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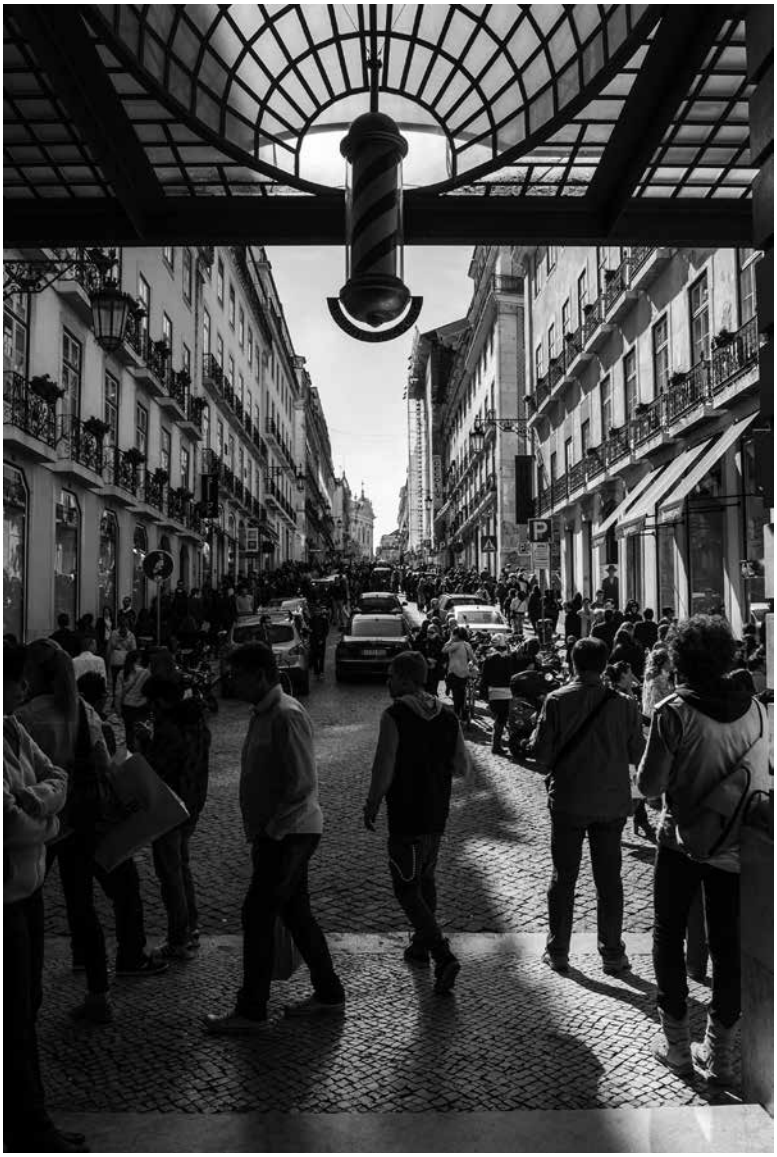
Sanity amidst schizophrenia: The process of Chiado reconstruction



Urban heritage

Interventions in urban heritage are ambivalent processes encompassing conservation actions claimed by the memorial role of heritage and transformations awakened by the life of the urban fabric, as proposed in 1931 by Giovannoni and globally propagated in 1976 by Unesco (Choay, 1992). They pose specific dilemmas that need clear and sane approaches as well as equally specific methodologies, capable of leading to synthesis decisions and actions.

Upon the doubts that arise during these processes, it is useful to review the intervention by Álvaro Siza in Chiado. This area of the 18th century Pombaline style scheme for Lisbon downtown suffered a fire in 1988 that destroyed 14 buildings and created an unexpected disruption in the city's history. The reconstruction plan was awarded internationally in 1993 and nationally in 1996, but unfortunately has since been forgotten by the architectural debate. This article analyses its approach and methodology, using the master-plan's drawings and regulation, as well as the built work itself, as the main source.

