

The squares in the Portuguese city.
Origins, processes of development, morphological characteristics

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Urban squares fulfil an important role in the urban organization of Portuguese cities. Under the generic name of *squares* we include a great variety of urban spaces – *praças, largos, campos, terreiros, adros* – with different functions, sizes, morphological characteristics and different types of relationships with the urban fabric and the buildings located in them. Each one of these different types of spaces has distinct attributes, but all of them fulfil a crucial role in the morphological structure of the city.

The location of squares, and their relationship with the urban structure, is never casual. Usually, the squares solve situations of real or potential morphological conflict, which may arise from the adaptation of the urban layout to the physical structure of the site, from the inflection or the articulation of structuring streets or from the articulation of urban fabrics built at different times. In other situations, the squares are associated to singular buildings, which are themselves located in singular locations, thus reinforcing the functional and the symbolic importance of these buildings and their locations. The success of the squares and their role in the urban structure results from the way they articulate these various factors.

The form of the squares results from their original functions, their origin and their relationships with the urban fabric. In any case, the squares may have a gradual development, their form resulting from successive small interventions through time, carried out by multiple actors or, instead, be built rapidly, involving the participation of architects or engineers. Whereas the former tend to be irregular, the later have usually a geometrical shape.

In Portuguese urbanism, planned squares were built mainly from the end of the 15th century, sometimes implanted in existing urban layouts, other times built as part of new urban

developments. The square acquired a growing prominence, associated with an increasing regularity of urban layouts. The regularity of urban squares also corresponded to the changing roles of these spaces. From the end of the 15th century, beginning of the 16th century, the squares became the centres of power – where the main urban institutions were located – replacing the topographically dominant locations that, up to then, had fulfilled that role. The construction of these new urban squares was associated to the construction of new urban equipments, usually Town Halls, main Churches and *Misericórdias*. These new buildings became the focus of these new urban spaces, thus reinforcing their functional and symbolic centrality.

These new squares became part of the overall logic of urban layouts. As a result of that, their relationship with the urban fabric was altered, becoming central elements in the morphology and the structure of the city. Soon, the squares became the generating elements of the urban fabric. The regularity of urban layouts, and the central role of squares, will reach its apex in the 18th century cities. In these cities, the square or rectangular urban squares, centrally located, assumed the role of generating elements of the urban fabric, from which the systems of streets and blocks was structured according to an orthogonal layout, and where the main institutional buildings were located.

The squares are a fundamental heritage of our cities. Their understanding and the re-creation of their symbolic and functional role is a fundamental task, in order to make them the fulcrum of a necessary urban revitalization.

Key-words: squares, urban morphology