

Exhibition

B E L É M



DEMOLITION SETS THE STAGE

from the 16th to the 21st century

In 1940 the Exhibition of the Portuguese World and Belém seemed like they were one and the same thing.

(Cover)

Rua Vieira Portuense, with the Belém Market on the left, 1939
Eduardo Portugal (1900-1958). POR056643 Arquivo Municipal de Lisboa (AML)

The place helped to tell the nation's history: the Jerónimos Monastery, the Tagus river, Afonso de Albuquerque Square, the Belém Tower. The vast event took over the neighbourhood, as if Belém did not exist, apart from the Exhibition.

The Estado Novo announced impressive transformations to those vacant lots, capable of welcoming such a large festivity. But what was this place like before 1940? What place did it become after the Exhibition? What was the role of this event in Belém's urban path? Alongside what was, in fact, wasteland, the neighbourhood presented a dense, varied, attractive centre. People lived and traded in streets, alleys and squares that had been consolidated for centuries, in a crescendo of urbanity since Infante D. Henrique had built the first church there. This urban and popular hub complemented the erudite and noble character that the surrounding estates and palaces gave to Belém.

The preparation of the Exhibition of the Portuguese World entailed numerous demolitions, depriving the neighbourhood of several elements: urban structure, residences, commercial spaces, sociable places, the market, and even architecturally relevant buildings.

After the event, and for decades, there was a void.

Today, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Exhibition of the Portuguese World endures, in physical structures that we can see and touch, but mostly in the immaterial sense.

A GROWING NEIGHBOURHOOD

When Infante D. Henrique (1394 – 1460) commissioned the first church of Santa Maria de Belém, the village of Restelo already showed an intense commercial activity, mainly related to the boats that docked in that beach, the first sheltered harbour near the entrance of the Tagus. Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, under the reign of D. Manuel I (1495 – 1521), this site has been associated with the *Age of Discovery*: ships bring all kinds of novelties and richness, the massive Jerónimos Monastery is built. Belém becomes appealing and cosmopolitan. Since then, and throughout the following centuries, the aristocracy establishes itself in estates and palaces near this new hub, confirming the central role of Belém as a place of representation and power, both courtly and erudite.

After the 1755 earthquake, with the destruction of Lisbon, the court and nobility moved to the Belém-Ajuda axis – the new centre of political decision-making.

At the same time, we find a growing settlement, as a result of a continuous influx of population, which shares traits with other riverside places: a mainstreet parallel with the river, and perpendicular alleys. Here, the atmosphere is popular and residential, especially with the arrival of those who served the upper classes. This way, a dense, compact and multiple, i.e. urban, nucleus is formed.

View of Santo Amaro
and panorama of Belém
Amsterdam, c. 1700
Engraver Pieter van
der Berge (c. 1659–1737)
Watercolour engraving
MNAA, inv. 14078 Grav

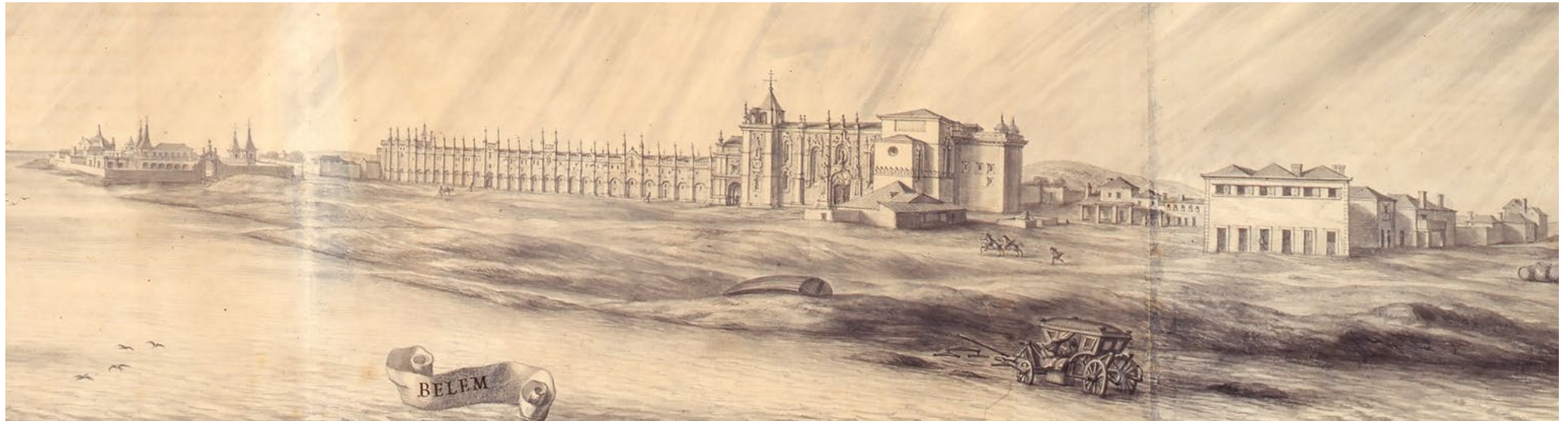
Un étranger qui va à Belem croit n'avoir pas quitter Lisbonne. Belem est une bourgade considerable, où la plupart des nobles et des gents d'affaires de la classe supérieur, ont leurs habitations.