The Pombaline plan drawn-up for the reconstruction of Lisbon downtown after the 1755 earthquake lays out an urban space formed by the streets, of public use, and by the voids in the blocks interiors, of private use. The facades composition, supervised by military architects and engineers Manuel da Maia, Eugénio dos Santos and Carlos Mardel, is based on a regular rhythm of the openings, thoroughly defined by elevation drawings, except in public buildings, which have their own design. It strongly characterizes the public space and is notable among the urban plans so far in Europe (França, 1989). But besides benefiting from the historic and architectural value of the Pombaline plan like the rest of Lisbon downtown, the Chiado area has a unique place in the identity of Lisbon, because of the culturally important memories added throughout time.

1. The Chiado area with regained vitality, 2015. Credits: Brand and Communication Department, Lisbon Municipality

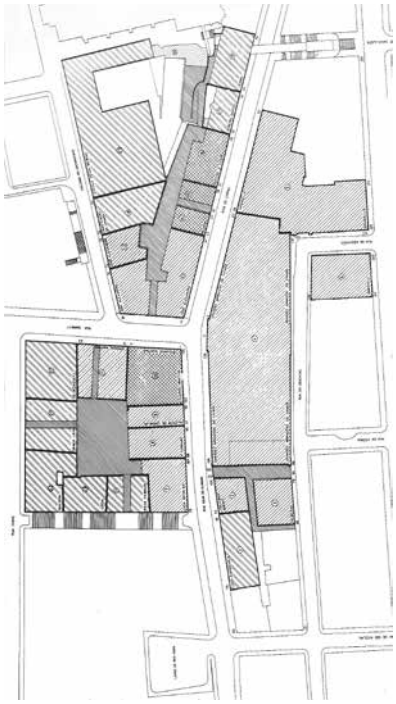
2. Corruption of the character of Pombaline architecture before 1988. Record of the status of Block A, photomontage after the 1988 fire. Credits: Álvaro Siza archive

Reconstruction

In the 1980 decade, Chiado was a declining shopping district and a scarcely inhabited area. The main street public space (Rua do Carmo) suffered from a failed architectural intervention which even prevented access to emergency vehicles; the buildings were also dilapidated, with no maintenance and no fire safety capabilities. The fire broke out in August 1988.

The reconnaissance and survey of the area after the fire confirmed that the urban blocks interiors were almost completely occupied with successive expansions, which corrupted their character and prevented cross ventilation of the buildings in the lower floors (*fig. 2*). The catastrophe was providing a unique chance for a transformation. However, in spite of the decline and the disruption, the cultural value of Chiado had to be preserved.

It was necessary to draw-up a plan to co-ordinate the projects by the public entities and by the different private owners within the



3. Expanding public usufruct to the inside of the blocks. Plan of the areas to be integrated in the public space, excerpt of drawing dated April 1990. Credits: Álvaro Siza archive

disaster area. The Chiado Disaster Area was bounded including not only the 14 destroyed buildings, but also 11 other buildings not affected or little affected by the fire, in order to carry out a coherent intervention in complete urban blocks.

Urban Space

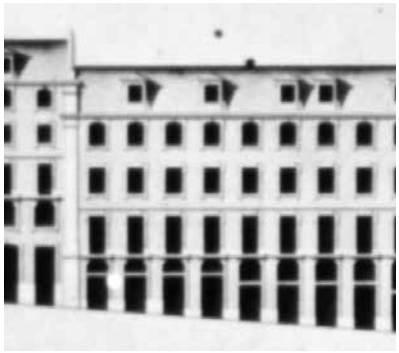
Álvaro Siza's approach to improve the conditions for the quality of life of residents and other users waived a spectacular transformation and valued instead a difficult balance with Pombaline architecture (Siza & Portas, 1998).

New transport infrastructures were co-ordinated with the city's mobility plan: a new public and residents parking was envisaged; and exits of the underground station, that was being planned, were defined on axis with Rua da Vitória, at downtown level, and in the Largo do Chiado, at high level, already outside the Disaster Area. Improved connections to the whole city were thus implemented.

A new pedestrian network in addition to the existing road network and the Santa Justa Lift was created by expanding public usufruct to the inside of the blocks within the intervention area. This action increased permeability between downtown and the hill on the west side (Bairro Alto and Carmo). At the same time, it created in the core of one of the blocks a void and rear facades that did not exist. And finally it allows space for much welcomed amenities.

