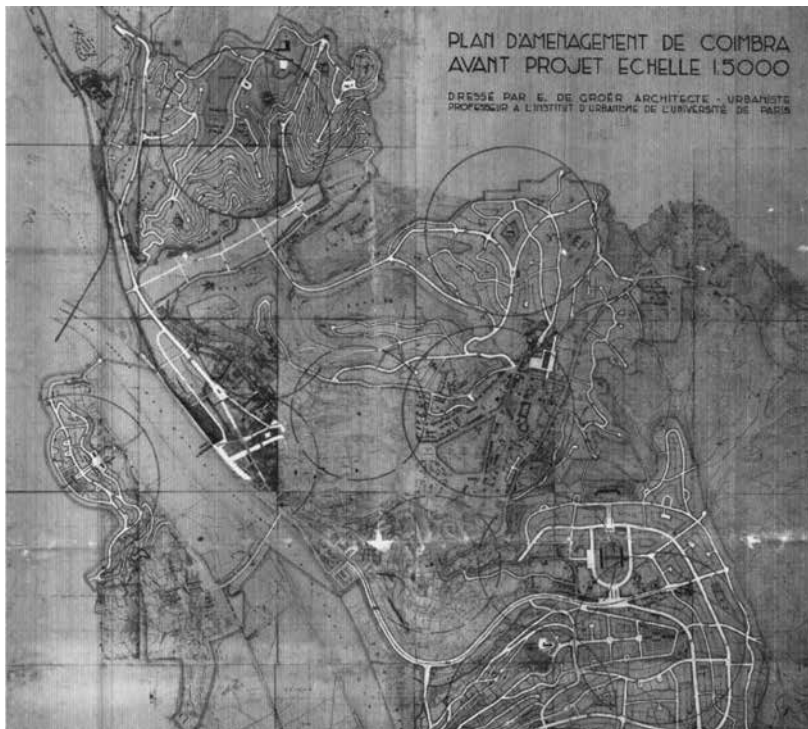
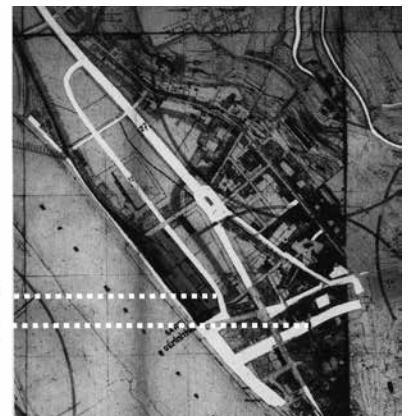


José Cabral Dias

Praça do Bota Abaixo as a metonymy: urban rehabilitation in democracy



Av. Fernão de Magalhães
Av. De Santa Cruz



I. Introduction

This article originates in a fact that took place 40 years before the 25th of April 1974 in Portugal. The city will therefore be exposed as a collective construction undertaken during a long period of time. This perception is crucial with respect to the notion of cultural heritage in general terms and built heritage in particular.

The aim of this paper is to reflect upon the decision of planning and opening Avenida Santa Cruz (Santa Cruz Avenue), in Coimbra, which was taken within the scope of *Estado Novo* dictatorship¹ (figure 1). It is known that the urban solution proposed for this avenue has never become a reality. However, Coimbra inherited an expressive urban void as a result of razing to the ground a large number of buildings within historic city. Nevertheless, the sole square that democratic regime tried to build in this city would emerge with *Praça do Bota-Abaixo* (Bota-Abaixo Square) on the demolished blocks² (figure 2). However, in a similar way to many aspects of democratic life, the procedural deadlocks emerged naturally through democracy principle as well as with electoral cycles and non-convergent agendas. Actually, a succession of contradictory decisions have demonstrated so far how the opposition between different power spheres block urban development. In summary, *Praça do Bota-Abaixo*, in its imperfection, can be seen as a metonymy regarding urban rehabilitation within the complexity of democratic society. This article will use it as a role model, in order to reflect about the ineffective processes of urban rehabilitation in recent years, in Portugal, knowing that many of them are perennial and ontological. We also should talk about this when we talk about built heritage.

