

BELÉM - PROJECTS, HESITATIONS AND INERTIA

The land taken from the Tagus, between the Jerónimos Monastery and the Belém Tower, was the stage chosen for the Portuguese World Exhibition in 1940. The Empire Square was built that year as a centre for the celebration of Portuguese history, as a cause for nationalistic cohesion, and as a source of praise for the political regime that existed at the time.

The end of the Exhibition created a void that was impossible to fill.

During the following decades, there was a succession of proposals that were never materialised, abundant criticism arose, arguments from different camps were set against each other.

Indecision almost always prevailed.

Inertia - a force that imposes itself, pointing in a direction that cannot be opposed - has endured until today.

The documentation kept in the archives allows us to uncover that recent history whose complexity is often devalued, or even ignored.

Will it allow us to better understand the present situation, to participate in the debate about our history and collective memories?

Is this information relevant for establishing the meaning and value of this heritage, for discussing how it will be used in the future?



1 FROM RESTELO BEACH TO EMPIRE SQUARE



The future of the area surrounding the Jerónimos Monastery was discussed during the summer of 1938 between António de Oliveira Salazar, President of the Council of Ministers, Duarte Pacheco, Minister of Public Works, and António Ferro, Director of the Secretariat of National Propaganda.

Choosing Belém as the location of the Portuguese World Exhibition, planned for 1940, would give a decisive push to several projects underway, with various scales and multiple goals.

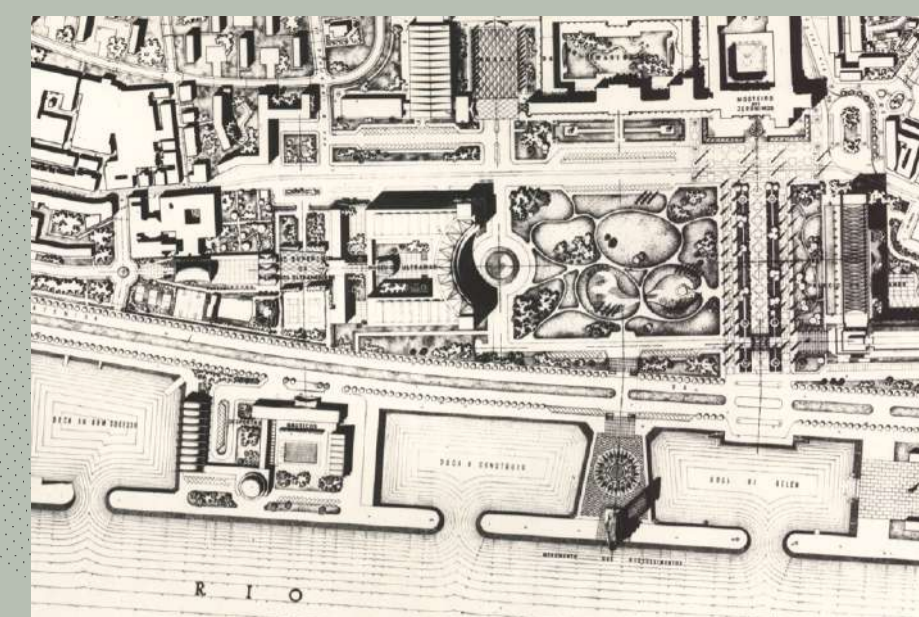
In front of the Jerónimos Monastery, there was the desire to create a structure that evoked the “Age of Discovery” and was worthy of that national monument. This was evident in the project for the Vasco da Gama Square (by the architect Vasco Lacerda Marques).

The goal was also to create conditions for the city’s expansion to the west, as defined by the Plan for Ajuda’s Hill (by architect Faria da Costa), and to connect the capital to Cascais and the “Estoris”, as envisioned by the Costa do Sol Plan (by the urban planners Donat-Alfred Agache and Étienne De Gröer).

2 THE PORTUGUESE WORLD EXHIBITION AND BEYOND

Above all, the Portuguese World Exhibition would constitute a *mise-en-scène* of the history of Portugal with a marked nationalistic bent.

But it also meant the opportunity to profoundly transform a vast territory.



3 A SQUARE FOR THE ENTIRE EMPIRE

In the 1950s, the idea of building in Belém a centre dedicated to the overseas calling, as envisioned by the regime, was resumed.