The experience of Chiado rejoined some normality with the completion of the works of the Chiado Department Store in 1999. However, the plan remained incompletely realized for further 15 years. Only after that interregnum did the works resume in the connection to the hill of Convento do Carmo. At the time of writing, the planned change to the urban network has recently been completed. (*Fig. 3*).

Such a transformation manifested itself, naturally, in new urban elements. The design of all of them embodies the structural transformation of urban space without joining the show of old-new contrast and without receding to minimization: the new facades followed the regular rhythm and the proportions of the Pombaline ones; the parking was concentrated in the only non-Pombaline building (the Grandella Department Store), whose architecture had already an entrance with compatible width; the underground exits and the public lift were integrated inside buildings and new accesses were opened in the existing facades, thus avoiding new volumes or barriers in the urban space; accesses and passages to the interiors of the blocks have taken, whenever possible, the rhythm of the existing openings in the facades (*Fig. 4*); handrails, fountains and other detailed elements have taken a severe character compatible with Pombaline architecture. The key criterion in the design of new urban elements was their adequacy to the Pombaline architecture and its development exceedingly pursued the correctness of proportions, dimensions and material qualities (Siza & Salgado, 1997).



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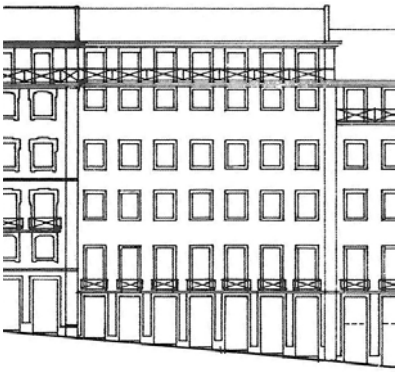

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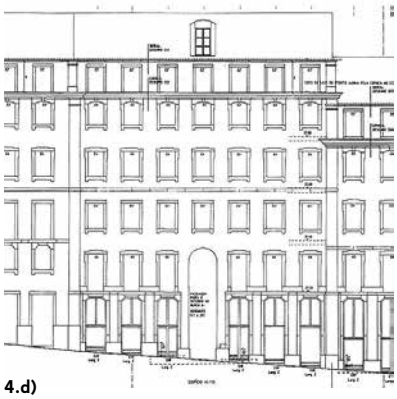


4.d)

4. Appropriateness of new urban elements to Pombaline architecture. New passage between Rua do Carmo and the interior of Block B. Credits: Álvaro Siza archive

a) elevation from the Reconstruction Plan of Lisbon Downtown after the 1755 earthquake, excerpt of "Prospecto da Rua Nova do Carmo, no lado que olha para o Oriente"

b) reconstitution of the state before the fire, excerpt of drawing dated May 1989

c) reconstruction elevation, excerpt of drawing dated May 1989

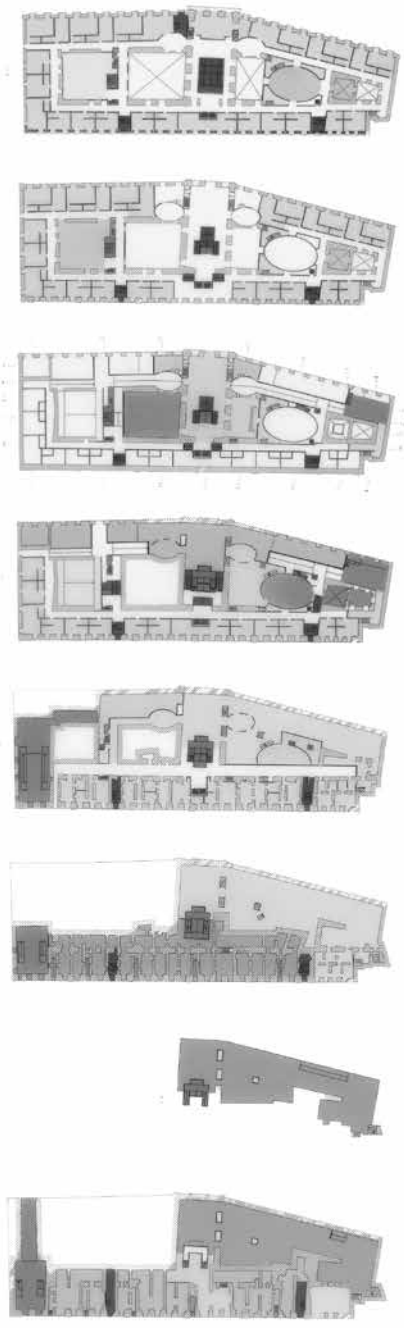
d) final reconstruction elevation, excerpt of drawing dated 1993