II. Context

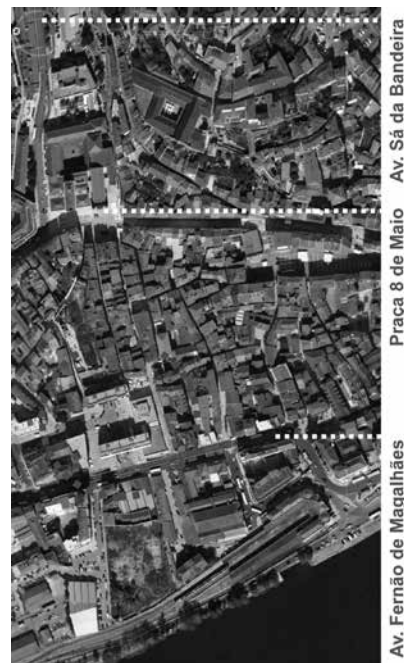
As it is known, Duarte Pacheco created a legal figure within his ministerial activity in order to organize the whole country. Indeed, *Planos Gerais de Urbanização* (General Urbanization Plans) were created in 1934, one year after the institutionalization of *Estado Novo*. Such plans should be seen as an attempt to establish a policy for urban regeneration which could be directly identifiable with *Estado Novo*³.

Prior to Duarte Pacheco's ideas, the automobile had already contributed to the transformation of both the understanding of territory and the way of organizing it. While spreading along streets and roads in modern world in the first decades of the xxth century, the car emerged as a catalyzer of alternative urban models based on movement. It should be noticed that, in 1909, Futurist Manifesto had already created a close link between the new vehicle, the idea of progress and new artistic expressions (Marinetti, 1909).

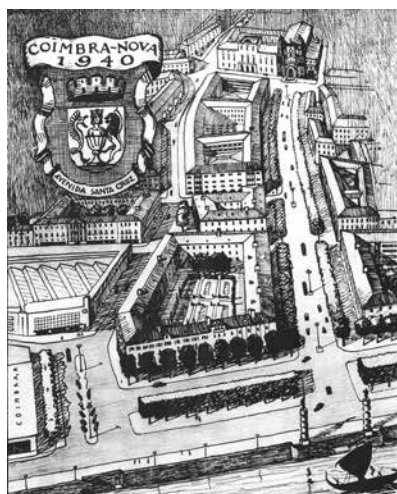
The role of the car in both daily life and territory was no longer understood in an objective manner: indeed, tangible and practical purposes had been overcome.

In Portugal, this reality would also be present within the spirit of *Planos Gerais de Urbanização*. New approaches on urbanism were also

1. Plan d'Amenagement et Extension de Coimbra, 1944. Etienne de Groër; Avenida de Santa Cruz. José Santiago Faria Archive



2. Bota- Abaixo: location. Retrieved from <<https://www.bing.com/maps/#Y3A9NDAuMjA5N-jQ3fi04LjQyNjYxOCZsdmw9MTUmc3R5PWEmdG09JTdCJTlyV2VsY29tZVBhbmVsVGZzayUyN-CUyNDAIMjllM0FudWxsJTdE>>. Viewed 22nd of November 2015.



3. Avenida de Santa Cruz: de Groer's proposal. José Santiago Faria Archive

developed with aesthetic, ideological, conceptual and doctrinal scope, accordingly. Expressed through *grande velocidade* and *velocidade acelerada* (high speed and accelerated speed⁴) with no necessary link with reality, a new look over mechanical movement was reflected in demolitions amongst urban fabric ever since then, in order to make car movement effective and faster (Dias, 2012).

