

[RE]PLACE - AN INTERVENTION PROPOSAL TO BEMPOSTA

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Abstract

This paper addresses the problems of rural development in Portugal, especially in the north-east, and specifically in Bemposta, in Mogadouro. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the role that architecture has been playing in the rehabilitation and conversion of uses as an intervention tool in depopulated rural centers. It is in this context that the re-place term acquires greater importance, functioning as a set of approaches in rural areas, enabling the reuse of old structures, reusing the existing materiality and, thus, seeking a less invasive approach in the existing building - the ruin - respecting the past and its historical and social value.

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The conversion uses emerges as a highly important instrument for the maintenance of the place memory. It is important to highlight the multi functionality of rural areas, recognizing the potential of their resources as strategic elements for promoting balanced and integrated territorial development.

The proposed project translates into an intervention that focuses on the reuse of local architecture and targeted for tourism in rural areas (TER), along with the Cultural, interpretive and Housing Center of Bemposta (CCIH).

Keywords: Re-place, rural development, tourism

Introduction

The subject of the present article explores the characteristics of rural areas and how architecture can enhance this reality, through the strands of rehabilitation and reuse parts. Therefore, after a first approach to the village

of Bemposta, there was the need to restore the vernacular buildings (once economic and socially active), respecting local traditions and memories in order to transport them to the present, through economic and socially sustainable structures, able to revive a village increasingly devoid of experiences.

The choice of re-place theme resulted essentially from the observation held to different typologies and construction processes found in this rural environment and the awareness that these models can contribute to valuing a forgotten territory, devoid of population (mostly young). Despite the desertification that plagues not only the village of Bemposta, but also the most rural areas of mirandês plateau, these spaces are carriers of historical and cultural potential, with the ability to generate economic and environmental sustainability and promote a comfortable return to the origins of who emigrated in search of better living conditions, as well as the entry of new users looking for a sustainable rurality.

The objective is to value the vernacular architecture of the Northern region of the country, where the reinterpretation of new models preserves the relation with the pre-existence, using and recycling materials inherent to the pre-existence and the place. This way, we give rise to a few fundamental questions that need to be probed, trying to answer the objectives outlined, such as to define the vocation of the pre-existence, to name the implications of the reconversion of uses in the structure and image of the buildings and, fundamentally, to reformulate the concept of place and to realize in what way does the project intervention contribute to the maintenance of memory, culture and tradition of it.

This project intervention has, as a main objective, the definition of a set of general intervention principles in the rehabilitation of small structures in the council of Bemposta, specially through the conservation and preservation of vernacular architecture, using techniques and materials adequate to the reality of the location, in such a way as not to compromise the original outline nor the traditional values. The creation of a Cultural, Interpretative and Habitation Centre of Bemposta (CCIHB) is proposed, one that incorporates the various aspects directed towards the enhancement of the village, namely in regards to culture, interpretation, habitation and tourism.

The problem of territory and possible solutions for the present | future

To preserve the memories of the location while intervening in the pre-existent, it was necessary to investigate and acknowledge the premises inherent to the location, the alterations made throughout the times, its process of evolution and, mainly, what currently remains. A large part of the built-up areas in the north-eastern villages is currently without use and

without life, left to abandon and transformed into ruin. This ruin works as a passport that takes us to a faraway past and, in some cases, such premises remain inherent to what was formerly considered a building.

According to Maria Veloso (2011), the respect for what exists, for the ruin, is the attitude that should overcome to any other characteristic when approaching an edification to be rehabilitated, in a space marked by its historic, architectural and monumental value. It is necessary to respect the remains of the memories of the past that, instead of blackening the memories of the built-up area, refines it with the justice of time. This enormous respect, however, cannot become an obstacle to the creativity of the intervener, but a positive factor in the approach to intervention.

The consequent state of abandonment and degradation of a lot of our architectural and cultural patrimony demands different calls to awareness and action by those charged with the responsibility to recover, protect and preserve the identity of the location. The conservation, the rehabilitation and the reconversion are currently seen as operating tools in the creation of architecture. Due to new economic realities, and to a change in political attitudes in face of the national heritage, these approaches are currently considered standard practice in architecture.