The new transport infrastructures and the expansion of public usufruct radically change urban life; yet they materialized in new urban elements whose treatment is remarkably appropriate to Pombaline architecture.

Users and owners

In view of the decline before the fire, the reconstruction plan had to improve conditions for the existing and new users, which consisted of infrastructural, comfort and fire safety upgrade in the non-destroyed and destroyed buildings. The Chiado process combined this architectural action with financial support, seeking to keep the residents, merchants and owners.

At the time of the fire, all the 11 non-destroyed buildings were at least partially in use with retail and housing. Instead of, hypothetically, solving the decay issues through a renovation requiring relocating the residents, the decision was in favour of simple and surgical restorations, while the dwellings were in use. Surveys and inspections showed the shortcomings and lack of health and safety; then, the works, financed by Recria program, restored the building envelopes, upgraded infrastructures in the common areas and in some cases created sanitary facilities inside the dwellings. This action was consistently conducted along several years and had the expected effect: the integral permanence of the residents.



5. Appropriateness of the program to the spatial structure of the buildings. Study for definition of the program and areas of Chiado Department Store Building, excerpt of set of drawings dated April 1990. Credits: Álvaro Siza archive

As for the 14 destroyed buildings, at the time of the fire there was no residential use at all. This problem would have to be solved by the brief for the buildings, which will be discussed later in this article. Then there were two strategies aimed at the permanence of existing figures: merchants and owners. For the merchants there was neither financial nor relocation support. Only the author of the plan endeavored to provide in the reconstructed buildings the areas and infrastructure that they specifically needed to return to activity. This strategy was insufficient due to the low competitiveness of the existing retail, the long duration of the works and the increase in rents after reconstruction. For the owners, the government created the Special Fund to Support the Reconstruction of Chiado (Fundo Extraordinário de Ajuda à Reconstrução do Chiado). The result ranged from owners who actually used the fund to invest in the reconstruction, those who sold their buildings to new investors of their own volition and those who, as they were already in a difficult situation, including the two largest buildings in the area (Grandella and Chiado Department Stores), lost the properties to the creditor banks. In short, the result was the partial permanence of the owners and a failure in returning the merchants to the reconstructed buildings.

The preference for interventions compatible with existing inhabitants in the non-destroyed buildings remained the aspect of the architectural methodology that, although less well-known, contributed to the possible continuity of the social fabric and to the mix of existing and newcoming residents.

Uses

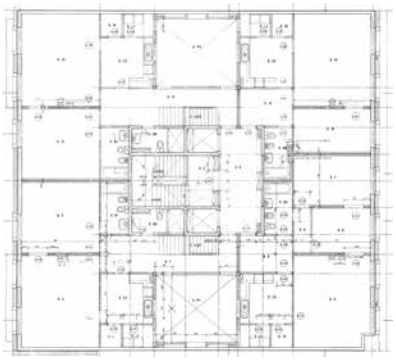
In order to completely recover the area's vitality, the plan should orchestrate a variety of users at different times of the day. The architectural approach was to maintain the land ownership structure and to regulate the uses that each reconstructed building would host according to its interior spatial structure.

Methodologically, the appropriateness of the brief was studied by means of plans, sections and elevations of each destroyed building, testing floor by floor the uses to be installed: the ground floors had an obvious shopping predisposition; the attics should be technical areas, to prevent installation of equipments above the roofs; the intermediate floors were reserved for services; and the last two floors for housing. Re-implementing housing deliberately contradicted the tendency of the real estate market, which pointed to the complete tertiarisation in each building and, by leverage effect, of the entire Lisbon centre.