III. Approach

Moving on to this article context, Etienne de Groër (1882-?) designed the Coimbra Urban Plan in 1944 during Portuguese dictatorship, within the context of *Planos Gerais de Urbanização*. Although the idea of crossing Coimbra downtown was not unprecedented, the strongest efforts ever made in order for it to become reality took place at the time, within the framework of that plan. The result is known as *Avenida Santa Cruz* (Santa Cruz Avenue).

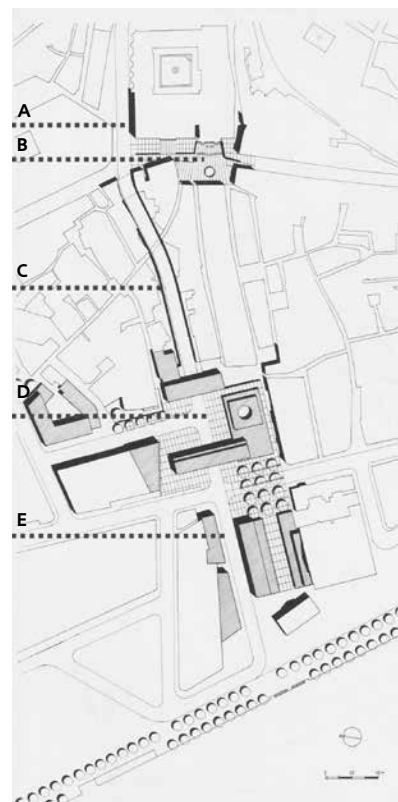
Avenida Santa Cruz reflects *Estado Novo* culture by expressing the idea of crossing *Baixinha*⁵ with celebratory rhetoric. The avenue layout had been directed towards the core of the convent founded in 1131: Santa Cruz Church⁶ (figure 3). Even though solely the demolition of some urban blocks became reality (too distant from that monument, anyhow), the power of de Groer's ideas were not denied. The unique drawing that is inserted in the descriptive document of the Urban Plan is clear: the graphical representation of the automobile is the medium chosen to give full meaning to *Avenida de Santa Cruz* length: 400 meters long. It is therefore noticeable that the automobile was aligned with modernity (in the sense that it was shown by Duarte Pacheco in his impetus to transform the country, moving forward into progress). Yet, in opposition, the car was also used to emphasize tradition on building urban space. This idea comes up by understanding the full significance of the new avenue within urban fabric. As a matter of fact, it was based on the intention of highlighting the historic meaning of *Santa Cruz Church* in a close link with car movement. The car should be seen, therefore, as an instrument to express an apologetic and aesthetic conceptualization, which was symbolically founded in history (in the sense that when accomplishing the role of giving full meaning to the avenue length, the car is simultaneously a medium to emphasize a symbol of portuguese national identity). In summary, *Avenida de Santa Cruz* is a result of its cultural context. It expresses an idea of shaping urban space accordingly.

Since *Avenida Santa Cruz* has never been built, the blocks that had been demolished persisted as an urban void that was used until 1990s as a fair ground and a car parking. The planners that followed de Groër didn't achieve a better result when they tried to open a new urban space nor when they attempted to repair the crater originated by the wrecking ball. António de Almeida Garrett in 1955, Alberto Pessoa in 1956, Januário Godinho in 1970 and Manuel da Costa Lobo in 1971 did not present more than proposals. Democracy would consequently inherit a problem to solve.

