



News from Portugal

# homeland

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**Representação Oficial Portuguesa na 14ª Mostra  
Internacional de Arquitetura, La Biennale di Venezia**  
Portuguese Official Representation at the 14th International  
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for the return to the (elysian) fields. The "seaside garden of Europe" that Portugal was in the rhetoric of "Estado Novo" propaganda has undergone brutal changes and accelerations over the last 40 or 50 years. Driven by famine and poor living conditions, peasants emigrated; some have ended up returning, but nowadays Portugal is a country of old folk and depopulation is advancing at a fast pace.

The marks and memories of that Rural Portugal are gradually falling apart with de-ruralization and the collateral effects left in its wake: depopulation, ageing population, fields and agricultural production being increasingly abandoned, the disappearance of certain ways of life, know-how and cultural practices – the interior, as these things are usually referred to. The few that endure live off an assisted economy of pensions, retirement pensions, savings or money sent by family members and those who can leave, as jobs are scarce and the mirage of a bucolic existence and lost paradises belong to outsiders who think nature and the rural are places for holidays and tourism. There is no way of finding a future for the "mythified" past of a country of poor but honest farmers. Their gardeners lost, the rural landscapes of old Portugal entered a

cycle of profound metamorphosis where most people can only see deterioration and ugliness. Not even (hyper)modernized landscapes of intensive farming escape this disenchantment: they are dull, aseptic, synthetic-looking and, it is suspected, poisoned; in addition to that, they generate very little and very poorly paid employment. There are cases of individuals being recruited in Thailand to work here for less than 500 Euros a month.

Given the flurry of sound bites and verbal excess this subject invites, it doesn't matter so much to ask what rurality, post-rurality or other fictions, are. Rather, let us enquire after the use and addressees of the nostalgic discourse about land, biological agriculture (is there any that isn't, with the exception of Facebook's electronic FarmVille?), the new rurals, rural tourism and other ruralities.

In the beginning, agricultural production was meant to feed people; afterwards, bread and wine, milk and honey also became the food of the gods. Now everything is a "market" and in Brazilian Portuguese, agriculture is called agro-business and produces green energy. So much rhetoric!

Also the rural was once green: then along came a goat and ate it! **86.H2**

### *This is me, the goat*

This one over here in the foreground is me, the goat. The pasture is rubbish and I am pregnant. I know it's not prudent at times like these but such is life. He rammed me, the bastard. Life is a sheepish business. Those nine sheep over there are as foolish as I am; they talked me into buying one of those row houses because the sheepfold was all mucky and when it rains you can't stand out in the pasture because of the damp and rheumatoid arthritis. It all started well enough. The houses were lovely, close to the pasture and with views out into the countryside. The landscape project for the external spaces is top-notch: dry stone walls, re-used props from a metaphysical vineyard; gravel pathways and

plenty of (low-growing) greenery.

The houses were never finished; they transitioned directly to the state of vandalism. They are all dried up, reduced to bare concrete, no frames, no windows, no sanitary-ware and even the electrical wiring was taken by the metal gang.

The bank auctioned off the houses. They were all bought by a German musician who says that one painted white and the other black will make for a fine keyboard. It looks like our house is going to be an F-sharp. There are plenty of other notes but the overall tone is pretty somber.

<http://www.revistapunkto.com/2014/05/englishhomelessness-and-nostalgia-for.html>

## Getting over Modernity

### *Beyond the frozen image of a rural and mild vernacular*

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At the peak of the Modern time, whole territories were imagined, and equipped with the most advanced machines, to make the world a place with a human scale. The ideas of Soviet "dis-urbanists", such as Miljutin and Okhitovich speak of that dream.

More than campanile church towers, as emerging spots in the landscape, what we find today in the Alentejo are lone towering grain silos, indecipherable – their appearance not disclosing whether they are yet living things, or not used anymore. At present, the vast majority of these structures are in fact abandoned.

The management of cereal was a crucial issue in all countries. Strategies defined by Portugal as far as the production and storage were concerned are not disconnected from international political affairs, especially after the end of WW2, and the adhesion to international trade groups such as the OEEC. Membership of those international groups involved compromises, and conditioned strategies.