M. Link, *Voyage en Portugal, Depuis 1797 jusqu'en 1799*, 1805



A foreigner who goes to Belem will believe he has not left Lisbon. Belem is a large village, where the majority of the noblemen and upper-class businessmen have their residences.

M. Link, *Voyage en Portugal, Depuis 1797 jusqu'en 1799, 1805*



Drawing of Belém by Pier Maria Baldi, c. 1668, Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms .Med. Palat. 1231, f. 130bis. Reproduced with permission of MiBACT

BELÉM IN 1939: A STILL ANCIENT PLACE



Frei Heitor Pinto Square, with the Chafariz dos Golfinhos, or Chafariz de Belém, 1939. Eduardo Portugal (1900–1958). POR057606. AML

Belém grew in the second half of the nineteenth century. First, in autonomy, serving as a county seat for three decades. Later, physically: the embankment built at the end of the nineteenth century ordered the riverside bank, expanding the land available for construction southwards.

In 1939 we find a multifunctional Belém. Palaces demarcate the area, acting as a reminder of aristocratic presence. The Belém Market perpetuates the commercial activity, mostly related to the river. The Chafariz dos Golfinhos is the culmination of a succession of fountains dating back to the fifteenth century. These uses, and others that have disappeared in the meantime, are expressed in the toponymy of the public spaces. Through the streets of this urban centre

we see common, unpretentious, and normal-sized buildings, which, by contrast, bring out the monumentality of the Jerónimos. There are residences, stores, services and associations installed in buildings from various dates, which coexist naturally. Some stand out from the rest, such as the porticos of Rua Vieira Portuense or nr. 138 of Rua de Belém. Meanwhile, the new urban policies of the Estado Novo favour rural and controllable environments, and this will be reflected on new low-cost housing, such as the Terras do Forno neighbourhood built close by. In contrast, the area around Rua de Belém materializes a secular history in its urban structure, linked to the river and a life lived under the shadow of the Monastery.

As a settlement, Belém has entirely the character of an urban neighbourhood (...).

Ramalho Ortigão, *As Praias de Portugal*
Guia do Banhista e do Viajante, 1876



Travessa da Praça, south view,
with the Belém Market in the
background, 1939. Eduardo Portugal
(1900–1958). POR057278. AML

THE CENTENARY CYCLONE



Preparatory work for the construction of the Exhibition of the Portuguese World, before 1940. CFT164.2653.ia Horácio Novais Studio collection
FCG – Art Library and Archives

If the goal of the Exhibition of the Portuguese World was to celebrate the glory days of the national past, then Belém provided the ideal scenery, due to its association with the *Age of Discovery*. The place was presented as empty, and thus available to receive the event, which was partly true: vast plots had remained unexplored since the construction of the embankment. Regarding the urban nucleus, the plans were imprecise and no image was divulged. The *Regime dos Centenários* [Statute of Centenaries], published in 1938, established the legal basis that made everything possible.

In reality, half of the neighbourhood disappeared in a poorly-documented operation, which was thus named *Centenary Cyclone*. A slow, manual process, interspersed with worries, evictions and expropriations.

The Market is closed down, entire streets disappear and, with them,

buildings that were already architecturally valued at the time. The pavilions of the exhibition were built. For months the destruction of real life coincided with the construction of a dream.