IV. Focus

It was only eighteen years after the revolution which opened Portugal to democratic life, in 1992, that Fernando Távora took on the mission of developing a new urban study to *Bota-Abaixo* (figure 4). It was a new time. Both the extension of the previous avenue and more building demolitions were rejected by Távora's proposal. The symbolic representativeness and the rhetoric expression were abandoned. Instead, a proposal was made to build a square and, at the same time, adapting a new street layout through the interior of urban blocks. Santa Cruz Church was then confined to the limits of its surroundings. Fernando Távora acted in apparently two opposite conceptual basis within historic urban fabric. On the one hand, he designed new buildings and new urban spaces in order to rebuild the demolished area. On the other hand, he focused on reshaping the preexistent space, centered on the relevance of the monument (Santa Cruz Church), proposing, on the contrary, no more constructions. Nevertheless, Fernando Távora intended to achieve a unique goal when designing his proposal under a basic concern. He wasn't focused anymore in emphasizing an urban axis like it was tried before. For him, cultural inheritance was always a matter to be valued, and, therefore, architectural patrimony should not be used in opposition to its own vocation and meaning. Indeed, Fernando Távora intended to reshape the surrounding space of Santa Cruz Church (figure 5). Accordingly, the architect tried to fortify the link between the church and its urban context: by lowering the quota of the ground (raised over decades to avoid frequent river floods) he intended to balance the relation between the different buildings deployed in the square (doing so from a key point centered in Santa Cruz). As a matter of fact, an accurate definition of ground surface design was achieved, including new ramps and stairs that were built to correctly articulate different urban levels. Távora was no longer striving against history: differently, he was trying to underline both the historic relevance of the church and its urban meaning. In that sense, Távora's was actually tuned with democracy in expressing complete respect for citizen's collective memory. It can accordingly be stated that Távora was much more focused in history than de Gröer and Estado Novo: he intended to act within context, seeking for the essence of things. However, Távora would be overtaken by reality in a short time.

Two years later, in 1994, new problems increased in complexity. The municipality of Coimbra launched the idea of building a light-rail metro system. After that, Central Government would delegate the responsibility of building and exploring *Metro Ligeiro de Superfície de Coimbra* (Light Surface Metro System) on a public limited liability company of public funds – Metro Mondego SA Company. The most relevant study for metro urban integration was done by Paulo Bebiano Correia, between 1994 and 1996. Even though it was made within an academic scope, it assumed fundamental importance, since it became a background document. It was the most complete approach



4. Coimbra, Downtown Plan 1992; Fernando Távora. Fernando Távora Archive

- A - Av. Sá da Bandeira
- B - Praça 8 de Maio
- C - Channel within the blocks (demolitions 2005 - 2012)
- D - Praça do Bota-Abaixo
- E - Street layout into the Mondego bank (demolitions 2005 - 2012)

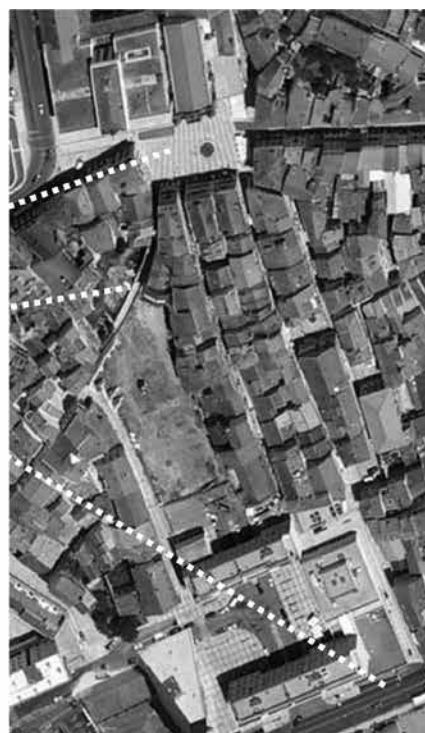


5. Coimbra, Praça 8 de Maio; Fernando Távora.
José Cabral Dias. 2014. Digital File Type.

to this issue until then, and by so, it provided a framework for further discussions.

For *Bota-Abaixo*, this study proposed to use the street layout defined by Távora in order to let the metro cross over downtown. The new metro line would therefore occupy the street section between *Praça do Bota-Abaixo* and the west end of *Avenida Sá da Bandeira* (Sá da Bandeira Avenue) doing it on a similar basis.

