

**Three squares for the Portuguese contemporary city:
the *geographical square*, the *structural square* and the *relational square***

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Squares have been the study subject of various fields of knowledge: sociologists, anthropologists, historians and other scholars from many other sciences and arts have focused on this subject. However, in proposing the theme of the square as architecture, we understand it in its condition of architectural permanence, in its value as urban significance and in its suitability as a form; we will appeal to the notions of memory, city and place as determinants of a square's project.

Our objective is to put the square as a fundamental theme in the form of the contemporary city and, in parallel, formulate an orderly system of squares that can articulate the morphological differences of the current city. The issues we focus on have to do not only with the form of public spaces (their design and position – an operative grammar) but also with the relation and articulation between public spaces (an order – an efficient syntax). Thus, we can devise a strategy for public spaces that may contribute to the prioritization and the characterization of the form of the contemporary city.

The city is still the privileged field of architecture, and in a new urbane context where the restrictions are in cyclical change, the architecture of public spaces has to meet again, more and more, with its structural components of stability, permanence and spatial dynamics and be shown like reality and presence. Unlike the systems of composition of the consolidated city, the nature of the new forms of land is established through a process of non-hierarchical, heterogeneous connection, which becomes entrenched and continuously modified into an anti-genealogical process and leads to the continuous argumentation against the necessity of any treaty or foundational speech about architecture or city.

What kind of squares interest the contemporary city? When Bernardo Secchi states that the image of the contemporary city already exists but is waiting for a project, he underlines the urgent necessity, in view of the new complex reality of the contemporary society, to project the forms that shape the city like an organism,.

If it is true that squares are again the subject of study and analysis, and particularly the subject of several architectural projects in recent reformulations of the historic cities centres (under numerous different pretexts) and in the recovery of degraded areas in the periphery or in "abandoned" transition areas, it can also be argued that the project-dominant perspective is limited to a collective use of the available space through fragmented and excessive design, subsidiary of other project disciplines. Public space is not itself considered and designed as architecture, in its prevalent relationship with tradition and innovation, as an autonomous form and a fundamental element in the continued form of the city. Then, it appears, artificially and sequentially, as

the solution to interstitial areas produced by the buildings, or as a possible formal unifying element of architectural fragments scattered randomly throughout the territory.

In the study of Portuguese traditional squares, and when we became aware of current urban conditions, we found recurrent conceptual fields, which allow us to propose three *squares characters* for the contemporary city. *Geographical*, *structural* and *relational* mean then, each one of them, a kind of genetic material of the square – ‘genotype’ – that views the relationship between the square and the territory, the urban landscape, the road system and the buildings, either by extolling the square value as an individual and autonomous element, or by accentuating its intrinsic connection with the road system where it belongs and with the buildings that comprise it. Our ‘genotypes’ of squares enclose the characteristics that we evaluated as necessary to keep on making squares, and they link the contemporary circumstances that permit their implementation; they also allow for the possibility of a reassessment of the semantic concept of square and of the significance of new urban systems and places where they can insert themselves. They are intended, ultimately, to ensure continuity of the effective formal diversity of the square, but they emphasize, always, their historical condition as urban elements that are essential to the city.

With our proposal to three ‘genotypes’ of squares to the contemporary city - a *geographical square*, a *structural square* and a *relational square* - we reaffirm the need for site selection, as a determinant factor in the characterization of urban planning, and for the definition of architectural places; we insist on the importance of a road hierarchy, as a condition of a unified and diverse mesh; and we demand the condition of exceptional city buildings, as essential elements in the composition of the shape of the contemporary city.

In the territory, some exceptional sites in the natural landscape have been chosen as special places of edification. This careful choice celebrated the extraordinary nature of the site and consecrated nature as a purpose of man, understood in its most profound contradiction: the ultimate aspiration to completion (nature as quasi-divine concept) and the constant necessity of its transformation (nature as a place of accommodation/housing). So, nature and place buildings were set up as a whole, which both encouraged the magical character of the landscape, and also demonstrated its ability to adapt to different forms of housing – starting, in this way, the process of fixating people and a geographic urbanity. We believe that despite the Websites or variable topologies, it is in the geographic condition of the public site that we want to find one of the purposes of formal perception of the contemporary city.

