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# IN SEARCH OF ALVAR AALTO: A PORTUGUESE JOURNEY IN 1957

João Miguel Couto Duarte and Maria João Moreira Soares

James Joyce (1882-1941) begins his book *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the story of the coming-of-age of Stephen Dedalus, with an epigraph from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: “*Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes*” [1, p. 2]. This mysterious epigraph presents a processual scenario where the figure of Daedalus, in his role as maker and in his effort to escape, becomes a shadow that is constantly present. An idea imbibed in dynamic principles associated with what could potentially exist is not indifferent to this notion of process. That idea is argued by Fritz Senn with regard to the short quotation from Ovid (43BC-17AC): “[t]he emphasis is not so much on the achievement, *artes* [...], for that remains doubtful always, but on the process. The prerequisites are not so much erudition, though that helps quite a bit, but curiosity and versatility.” [2, p. 127]

## Travelling as a transition rite

The travels of the young adult interested in architectural matters essentially became a persistent subject matter in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sometimes, as in the case of the young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (1887-1965), who travelled in the company of Auguste Klipstein (1885-1951), the trips took the form of a “classical” Grand Tour, with Jeanneret's travels to the Near East in 1911 being the perfect example thereof. Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) also travelled. He was accompanied on his first major trip, in 1924 to Italy, by Aino Aalto (1894-1949). Given the impact that said travels eventually had in the formation of these young men, one can accept that they almost have the status of a rite of passage, with the revelations of new cultures marking their works forever. On the concept of the Grand Tour, Adolf Max Vogt writes:

[...] the Grand Tour appears [as] a splendid elitist crowning of the bourgeois educational system of northern Europe. The young, talented citizen from the north leaves his region of bad weather, material plenty, and scientific progress and bows before the south, with its beautiful weather, its poverty, and its lack of progress, and tries to appropriate the southern bounty of the past. [3, p. 40]

From a country in the south, which was poor and characterised by a totalitarian regime, the young architecture student Alberto Cruz Reaes Pinto (b. 1932), set off to travel the countries of northern Europe. He left from Lisbon, Portugal, in the com-

pany of his colleagues Leopoldo Castro de Almeida (1932-1996) and Fernando Gomes da Silva (1932-2014). It was a journey that was to take him to Finland. In contrast to a Grand Tour, the trip was marked by the scant resources available to the three friends. Trips undertaken by Portuguese architects were not rare, although isolated in nature. As the architect Manuel Tainha (1922-2012) writes on the matter: “the vanguard of the [19]30s is not unacquainted with the European ‘machines’: the large-scale ateliers of Berlin, Rome, Vienna, Paris; there were even some [Portuguese architects] who passed through them.” [4, p. 12, our translation] These travels helped bring modernity to Portugal. However, the learning gathered on them clashed with the domestic reality. The *Estado Novo*, the totalitarian regime that established itself in 1933 and remained in power until 1974, turned Portugal, in the words of Tainha, into a country that was “ideologically hostile to any and all expression of modernity.” [5, p. 39, our translation]

Portugal in the 1950s was still a country divided between the promise of albeit belated modernity and a mentality of isolation. A generation of architects that were born in the 1920s and 1930s endeavoured to carry out a revision of the Modern Movement. The new openness usually meant reading *Sapere vedere l'architettura* (*Architecture as Space: How to Look at Architecture*) (1948) by Bruno Zevi (1918-2000), the 1950 issue of *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* on Alvar Aalto, and the texts of Aalto himself. In 1953, Manuel Tainha translated Aalto's 1947 text “The Trout and the Stream” into Portuguese and published it in the magazine *Arquitectura*. At that time in Portugal the magazine provided a reference platform for reflection on Modern Architecture, paying particular attention to the international architectural output. This was the context within which the idea for the travels of Reaes Pinto and his colleagues was born.

## Visiting Aalto sites at Helsinki

Reaes Pinto, Gomes da Silva and Castro de Almeida left Lisbon for Paris. Their travels took them on to Cologne and Hamburg. In Denmark they visited the new neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Copenhagen; in Sweden they visited Stockholm and the suburb of Vällingby. They hitched rides a lot and often slept on the street. They took on precarious jobs, so as to be able to further finance their trip. Effort requires tenacity, to confirm the aforementioned words of Fritz Senn [2, P. 127]. They finally arrived in Finland, where they first visited Turku. They then stayed for some time in Helsinki. They went to Otaniemi and Tapiola. They were captivated by the cities and their serene relationship with the surrounding forest, the discretion of the architecture, the care taken in the use of materials and in the construction of details. All these things were far removed from what was being done in Portugal at the time.

The possibility of getting to know Alvar Aalto and his work was one of the ambitions for their journey. They visited Aalto's House of Culture in Helsinki, which was then in the final completion phase, and the Sports Hall in Otaniemi. They went to Aalto's studio in Munkkiniemi. However, they did not have any direct contact with Aalto. They later returned to his studio, but again without success. They got to meet Elissa Aalto (1922-1994) (Fig. 1), though the conversation was short and circumstantial. They perhaps also talked with Aalto's assistant, Kaarlo Leppänen (1929-2005) (Fig. 2). The journey was somewhat of a revelation in architectural terms, but also because of the horizon of freedom it represented. Reaes Pinto reveals satisfaction in many of the photographs, as he experimented with the pose of the architect, holding a pipe and with a trench coat in his arm (Fig. 3).

Gomes da Silva and Castro de Almeida were to report their impressions of the journey in an article published in 1958 in the magazine *Arquitectura*. Regarding Finland, they noted the intimate relationship between the people – which they observed to be joyful and happy – and nature – which took the form, above all, of the forests – and they acknowledged that the country's architecture translated that relationship. They found in the discretion and humility of the architecture a lesson of humanity and intelligence. "Because architecture exists, but the result is more than an affirmation of form." [6, p. 38, our translation]

Back in Portugal, Reaes Pinto purchased Zevi's *Saber ver la arquitectura* (Fig. 4), which he had already read. The visit to Aalto's works reinforced the pertinence of Zevi's thoughts. The fact he was unable to meet the Finnish master directly contributed to accentuating the referential dimension of his work. Reaes Pinto took a humanist approach to architecture, where nature played a fundamentally important role. As an architect he was to work with Manuel Tainha on the design of the Escola de Regentes Agrícolas [Agricultural Technical School] in Évora (1960-65), which clearly shows the influence of Aalto. Later he would go on to explore the Garden City concept in his design for Santo António dos Cavaleiros, a new urban nucleus on the outskirts of Lisbon; his visits to the garden cities of Finland no doubt contributed to the design, for which the collaboration with the landscape architect Gonçalo Ribeiro Telles (1922-2020), a reference figure in landscaping in Portugal, was fundamental. Alberto Reaes Pinto came to focus on matters of sustainability and is today regarded as a reference in that field in Portugal.

The present text has focused on the echoes of the trip. Viewed as a whole, such echoes are a testament to the interest in the new Nordic architecture of a 25-year-old man from a country that was still very much on the outside looking in, in terms of the debates that alimented the European architectural scene. In this sense, the

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2



3



1–2 Alvar Aalto's Studio, 1957. Courtesy of Alberto Reaes Pinto.

3 Alberto Reaes Pinto in Otaniemi, 1957 (Otalaakso student housing by Kaija and Heikki Siren, 1957). Courtesy of Alberto Reaes Pinto.

travels reflect the interest of a generation of architects who found in Aalto a reference for a new approach to architecture.

Undergoing travel is a desire for a horizon, where one can justly find a portrait of a generation in search of an identity.

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