Although Coimbra was facing a new opportunity to rebuilt the area which was demolished during the dictatorship, a slow pace persisted through the years. In 2003 alone, the construction of the two buildings which set the limit of *Praça do Bota-Abaixo* were finally finished (figure 6). However, time elapsed didn't bring increasing quality. On the one hand, the buildings did not faithfully follow the deployment nor the height defined by Távora. On the other hand, a further sequence of projects set a period of indecisiveness, overlap between decision-making and contradictions. Still in 2003, *Metro Mondego SA* called the University of Coimbra to the process: the Department of Architecture of the Faculty of Science and Technology gave it new inputs with a different study (Figueira, 2006), which would not be fully considered by city council. In the same year, both the University and *Coimbra 2003, Capital Nacional de Cultura* (National Capital of Culture – initiative which was promoted by the Ministry of Culture) organized the *International Seminar on Urban Design – Inserções* (Insertions). Since *Inserções* was a workshop promoted in order to reflect about the city and its challenges concerning the metro line construction (Bandeirinha, 2003), it was never pursued an outcome with literal application. It is true, moreover, that the ideas that came out from that initiative didn't get hosted by municipal authorities with responsibilities on planning the city. Even though a group of qualified and prestigious architects and academia had gathered together in a forum of reflection under the patronage of the Ministry of Culture and in articulation with Coimbra's City Council and *Metro Mondego S.A.* (Byrne et al, 2003), they couldn't find a solution. As a matter of fact, the different public

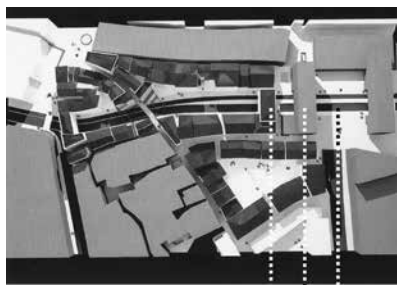


6. Praça do Bota-Abaixo and its surroundings. Retrieved from <<https://www.bing.com/maps/#Y3A9NDAuMjA5NjQ3f04LjQyNjYxO-CZsdmw9MTUmc3R5PWEmdG09JTdCJTlyV2VsY29tZVBhbmVsVGZayUyNCUyNDAlMjIIM0FudWxsJTdE>>. Viewed 22nd of November 2015.

power spheres weren't able to look at urban concerns either under the same perspective or at the same time.

After that, in 2006, a set of new actions intended to try a different insight into the problem. On that context, *Sociedade de Reabilitação Coimbra Viva*— which was created within the framework of *Sociedades de Reabilitação Urbana*⁷— defined *Bota-Abaixo* and its surroundings as a place of priority intervention. This is a new moment which is materialized in the study made by Rui Passos Mealha and José Oliveira (Mealha et al., 2006). Definitely, the opening of the urban fabric to the east was exclusively dedicated to metro line. Consequently, car traffic was no longer considered an option within the area. The purpose was focused on trying a deeper commitment with urban morphology (figure 7). Converging with Távora's proposal, the urban disruptions pursued not to exceed the limits of block interiors. The planners aimed not to change urban morphology except on the necessary points of contact with both *Praça do Bota-Abaixo* and *Avenida Sá da Bandeira*.

Comparing this urban framework with the one prior to the 25th of April, the differences are expressive. Etienne De Groër had proposed an intervention which was in line with Estado Novo ambitions. Indeed, the new University City of Coimbra, in Alta⁸, whose project had been started by the Portuguese Government in 1934, was radical: the university hill was literally razed to ground in order to deploy the new university buildings and raise a new urban order (Costa, 1998). Reinforcing this thought, demolitions were assumed as a paradigm through the decades, reflecting urbanistic ideas to Coimbra downtown



Elevated Building (2006, project)
New Elevated Buildings (2003, build)