In most buildings, the first defined brief was fully implemented. The exception was the Chiado Department Store, the key building in the reconstruction area, due to its large size. The main use prescribed in the plan for this building was a hotel, to generate use of public space at different times of the day (*Fig.* 5). In this case, the existence of a single interested developer led to the negotiation of

an amendment to the plan. Throughout this, the study was subjected to successive changes which correspond to successive proposals and counterproposals programs. The change agreed to in 1996 consisted of reducing the hotel area, which now only occupies the top floor and part of the floor below, and increasing the shopping area, which became the main function. The drawn study fulfilled the role of setting functional appropriateness and maintenance of the original spatial geometry as pre-conditions for the negotiation.

The result of the approach and the methodology was respectively to contribute to the multi-functionality of the Lisbon centre and to suit the uses to the architecture of the buildings.



6. Adequacy of the geometry, scale and proportion of interior spaces in relation to external openings. Castro & Melo building, Level 6 Plan, 1991 – 1996 (Álvaro Siza). Credits: Álvaro Siza archive

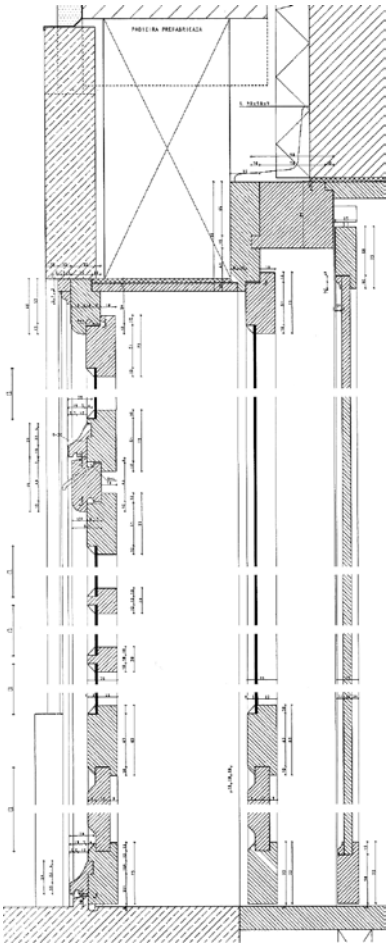
Interior spaces

The strategy to materialize the actions inside the buildings had to consider the real scope of a *plan*, as opposed to a *project*. Regarding the organization of the interior spaces, the reconstruction plan regulation establishes few conditions: it only stipulates that the partitions cannot meet the exterior openings and that the floor slabs retain the original relations with sills and window sills. The very Pombaline plan was also vague in this matter. Not surprisingly, a documental research in the municipality archives to support the preparation of the reconstruction plan, revealed different interior organizations from building to building at the time of the fire. Instead, Siza's plan offered constructional solutions for the two main types of action: restoration and reconstruction.

In the 11 non-destroyed buildings, the upgrading of comfort and safety conditions mentioned in a previous chapter was implemented while fully preserving the construction system, based on a mixed structure of wood skeleton (the "cage", made up of pillars, beams, diagonal braces, joists) and masonry (facades and gables). Restoration was done with traditional techniques, both in the said mixed structure and in finishes, decorations and finials.

However, in the 14 burnt buildings, the long duration of the fire left standing only some of the elements built in masonry. These elements were restored and the buildings were rebuilt with a modern structural system and materials. As usual in Pombaline buildings, the interior walls remain single planes, with no visible signs of a skeleton.

In the reconstruction process, each owner was also free to appoint the authors of designs for his building. The overwhelming majority of architects adopted a modern and generic character in the interior spaces, inconsistent with the character and with the rigor imposed on the urban complex. The exceptions are found in the buildings that Alvaro Siza also designed, which show appropriate criteria in the common and housing spaces. Among these principles, the essential (and less easily configurable) is the adequacy of the geometry, scale and proportion of spaces in relation to external openings. (*Fig. 6*)



7. Evolution of detail solutions without caricaturing the previous ones. Typical detail of exterior opening, excerpt of drawing dated April 1993. Credits: Álvaro Siza archive.