Regarding the primary factors of the decay of the rural spaces, of the landscape and of the built-up area, they are the desertification and the depopulation, and they are consequently at the source of the ruin of material and immaterial values.

In the specific case of Portugal, the biggest cause of the effect of desertification, and the one with more expression, is the depopulation. With a special focus in the Northern Region of Portugal and particularly in Trás-os-Montes, as the rural space occupies a place of special importance in the territorial composition. From the 1950s onward, a large part of these spaces have become fragile, unpopulated, empty and lifeless spaces. Since that time, a series of social transformations and changes have occurred in the rural area, a consequence of the negative and unbalanced demographic tendencies registered in those rural spaces. This demographic change was mostly due to the bad quality of life in the rural setting that, along with a feeling of uncertainty towards the future, forced most of the population to immigrate to countries that could offer a different quality of life, and more attractive financial conditions. The migrations towards the industrialized and urbanized centres led, mostly, to the abandonment of traditional agriculture and desertification, as much physical as human. Consequently, unemployment and the diminishing of income have crucially promoted the rural exodus.

The European Commission itself, through document *The future of the rural world* published in 1988, mentions that the rural space displays

vital functions for the whole society, it is indispensable for the ecological balance, and is becoming a place of privileged welcoming for rest and leisure. In the same document, it states that the rural world is affected by several problems, mostly due to the pressure of economic evolution on the nearby agricultural regions and that the continued and massive rural exodus does not permit a natural development of the rural world (Cardoso, 2001).

Throughout the next decades, the rural world showed demographic tendencies increasingly negative and unbalanced, combining a high mortality rate and a reduced birth rate with the growing effect of immigration, both domestic and abroad. All these factors have contributed to the desertification of many rural spaces and population centres.

According to Fernando de Sousa (2005), the rural spaces, especially in the Douro Valley territories, "are struggling with a vast and complex set of blockages and frailties", arising from several factors, namely a very reduced demographic dynamic, which translates in a continuing ageing process in its population, a reduced cultural participation, a lot of it due to a low level of education of the local populations, a feeble economy, characterized mostly by the production of agricultural products; the deficient access to the region¹⁵, very important to establish communication with the rest of the country, the lack of current and global information, the reduced presence in terms of integrated tourism offerings¹⁶; the inexistence of a common profit strategy for the historic and cultural patrimony.

The decline of the population and of the economic activities in the rural world accompany, in a certain way, the crisis in the country. The population, leaving their roots in search of better conditions, leaves the land and production, causing a decrease in the consumption of goods. Consequently, the land is no longer cultivated, leading to the asphyxiation of the production structures that, totally deprived of human and financial assets eventually disappear. Much in the same way, the population decreases, which also diminishes the investment in basic infrastructures. All these processes of cause and consequence intertwine, leading to a contagious and unstoppable process. The population decrease is continuous, growing into a never ending cycle, which leads to the desertification of the rural areas (DGDR, 1995).

Despite all these problems, the rural world must be looked at as a supplier of goods and services. The desertification processes, together with the abandonment of agricultural activity and production of goods, are elements that unite the local agents in search of solutions that allow to alter

¹⁵ Although currently there have been substantial improvements in this regard.

¹⁶ However, this sector is clearly developing in the region, especially through TER and TN.

this scenario and to promote a sustainable rural development. Currently, we are seeing a slight, but progressive, return of people to the rural areas. In that regard, the tourism sector is an advantage to promote a sustainable development¹⁷ and to propose activities related with the aspects of Rural Tourism (TER) and Landscape Tourism (TN) that boost the rural areas.

As a reply to the increase and the diversification of the demand in the tourism sector, as well as to the search of solutions for the continued decline of the rural areas and for rural desertification, there has been, from the 1970s onward, a controlled development of tourism and sporting and recreational activities in the rural world, which has appeared as an important factor to recover and revitalize the economy, the society and the culture of these territories.