This process is described by the *Écos de Belém* newspaper. Upon reading it, we can sense how the views of the inhabitants of Belém evolved: at first enthusiastic about the promised transformations, later concerned about the arrival of the new reality, soon pleading against the devastation, finally resigned in the face of inevitability. The destruction of established areas around the monuments was common during this period, revealing ignorance about what we now classify as urban heritage. Here the demolitions also implied negating the direction that the neighbourhood had been following for centuries: growing urbanization and urbanity.

*We will not tell anyone until
the Exhibition is ready...*

Cottinelli Telmo, Revista dos Centenários, no.6, 1939

Building nr. 138 of Rua de Belém, preparatory work for the construction
of the Exhibition of the Portuguese World, before 1940. CFT164.190445.ia
Horácio Novais Studio collection | FCG – Art Library and Archives



EXHIBITION OF THE PORTUGUESE WORLD



Preparatory work for the construction of the Exhibition of the Portuguese World, before 1940. CFT164.190441.ia Horácio Novais Studio collection
FCG – Art Library and Archives

On 23 June, 1940 the most prominent cultural event of the Estado Novo was inaugurated. Among the 442.000 m² it occupied, Praça do Império [Empire Square] stands out, designed by the exhibition's main architect, Cottinelli Telmo. Praça do Império is the structural element of the precinct and the only one that was planned to last. The construction of the square and the reorganization of the surrounding road system were included in Lisbon's Urbanization Plan, by Etienne de Gröer — a project that rethought the whole city and strived to bring it closer to the river.

Contrary to the longevity of Praça do Império, the pavilions had fragile structures, made of metal and wood — ephemeral architecture, masked with coatings that simulated lasting, solid materials.

The commissioner-general Augusto de Castro announced a *city of illusions*; today we would call it a historicist theme park. The atmosphere of this *spiritual city* contrasted starkly with that of the real city that existed before. During those months, the former urban nucleus of Belém was replaced by circulation areas, parking lots and pavilions that were irrelevant to the exhibition's historical discourse, such as Casa de Santo António and the Industrial and Commercial Neighbourhood. The building of “Casa de Belém” was planned for the latter, restoring *that ancient property located in Rua de Belém* — which proves that architectural value was placed on that newly torn-down house. The exhibition lasted 163 days and closed on 2 December, 1940.

*This exhibition is nothing
but a city of illusions.*

Augusto de Castro, A Exposição do Mundo Português
e a sua Finalidade Nacional 1940

Preparatory work for the construction of the Exhibition of the Portuguese
World, before 1940. CFT164.280942.ia Horácio Novais Studio collection
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AFTER THE PARTY: WHAT PLANS FOR BELÉM?



Site of Belém's demolished urban centre, 1966
Garcia Nunes Photography. NUN001777. AML

The pavilions' structural fragility led to the immediate demolition of many of them, except for the main ones — but even those were taken down a few years later.

The vast plots occupied by the exhibition were gradually deserted. On occasion, portions of this space were occupied erratically, but neglect soon prevailed. The lack of a future strategy for this place became clear after the exhibition. The void grew and lasted for decades.

From 1940 we still have Praça do Império, the rebuilt Padrão dos Descobrimentos (1960), a few transformed pavilions and scattered sculptural elements. But the incorporeal permanence of the exhibition is more significant. A good example of this is the series of chimerical plans designed by the architect Cristino da Silva (1954–1961), which were still

anchored in an imperial logic. Later, Belém recovered gradually, maintaining its recreational and exhibition purposes, the monumental scale of the buildings, the landscaping of large spaces, the view of the site as a place of representation. In the centre of Belém, the former urbanity would never flourish again. Since 1948, with the Museum of Popular Art, cultural equipment has proliferated, from which the Belém Cultural Centre stands out — which effectively roused Belém from the lethargy that had plagued it since 1940. In the twenty-first century, the new Coach Museum and the MAAT (Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology) perpetuated the character imparted on Belém by the Exhibition of the Portuguese World, reinforcing its main role as a tourist attraction.

*When the multicoloured lights no longer
illuminate the pavilions, what lamps will
remain on in our parish?*

Écos de Belém newspaper, 10.7.1940



Panoramic view of Belém, 2020
©Luís Pavão

Exhibition

BELÉM: DEMOLITION SETS THE STAGE

from the 16th to the 21st century

February 16 to May 17 2020

Monument to the Discoveries

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