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Systems of History

George Kubler's Portuguese Plain Architecture

Eliana Sousa Santos, Editor

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Introduction

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Systems of History

The following essays are the proceedings of the symposium “Systems of History: George Kubler’s Portuguese Plain Architecture” held at Centro de Estudos Sociais September 7th 2012. This symposium was a celebration of many things: George Kubler’s 100th birthday; *The Shape of Time* 50th anniversary; and *Portuguese Plain Architecture* 40th anniversary. This was the year to celebrate Kubler, and we joined other celebratory conferences that happened throughout the year and to resonate a special note about his work in Portugal and the influence of his book: *Portuguese Plain Architecture: Between Spices and Diamonds, 1521-1706* (1972).

Kubler is well known to have given an extraordinary contribution to art history by writing *The Shape of Time* (1962), a book that established his position as a visionary historian since the 1960s, and contributed to open the field to include all human-made things, not only the finest works of art. The book was so successful that his writings actually became a kind of artifact, changing our assessment of all previous works in history of art and architecture and influencing some of its further developments.

Kubler’s interest about the patterns of change in art can be related to his inquisitiveness about disappearing cultures, remote places, places where the systems of making could become visible, since their shapes of time were less convoluted.

Kubler traveled to Portugal several times between 1950’s and 1960’s, when the country was still very affected by its geographic position and its political regime. In a sense, it was a Plain country, the one that he saw. As I said elsewhere Portugal, given its geographical and historical situation, was the kind of place that was very convenient to Kubler’s study. It is remote and yet connected, it was once very influent and yet lost most of its influence, it was part of Europe and yet it maintained the fundamental difference that its poverty and remoteness imposed.

Kubler’s text infuses Portuguese architecture with poetic qualities, achievable with immaterial qualities such as light and proportion, or strictly functional and thus not dependent of technological progress. *Plain Architecture* can be understood as the essential qualities of architecture itself. Somehow the fascination with ‘pure volumetric forms’ is even assigned by Kubler to be “recognizable as a distinct Portuguese trait as early as the sixteenth century.” And these qualities resonated with modernist qualities: the simplicity of forms, the boxlike spaces, and the taste for unornamented shapes.

The idea of Portuguese Plain Architecture, although emerging every once in a while and having a stable position within Portuguese Architecture historiography has yet to have that position mapped.

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The connection between the idea of Portuguese Plain Architecture and architectural practice started in 1979 when the architect Duarte Cabral de Mello compared Vítor Figueiredo's architecture to Portuguese Plain, it continued in several texts and lectures by Paulo Varela Gomes and reemerged in Manuel Graça Dias's edition of *Jornal dos Arquitectos* in 2001, essays by Alexandre Alves Costa, one of its last appearances was in a speech by Eduardo Souto de Moura where he equated his work to Portuguese Plain.

Portuguese Plain Architecture became some kind of a meme, or to use Kubler's expression a *sequence*, metamorphosing through time, expressing political positions in the 1970s, and serving an architectural establishment nowadays. It is this change of tone, which is most interesting. Not only shapes change through time, but also ideas, and the tracing of Portuguese Plain Architecture from conveys the relationship between history of architecture and its practice. By rearranging the perception of Portuguese architecture in Portugal, Kubler achieved what he defined to as historians' commitment, that is, to "... discover a patterned set of properties that will elicit the recognition all the while conveying a new perception of the subject."

The following papers were presented at the conference. Joana Cunha Leal (Universidade Nova de Lisboa) contextualizes Kubler's work about Portuguese architecture within the tradition opened by Julio de Castilho, who coined the term *plain style* (estilo chão) as a possible tradition to be adopted by contemporary architectural practices. Raquel Henriques da Silva (Universidade Nova de Lisboa) presents Kubler's work within the realm of the historiography of art, focusing on the reverberation of the ideas within *The Shape of Time* (1962) and their influence in history and theory of art. Reva Wolf (New Paltz, State University of New York) writes about Kubler's use of metaphor as an instrument to support his arguments, and shows its manifestations in *Portuguese Plain Architecture* (1972). Susanne Bauer (University of London) contextualizes the adoption of the color white as a meme by the Portuguese contemporary architect Álvaro Siza Vieira relating it to the idea of *Plain Style*. Patrícia Miguel (Universidade de Coimbra) maps the persistent role of the vernacular revival in the recent history of Portuguese architecture. Emanuel Sousa (Architectural Association School of Architecture) analyses Kubler's arguments in *The Shape of Time* (1962) relates it to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966), and makes a parallel between the recurrence of *Plain Architecture* through Foucault's concept of *heterotopia*.

This symposium was organized as part of my post-doctoral research project "George Kubler's Shape of Time: The Historiographical effect of *Portuguese Plain Architecture* in post-revolutionary Portugal", with the supervision of Paulo Varela Gomes.