Although this study is centred on the politics of rural development that had a direct impact in the society of the rural world and, especially, on those connected to activities related with the tourism sector (especially the TER and the TN), it is necessary to make a brief capitulation of the main programs and politics directed towards rural development that have been responsible in the creation of strategic documents, of rural territory planning, and of solutions for the question of the rural world.

In the eyes of TER and TN, Program LEADER was significant in terms of the impact it made, especially in the rehabilitation and requalification of the rural patrimony.

YEAR	POLICIES FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT	
1950	PAC (Common Agricultural Policy)	
1976	Granada Appeal	
1991	Program LEADER I (Connection between Actions of Development and Rural Economy)	
1995	Program LEADER II	
2000	AGRO Program (Operational Program of Agriculture and Rural Development)	Action AGRIS (Action Agriculture and Rural Development of the Regional Operational Programs)
2001	Program LEADER +	
2004	FEADER (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development)	
2007	IGT (Instruments of Territorial Management) – PNPOT (National Program for the Policy of Territorial Planning)	
2007	PRODER (Program for Rural Development in the Mainland)	
2007	PRRN (Program for the National Rural Network)	

Image 1 - Rural development policies

¹⁷ Without neglecting the agricultural sector and cattle raising that, by themselves, do not present viable conditions to structure solutions for rural development.

Considering that one of the biggest factors of tourist attraction (among others) for this regions is their historic patrimony and the patrimonial values - edified, cultural, environmental and landscape -, we must reference the importance that the financing and the orientation of Program LEADER had in the recovery and also in the re-conversion of lodgings and infrastructures that would prolong their physical and environmental degradation through time. Although it is considered a broad plan, aimed at the sustainable development of the rural area, LEADER is more directed for the tourism sector, with a particular emphasis on TER and TN, considering them more and more fundamental for a safe, effective and sustained rural development.

***Re-place* – using the matter of the place**

Approaching the concept of *re-place*, its importance in the relation with the pre-existence and its connection to the rehabilitation and reconversion, be it material, immaterial, functional and spatial, it can be inserted in the re-utilization processes in architecture, comparable to concepts of reconversion, such as adaptive reuse or *retrofit*. Given its broad and encompassing definition, it allows for many and different interpretations. However, there is an underlying objective that the architectural reuse must be understood as an evolution of process, that happens over time.

In the direct definition of *re-place* or *retrofit*, to execute this kind of operations in a construction means to give it a new life, preserving original aspects and adapting it to current demands and standards. These concepts are often mentioned together as "reform" or "restoration", although there are substantial differences between them. Restoration consists in the restitution of the edification to its original condition (that had in Viollet-le-Duc the main defender of this practice), and reformation entails an upgrade, without compromising the previous characteristics. The *re-place* or *retrofit* looks for the harmonization of some concepts inherent to restoration and reformation, renovation and maintenance, as it tries to maintain the original characteristics, adapting them to the present day (Resende, 2013). This concept is a good alternative to value old constructions and a good contributor for sustainability, not only due to the recycling and reutilization of matter, but also due to the insertion of sustainable technology. *Re-place* acts as a keeper of natural resources, reforming the image of the space, its character, its function, and preserving the integrity of the architectural space and of the place. In this approach to the *re-place* and, considering that the identity of the edification comes from the place where it is inserted, the definition of place is demystified, considering it as a physical, phenomenal and ontological process. The concept of place has caused many discussions

in contemporary architecture. It can be understood as a phenomenal entity that encloses specific meanings and forms (able to transform into an element capable of influencing or giving cause to an intervention).