Around the Empire Square there were plans to build a complex devoted to the memory of the Portuguese colonial past, but also to the interpretation and management of its present and future. It was composed of the Overseas Palace and Overseas Museum, the Higher Institute of Overseas Studies, the Institute of Tropical Medicine, and the Maritime Museum.

Urbanism and architecture, gardens and visual arts should be combined under the coordination of the architect Cristino da Silva, together with his French colleague Jacques Carlu, specially invited for the purpose.

In order to open India Avenue, which later extended into the coastal road leading to Cascais, it was crucial to rearrange the railway tracks. Vacating the lands needed for the Exhibition required removing the naval facilities that existed there, but also part of a residential neighborhood.

Coordinated by the architect Cottinelli Telmo, a large group of artists and technicians designed the pavilions of the Exhibition – conceived as temporary – and the Empire Square, with a garden and glowing fountain in the center, which should remain.

After the Exhibition, even the fiercest critics of the regime agreed that these new buildings should be preserved as much as possible. Nonetheless, the cyclone that swept Lisbon in 1941 ruined some buildings and precipitated the demolition process.

Still with Cottinelli as head architect, projects arose for the renewal of existing buildings and the construction of new ones, as well as green spaces that would transform Belém into an area devoted to history and culture, leisure and nautical sports.

Together, they presented a series of alternative solutions, dominated by the desire of monumentality, the rigidity of urban lines, the supposed valorization of the Jerónimos Monastery, and the growing presence of water, a metaphor for the “Age of Discovery”.

The so-called Final Plan was concluded in time for the celebration of the centenary of Prince Henry, the *Navigator* (1960) and included a few partial projects developed in the meantime, particularly the area surrounding the Belém Tower and the Maritime Museum.

The criticism presented by the architect Raul Lino was decisive for the conclusion of this process, especially regarding the definition of the Empire Square, the relationship with the Jerónimos, and the location of the Monument do the Discoveries.

Throughout the 1960s the plan failed and almost nothing was built. The dissatisfaction with the situation continued and, contrary to what had been announced, the Belém river bank remained in disarray.



4 THE OVERSEAS PALACE

Cristino da Silva began working on the Empire Square with the pavilion that he conceived for the 1940 Exhibition. For the same location, he later designed the Contemporary Art Museum (1943), which was never built. In 1952, the Overseas Palace was commissioned, the first piece of his future urbanization project.

The Palace would amount to the musealization of the empire, now renamed the “Portuguese Overseas”. The goal was to gather a vast geographic and thematic display, about the past and the present, which should not constitute an ethnographic or natural museum.

The project was delayed by a clash between monumentalist intentions and the conquests of international modern architecture, in an effort to give expression to the symbolism of its role and to respect the Jerónimos and the legacy of 1940.



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6 THE OVERSEAS ETHNOLOGY MUSEUM

This path led to the creation of the Ethnology Museum, which was an old demand. For it, the contribution of the 1959 exhibition *Life and Art of the Makonde People* was decisive, resulting from the *Expeditions for the Study of the Ethnic Minorities of the Portuguese Overseas*, conducted in Mozambique, by the ethnologists Jorge Dias and Margot Dias.

The Overseas Ethnology Museum was created by decree in 1965. Containing important collections, mostly from Africa, but also Timor and India, it did not have a fixed location until the early 1970s. The successive projects for that Museum, designed by architects at the service of the Overseas Ministry, used a modern language of a new type, in compositions that eschewed the conventions of the past, without aspirations to monumentalism.

In the end, all were blocked, due to the reticence of the institutions responsible for protecting historical heritage, the mistrust of the Ministry of Public Works, and the indecision of the Lisbon City Council.

With a project from 1972, designed by the architect António Saragga Seabra, the National Ethnology Museum, in Restelo, was inaugurated four years later, when both the regime that had defined its location and the empire that had included it in the political agenda had already collapsed.



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IMAGE REFERENCES

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BELEM - PROJECTS,
HESITATIONS AND
INERTIA

Shadows of the Empire

EXHIBITION

EXHIBITION

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BELEM - PROJECTS,
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1941 — 1972

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3D MODEL AND MOTION GRAPHICS

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Belém overviews
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