The landscape in the south of the country is defined by vast agricultural estates owned by a single landlord. From the 1970s what had been called "the most beautiful of Estates", or "The Granary of the Nation" began to be dismantled. It had known a huge investment, at least until 1953/1958, when plans were still made according to the thought: "For each arm a hoe, for each family a home, for every mouth its bread." About the same time as the territory had been equipped with huge and sophisticated silos, these same structures began a journey of disuse, until their present condition of obsolescence.

The silo is a piece of engineering of gigantic dimensions but great simplicity. It might be redundant to say it, but their presence in the landscape is inescapable. While

it stands on its solitary image, in fact it is backed and supported by a network – it is almost always connected to railways. There is a special connection between "machines", showing the silos like signs that reveal the layout of this network – as lighthouses do with the shore.

There is an iconic dimension to the huge concrete silos, which points to a moment that must have been epic, and that, having ended, continues to exist as an aura, evoked by their silent presence. This aura is well captured in the work on similar industrial structures, for example, of the Becher's "anonyme sculpture", or in Virilio's "bunker archeology."

In the 1920, Le Corbusier would find the allure of the silos, which is denoted in "Vers une Architecture" (1923), as a perfect example of the importance of volume in architecture. It is in the chapter "Trois rappels MM. Les Architectes" (which opens with a photograph of silos) that the famous description of architecture as a wise play of volumes under the light is found.

In an essay on granaries, A. Armesto proposes a reading of the sacred from these architectures, and says "They are tools related to the prolongation of life in time, since, through their mediation, the biological escapes the precarious concepts of duration and settles itself in a cyclical, therefore continuous, apparently endless time: the time that characterizes the sacred. (...) The tomb serves to prolong life in time beyond death, in memory. In this sense, it mimics the grain tower, and not the opposite. (...) For this relation with time, and because life in them is expecting, expectant, the lonely granary – as tombs, treasures, chapels, temples. Is time anything else than the barn of the gods?"

Armesto was referring to stone granaries, and the specific area of northern Portugal and Spain, but the reflection can also be offered as a reading of the more contemporary concrete structures, referred herein.

The debate is timely, about what it means to inhabit the countryside and the trend of returning to the contact with the earth (in fact cyclic trends like the alternative movement “back to the land” were very strong in late nineteenth century England). A profusion of fads attests to these trends: rurban; post-rural; superrural... It seems however that we'll also have to deal with the immense paraphernalia of machinery and infrastructure (that were once cutting edge technology) that lies in these territories, and which we have not yet been able to figure out how to deal with – or rather, inhabit.

The rural dwelling that is considered here is the dwelling of the landscape, and it summons Heideggerian notions on the act of building. One inhabits a rural landscape, which is beyond the frozen image of a rural and mild vernacular, consisting of strata with successive layers of agricultural crops adding to one another, and co-inhabiting with aqueducts and levees, agricultural warehouses, railways, and silos. Scholars specialized in the industrial heritage have considered these structures for long: they are “abandoned areas” needing re-significance. Many equipments: milling; slaughterhouses; cork factories, are now targets for reprogramming and noteworthy reuse. Silos also fall in this category, even though the particular form of these large “vertical cabinets” lends little to architectural space.

But inhabiting such structures as silos does not necessarily mean converting them into residential towers within which to live. Inhabiting the silos might mean to take use of what makes them monumental, of their enormity, of their height! To place oneself upon the shoulders of these giants, using their tops to siting new places. It could be a way of “getting over” modernity. And to

inhabit the landscapes that can be seen from the top of these silos, would be to find ways to reframe or, at least to make these erected landmarks visible, as solitary watchmen, or as towers embedded in apt urban structures, like the outlook towers conceived by Geddes.

At the same time the railway connection structures lay in a state of abandonment, and are, a heritage also in need of care.

Taking up the suggestion of the sacred as convened by A. Armesto, the now empty interiors of the silo can serve as precious deposits for tangible and intangible heritages, which, while existing scattered, are searching for a place to live: seed banks; location archives; of cultural legacy. The potential uses that can be found for these giants in recognizing their symbolic dimension of temples, guarding valuable testimony, may also trigger a possible reuse or reinterpretation of the networks that connect them.

As a merely artistic gesture, one can think of the suggestive image of a silo being refilled with Ai Weiwei's “Sunflower Seeds”, from the remote Jingdezhen, after having already “inhabited” a converted former electric power plant! Alentejo silos rescued by porcelain seeds coming from the other side of the world. **87.H3**

## SHORTS