Spatial attributes Bioclimatic attributes

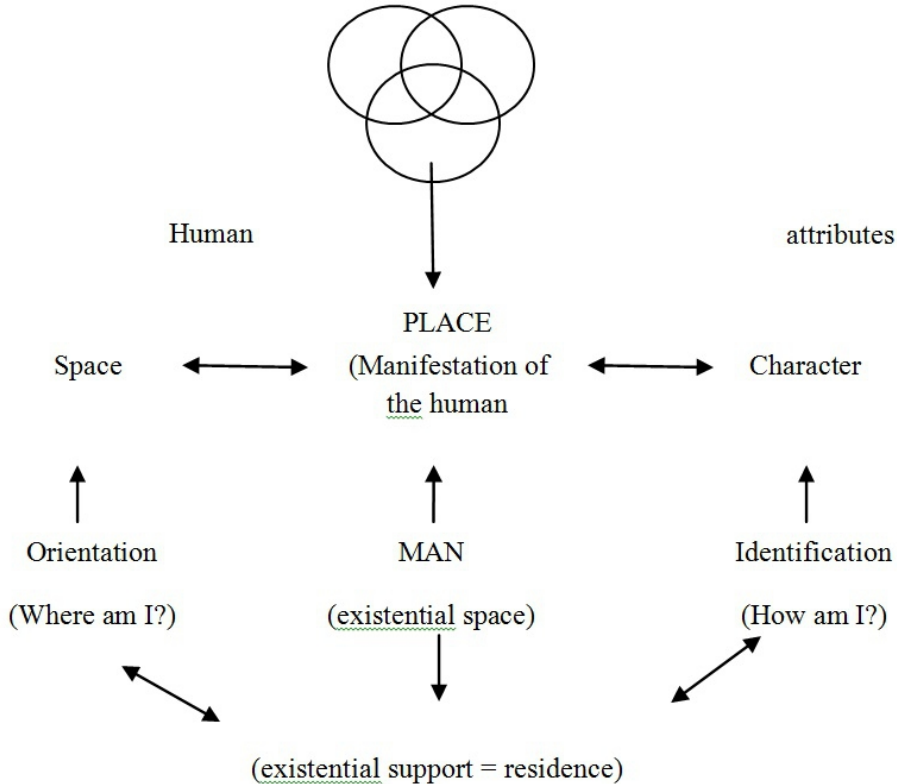


Image 2 - Graphical schematic about the concept of Place according to Norberg-Schulz (Reis-Alves, 2007)

On the other hand, the importance of place as a significant element can also be undervalued (in the perspective of a global society, mostly urban and technological, the "standardizes" places) and its aesthetical importance may be underestimated due to the simple fact that time has altered or vanished the form of the place (Neves, 2001). This attitude towards the place is translated into a creation process, whose main objective is the autonomy of the form, dictating their own directives and establishing itself as something radical and innovative.

In the relation of the place with the *re-place*, it is considered fundamental to intervene according to the concept that each place has its identity, its culture, its history. The understanding and the interpretation of the place may contribute to generate an architectural space, in the sense that it has the potential to generate spaces to organize and maximize new uses.

The pre-existent conformation of the natural terrain, its planimetry and altimetry and also its morphological relation with the landscape and with the natural aspects inherent to the place, allow for the identification of orientation lines in the planning of the space and of the shape (Maciel, 2003).

This way, the *re-place* works as a set of approaches that, by stimulation or reformulation, infuse themselves in the multi-faceted structure of the place. The factors of the culture of a territory and the parameters that eventually characterize are limitations to an intervention (Cruz et. al., 2010). This concept approaches the interventions of rehabilitation and reconversion in the sense of maintaining the memories of the past that, in this case, consist mostly in the reutilization and recycling of the material of the pre-existing in the current construction, maintaining the values of the culture and of the vernacular patrimony of the place.

Project intervention

The implementation of the strategy comes during the visit to the rural centre of Bemposta, and from the realization that the area surrounding the Church, strategically located, as well as the area of the viewpoint, that establishes a direct and genuine relation with nature in its purest form. This way, the orientation of the CCIHB, that encompasses four sides that are considered fundamental for rural development, connected with culture, tourism, history and temporary lodging, allows the stimulation of the interchange among users and the possibility of making use of the amenities of the place. In this sense, the aim is to give incentive and to promote multiple income and economical sustainability that, through culture, traditions, temporary lodging, TER and through the implementation of the tourist circuits between several points in the village, whether through the promotion of the traditional products (craft work, gastronomy, among others) and new products and activities. It is this point, with an intervention aimed at the reutilization of the local architecture and directed at TER, that the proposed CCIHB arises.

