loureiro, 1964, p. 34).
- 6 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156113.
- 7 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156154.
- 8 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156156 and TXT00156157.
- 9 → In 27.01.1959, the local DGEMN proposed the relocation of Tesoureiro Chapel to the Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro facilities despite the difficulties in its installation. Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156170.
- 10 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156185 and TXT00156186.
- 11 → The Asilo de Mendicidade of Coimbra in the College of São Pedro, in 1959. The Diocese of Coimbra, cf. Bishop Oliveira’s letter ion 23.03.1962 (Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156195 and TXT00156196). The director of the MNMC approves the reconstruction project in its facilities on 13.02.1966 (Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156402 and TXT00156418).
- 12 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156189 and TXT00156190.
- 13 → Cf. Authorization to demolish the CSD and the reconstruction of the Tesoureiro Chapel in Montes Claros, integrated in the new church built by the Bishop of Coimbra (Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156208, TXT00156209, TXT00156195 and TXT00156196).
- 14 → Idem.
- 15 → In 13.04.1962, the authorization to acquire the building and its subsequent reconstruction on the confirmed site is given and also, the obligation to give the State all stone pieces of value (Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156223).
- 16 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156358, TXT00156220 and TXT00156223. With the collaboration of architect Álvaro da Fonseca.
- 17 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156346.
- 18 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156402 and TXT00156418.
- 19 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156423.
- 20 → Cf. Process PT020603250022, SIPA TXT00156447.

21 → In a premonitory way, Correia pointed out that unless what might be build and what could be museum content, which must be abandoned to what its owners wanted to (1947, p. 89).

22 → Cf. APMC, File 1108.1: CMC-003347, 20/08/1979.

23 → Cf. APMC, File 1108.1: CMC-004948, 17/12/1980.

24 → Cf. APMC, File 1108.1: CMC-003347, 20/08/1979.

25 → Cf. APMC, File 1108.1: CMC-003534, 30/08/1978.

26 → Cf. APMC, File 1108.1: Communication 1676, 16/08/1978.

27 → Cf. APMC, File 1108.1: CMC-003534, 30/08/1978.

28 → Idem.

29 → Idem.

30 → Cf. APMC, File 1108.1: Communication 2632, 05/12/1978.

31 → Cf. APMC, File 1108.1: Communication 000708, 18/01/1979.

32 → Idem.

33 → According to the stamp on the text of the letter, with handwritten notes and internal information from the services of the Municipality (APMC, File 1108.1).

34 → Only on 30.04.1981 did the DGEMN release a technical note where “the best collaborative spirit of the architect, with nothing more to say about the issue” is mentioned (APMC, File 1108.1: Communication 2592, 30/04/1981).

34 → Only on 30.04.1981 did the DGEMN release a technical note where “the best collaborative spirit of the architect, with nothing more to say about the issue” is mentioned (APMC, File 1108.1: Communication 2592, 30/04/1981).

35 → Inspection number, 30/03/1989 and Communication 024190, 18/10/1984 (APMC, File 1108.1).

36 → Notes and internal information from the Municipality of Coimbra, handwritten, and stamped with the office number 001410, 17.01.1985 (APMC, File 1108.1).

37 → Based on a document from the Technical Service of Works and Urbanization of the Municipality office on 30.03.1989 (APMC, File 1108.1).

38 → Decision 37 COM 8B.38 adopted by the World Heritage Committee at its 37th session of the Convention concerning the protection of the World Heritage by UNESCO, in Phnom Penh-Cambodia, in 2013, document WHC-13/37.COM/20. Cf. (UNESCO-WHC, 2013, p. 209).

39 → Cf. Number 1, article 1st, Decree-Law 114/2012, 25.05.2012.

40 → Information 1774-DRCC/2013, 27/11/2013 (DRCC process 13/06-03-17 (XXII)).

41 → Idem.

42 → Cf. Art. 31º, Law 107/2001, 08.09.2001.

43 → Ordinance 207/2015, 13.04.2015, signed in 01.04.2015.

44 → Cf. Communication of CNC, Lisbon, 17.12.2014.

45 → Cf. Communication of CNC, Lisbon, 17.12.2014.

46 → Ordinance 207/2015, 13.04.2015.

47 → Athens Charter about restoration of 1931 (Lopes & Correia, 2004, p. 43).

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