In the interpretation of the available territory for the growth of the contemporary city, and in the re-evaluation of some of the characteristics of Portuguese squares (particularly those whose origins are ‘rossio’ or river and sea piers; those that are configured as open squares; or those that withdraw from a identified system of public spaces), we believe we have found the conditions for achieving our ‘genotype’ of *geographical square*. So,

the geographic square will be all the squares whose origin depends essentially on the geographical constraints of place and landscape, which entails a clear link with the territory, and which becomes autonomous as landscape construction.

The construction of the contemporary city is torn between two urban sceneries that are difficult to reconcile or resolve distinctly: one that develops from the mega and territorial road structure, dictated by strategies geared towards the resolution of the new mobility, and one still structured in an urban culture that has the street as a fundamental theme of its composition. These two ranges of the territory's architecture are not, however, shaped by buildings that distinguish or harmonize them. The analysis we made about the idiosyncrasies of the current city (the marginal provision of new buildings concerning major road infrastructure, the frequent submission of the layout of streets to the traditional role of the architectural object) and, concurrently, the study we carried out about Portuguese traditional squares (particularly those whose origin is a "largo" and those that fall sequentially in an ordered system of public spaces), began to shape our proposal of the 'genotype' of the *structural square*.

The *structural square* will be the square of repetition of the contemporary city that defines important and enhancer points of different 'urbanities'. The possible and desired relationship between such squares supports a continuity that links the diverse and heterogeneous networks that draw up the actual city. The structural square can perhaps reconstruct the builder skeleton of a public space system, which articulated different areas of the city and reinforced their different natures.

The vulgarization of the meaning of 'architectural exception', by the continuous construction of individual, unique and inventive buildings, is one of the problems in the construction of the contemporary city. In parallel, we witness the devaluation of the concept of tissue in a context where it is difficult to identify an urban composition, or evidence of a new order. By recognizing, though, the uniqueness of some buildings in the new urbanized areas and their condition of exception, we found, in many cases, an inability to stabilize the vast open spaces that accompany them functionally, and the inability to draw these spaces as a main intermediation with the surrounding soil (inevitable confrontation and support), with the geographical nature and technique, and with (or consciously against) the historical depth of its constitution. Thus, either through the study of Portuguese traditional squares (including those that have their genesis in the yards and 'terreiros'; those that are configured as squares of facades, or those that we call volume squares), or by evaluating the significance and persistence of an architecture that we can qualify as an individual one, we think that we have found the conditions for achieving our 'genotype' of *relational square* for the contemporary city.

Therefore, the *relational square* will be the square that reinforces the collective utility of the exceptional building that has created it, and which gives an identity to the urban space underlying the building - a clearly public space, recovering the traditional antinomy and complementarity between public and private sectors.

The squares should be a kind of urban reference that, in the development of its independent significance, in the exploitation of their structural continuity and in the equating of its contiguity with the buildings, can announce the possibility of an order. An order not only apparent but real, characterized by a balance between public space and buildings, and whose construction is made of repetitions and similarities, alignments, juxtapositions, homogeneities, hierarchies and exceptions - an order that can produce a system of references, a form.

To conclude, we would say that our genotypes squares - the *geographical square*, the *structural square* and the *relational square*:

- Identify a genetic material that the city has as its disposal to redraw itself;
- Empower the square as one of the urban core facts of the city;
- Assign to the square a capacity for a systemic articulation;
- And demonstrate their competence in controlling their own architectures.

The proposal that we put forward is not presented as prescription for the different pathologies of the current city, but rather as a set of procedures that we consider to be essential: it justifies the urgent need to identify the city's exceptional places, to distinguish their different road tissues and to prioritize their exceptional architectures. It also expresses the need for continuous systems (as outlined in the three genotypes of squares), which predispose the possibility of an order, understood not as a given but as a result, whenever necessary but always provisional. This work also prepares a sequence of squares as links of a process, which will recover the different interventional scales of a project and also reaffirms the meaning of the square as the fundamental element of urban city form and of urban value.

As Bruno Fortier puts it, "if the city to which we move is neither ancient nor modern, but - through a consolidation of the first and a modification of the second - is something like a third city that plays both contemporaneously, (...) if we are fascinated by the first and prisoner of the other - unable to return to the city but once assured that the city will never disappear - then this gives us permission to handle their forms and their memories as a major challenge".

Note - This article is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, "Form and circumstance: the square in the Portuguese contemporary city" presented at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto in December 2009.