This enterprise (CCIHB) predicts its implementation on one of the oldest areas of the village of Bemposta, the Church Square and all the area surrounding the viewpoint, peripheral to the village. One of the main reasons to choose this location was the wealth in examples of vernacular architecture in the area. Regarding the territory's intervention plan, it was divided in two: general plan - macro scale (county and village) and specific plan - micro scale (CCIHB). The general plan, directed towards the whole village, predicts the creation of several circuits between several important points in the village, culminating at the CCIHB and creating conditions that allow for the improvement of the living conditions of those who live there.

The county's rural development strategy places great importance in the creation of new infrastructures and in the revision of existing structures with the objective of promoting and giving a new lease of life to the rural areas. In a micro scale analysis, to the county, it is clear the existence of several frailties, thus proposing a structural plan on several levels, among them the rehabilitation of the connection points (accesses) and the revitalization of important spaces in the village (empty). The specific plan, planned on a more reduced scale, predicts the revitalization of the area surrounding the CCIHB and the spatial organization of the public spaces that compose this area. Considering the objectives outlined, the CCIHB will be an advantage in terms of recognition of place, through its various designations - cultural, interpretive, habitation, interactive, commercial, sporting - thus fighting some of the issues that this area faces. The CCIHB comes from the addition of pre-existences, proceeding to its rehabilitation and reconversion to the contents desired. With this enterprise, it is intended to offer the users various possibilities to enjoy and take comfort in the place, through several program contents proposed for an expo area, a bar area with terrace, a store to sell regional products, a front desk, a library, a space destined to sports, administrative services, an office destined to TER and a space for temporary, low-cost stay. Exploring the subject of the reconversion of uses, some setbacks arose like, for example, the transformation of what used to be independent buildings into a unified whole, and the internal connections that follow.

In terms of material, there was a need and a will to make use of the pre-existent in the reconversion, the principle of the surrounding structural wall in granite masonry. The objective of maintaining the language and the material of the constructions was achieved, through the idea of making up the façade from the pre-existence. Most of the edifications were maintained and rehabilitated, and only some of those walls and a roof were demolished and rebuilt.

Conclusion

In this article we analyse interventions in the vernacular architecture, specially in the Bemposta county, and in which way can they contribute to fight the growing factors of desertification, depopulation and consequent abandonment of the buildings and of the land. This way, it is essentially intended to answer the objectives outlined in the Introduction. Regarding the first two questions, related with the calling of the pre-existence and the implications of the interventions in its image, we realize that the interventions as rehabilitation, reconversion and reconstruction are essential contributes for the maintenance of the pre-existing buildings and also to increase its "life span". It is necessary to respect the past, to combine the

calling of the pre-existence with the introduction of new program contents. All those alterations have implications in the structure and in the image, that should be current and, at the same time, connected to the traditions inherent to the building and the surrounding area. Regarding the third question, directly related with the place and with the maintenance of memory, culture and tradition, it is concluded that when deciding to intervene, it becomes necessary to make a previous study of all the characteristics inherent to the place so that it may be possible to create a perfect dialogue between all the entities that intervene in the project. The proposal of the project respects the characteristics of the place, it rises in relation to the place and organizes its form and function, considering the appreciation of the local traditions and culture, in order to retrieve memories of the place and transport all its qualities to future generations.

The importance of maintaining the memory of the place and of the pre-existence may constitute an essential factor in the project interventions in the edification. With an absolute fidelity to the vernacular and popular architecture of the Northern region, the program was proposed considering not overlapping the pre-existing, and not altering its physical space. This way, a careful programmatic choice was performed, taking advantage of the parcels and of the dimensions of the pre-existing buildings, respecting the integrity of the edification and the memory of the place.

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