Increased square area; decreased circulation area



preponderance of road traffic area

7. Projecto- Base do Documento Estratégico para a 1ª Unidade de Intervenção na Cidade de Coimbra; Rui Passos Mealha / José Oliveira / Comparison between proposal and the reality. Rui Passos Mealha arquitectos Archive / Retrieved from <<https://www.bing.com/maps/#Y3A9NDAuMjA5N-jQ3f04LjQyNjYxOCZsdmw9MTUmc3R5PWEmdG09JTdCJTlyV2VsY29tZVBhbmVsVGZzayUyNCUyNDAlMjIIM0FudWxsJTdE>>. Viewed 22nd of November 2015.

within the plans that followed de Gröer. In opposition, it can be said that with Fernando Távora the paradigm reflects a more conciliatory way of proceeding. He tried to adapt design basis to urban fabric, both existing and demolished. The large gestures based on the idea that it was possible to build a new city on the existing one, as it was generally proposed by *Planos Gerais de Urbanização*, had no place in democratic urban and architectural culture. The City Council of Coimbra also states this change. *Urbanismo Coimbra, Anos 90* (a book that was published in 2004 by the Planning Division of the Municipality of Coimbra) states that the concept of built heritage already developed, as well as social and financial rationality, should be focused on rehabilitation (Divisão de Planos, 1993). The text is focused on *Bota-Abaixo* and is convergent with the path followed by Távora before.

The orientation followed by other authors in subsequent urban studies reinforce the new way of thinking. Mansilla and Tuñon recognized that a special care should be applied when crossing the blocks in *Baixinha*⁹. Referring to the insertion of the metro line in that area, they recognize that *Baixinha* should be regarded with patrimonial value and treated with precision by a scalpel, rather than with a bulldozer. This is also the understanding basis of Rui Passos Mealha and José Oliveira, shown in the planning project phase of the Strategic Document for the 1st Intervention Unit in the City of Coimbra (2006). They intended to rebuild the urban form demolished previously, aiming at approaching to prior urban reality. It can be said that Mealha and Oliveira were pursuing a commitment with context, too distant from the grand gesture that characterized urban plans before the 25th of April. Their *realistic design* sought interactions and cuttings between deployments in order to shape small urban spaces. It can be said that it was intended to formulate a return to tradition. It is meant that restoring and keeping spatial and morphological continuity, as well as clear definition of streets and blocks, besides local scale, was the aim of the proposed design. It would have been precisely that strategy that would have given back contextual meaning to the surroundings of *Praça do Bota-Abaixo* (which was lost with the new elevated buildings and by the scale that they had established in the space around them), if another suspended building had been build according to their proposal: in that case, the option of closing the block located in their intervention limits would have given *Baixinha* new boundaries, away from *Praça do Bota-Abaixo*.

A similar wish of rescuing urban features that had been lost was crucial for redefining public space for people as well as for motor traffic. Accordingly, Mealha and Oliveira strived to clarify space definition. Their attempt can be seen as a proposal to enhance the city as a space for active citizenship primarily, rather than for car-circulation. In summary, Mealha and Oliveira's proposal aims to defend the *polis*. In that sense, they express a clear change of thought in line with Távora.