The small number of rules applicable to the interior spaces of the reconstructed buildings did not prevent treatments alien to the character of the urban ensemble. The influence of the plan in the interior spaces was achieved mainly by keeping and restoring the existing elements and buildings; and by carefully integrating a modern construction system in the reconstructed buildings.

Facades

The facades, essential elements for the urban character, help us to understand how Álvaro Siza dealt with the problematic of historic accuracy.

In the early stages of work on the facades the spotlight was on identifying and reconstituting the Pombaline rule of composition, as opposed to juxtaposed (extensions at the rear and above the roofs) and subtracted (mainly on the ground floor to widen shop windows) elements that had come to degrade the character of the area before the fire. The post-Pombaline extensions of one whole floor above the original entablature, generalized in downtown, were maintained on the basis of a solution already assimilated into the character of this architecture and formally appropriate.

The reconstructed stonework was thoroughly defined, according to the rules revealed in a detailed survey carried out on the same or other buildings of the same period. Different reliefs of the facades have been drawn and tested on prototypes in detail. For elements with several exposed sides, no visible cladding joints are allowed. For example, balconies, entablatures, or decorative elements, were rebuilt in solid stone.

Regarding the window frames, a survey of existing solutions in the Pombaline downtown confirmed that a "pure" role model is not available, neither in elevation composition nor in detail. Failing that, a type was defined that, presumably not corresponding to the oldest frames, is already commonly considered part of the style. To this frame, is added to a second one behind, in order to improve the thermal behavior of the opening. This alternative to double glazing keeps a certain distortion in the reflections of windows, only possible with the single 3 mm glass (*Fig. 7*). The typical opening has been tested in prototype and adopted as the working basis. Finally, all the various dimensions and proportions have been detailed for application in the plan.

The accuracy of the method helps to explain the perception of overall consistency and correctness. From general composition to detail, the plan's response was in order to continue the history of development of solutions without caricaturing the previous ones.

Topicality

What then is the relevance of Chiado reconstruction in relation to the issue of intervention in urban heritage? It is not found in any new specific aspect. Despite two goals not attained — as we saw earlier, the prevalence of generic character in the interior spaces and the

non-return of former traders to reconstructed buildings –, the process is exemplary, since it integrates a systematically inquisitive approach and a coherent and recognizable architectural methodology.

The relevance of this case is clarified by contrast with the trend that Francoise Choay (1992) identified at least as early as 1988. Indeed, both the political powers, with the economicist methodologies they are more and more adopting and the media, with the controversies over financing and administration they select, have led to schizophrenic processes. Conservation is literally applied to existing elements while transformation is increasingly disproportionate, either in contrasting new urban elements, sudden gentrification of users, imposing functional programs, unnecessary renewals or technical upgrades uncontrolled in detail. The absence of a coherent architectural methodology for the ensembles has also left the processes dependent on the expertise and talent of the architects of each of the rehabilitated buildings, with very uneven results.

On the contrary, pondering the transformation, which is so necessary to the life of a city, and include it organically in conservation, is a complex process. It includes, however, a specifically architectural methodology that, in the case of Chiado, was taken to the maximum extent by the author of the plan and that unfolded in the five dimensions discussed throughout this article: the design criteria to adequate new urban elements to Pombaline architecture; the preference for interventions reconcilable with the existing social fabric; the appropriateness of uses to the urban dynamics and spatial structure of the buildings; the maintenance of construction system whenever possible, and careful formal integration of new ones where they are needed; finally, the evolution of detail solutions without caricaturing the previous ones. The process has integrated this methodology since its genesis, drawing up the functional program, until implementation, monitoring scrupulous compliance of detail.

In addition to the plan's author, also the political power of Lisbon municipality and the technical staff of the Chiado Office (established by the municipality to coordinate the works) wholeheartedly embraced the methodology (Siza & Portas, 1998). Not by expediency, because if it were so it would be enough a caricature of Pombaline architecture and a deceptive animation of public space, but because they strived to implement an operation tending to the sanity of the people, the architecture and the city.

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