V. Synthesis

Although all the attempts to solve the problem created during the dictatorship, the result doesn't reflect neither the efforts nor the time elapsed since the 25th of April. It is true that the Plan of 1992 aimed to achieve a unitary intervention. However, the coherence was lost due to the complexity within the decision processes and also with the passage of time. The antinomies materialized ever since then are irremediably distant from Fernando Távora's proposal. Reacting against what he considered a loss in rehabilitating urban fabric, he was in total disagreement with the changes made to his project (Bandeirinha, 2006, p. 150). The truth is that differently from *Praça 8 de Maio* (8 de Maio Square), *Praça do Bota-Abaixo* and its surroundings are still needing a final and accurate solution. The area in question shows a configuration that is almost incomplete or, at least, far from accomplish the definition expected from a planned space. In summary, this exposes the difficulties brought up by democratic regime nature concerning urban matters in both changing contexts and with multiple actors. The dilution of the decision-making process, already divided by central Government, municipality authorities, public companies and private investors, as well as instability due to different electoral cycles and non-convergent agendas slow down decision processes and the construction or rehabilitation of cities. The divergence between both public and private concern as well as between national or local priorities changes the perspective about urban space. In that context, it is yet fundamental to highlight that the pace in accessing funding sources by municipality is not always constant. It is not even coincident with either companies' investment in real estate or the purchase of private housing¹⁰. The expansion or retraction of those kind of investments takes place in a close link to both access to bank credit and Portuguese living conditions. Concluding this idea, it should be underlined, as it is known, that the pressure for cities growth and, therefore, for either urban enlargement, densification, consolidation or even rehabilitation, is not solely dependent on public politics. It can be accordingly said that a solution to *Bota-Abaixo* was partially found. Even though a rhetoric approach was abandoned, the confrontation between the scale of preexisting city and the prominent role of the automobile remained firm on site (figures 8, 9). Both building heights and excessive deployment lot sizes opened new wound in urban fabric, besides the car remains the most important and determining factor on public space design. As an evidence, it occupies much of public space which has been exclusively defined for both car traffic and parking. Any idea of organizing staying areas for people was tacitly forgotten with the abandoned idea of creating a square. In summary, everything remains indefinite on site. Furthermore, many demolitions already promoted in recent years, from 2005 to 2012, show an impasse. As a result of the measures undertaken to reduce public deficit during portuguese sovereign crisis, metro line project was suspended in November of 2011.



8. Praça do Bota-Abaixo: existent city vs. Proposal. José Cabral Dias. 2014. Digital File Type.



9. Praça do Bota-Abaixo: public space. José Cabral Dias. 2014. Digital File Type.

Paradoxically, train rails which had been uprooted during the previous government mandate appear to be the only testimony that *Sistema de Mobilidade do Mondego* (Mondego Mobility System) had been real. So, the intervention in *Bota-Abaixo* didn't brought city space closer to people, since it didn't improve quality in public space.

VI. Conclusion

It can be said that owing to nowadays time acceleration nothing is stable. In this subject, a lack of strategic thinking and a conflict between urban and suburban (or regional) concerns (Bandeirinha, 2003, p. 12; Correia, 2003) implied a long process of indecision never overcome.

In fact, we are already far from the 30 up to 50 year validity period of *Planos Gerais de Urbanização*. Simultaneously, tecnocracy or, instead, a pragmatic commitment overlapped the aesthetic or patrimonial attitude. Even though it is true that the automobile had also shaped the proposal for *Bota-Abaixo* before, during the dictatorship period, the concret results which were achieved by democratic context on site abandoned any cultural framework while building public space. The massive presence of the car on site results, in the present, from inconsequential circumstances. Either processual impasses or changes in purposes, or even pragmatism, seem to be the sole path. As a matter of fact, instability, confrontation and hesitations seem to be the city's hallmarks in the present, although all the efforts to plan both city space and every type of Infrastructures. This is still true even in respect to sensitive parts of the city, as it was seen within the context of these pages. Praça do Bota-Abaixo illustrates it and it should be seen as a metonymy when we talk about built heritage.

- 1 → Estado Novo – New State – is the way the dictatorship established in Portugal by the 1933 Constitution calls itself. Cf., Rosas, F. and BRITO, J. M. B. de (1996). *Dicionário de História do Estado Novo*. Lisbon: Bertrand Editora, I, 315.
- 2 → Bota abaixo means to bring down in portuguese colloquial language.
- 3 → Portuguese Minister of Public Works between 1932 and 1836 and later between 1938 and 1943.
- The Decree-Law 24 802, dated 21th December 1934, established the legal framework which instituted Planos Gerais de Urbanização. It provided that more than 400 urban centers would have to develop a urban plan.
- 4 → That was the way how movement was from then onwards considered by many portuguese architects/urban planners within General Urbanization Plans. See DIAS, José Cabral (2012). *Episódios Significativos de Espacialização Urbana a Partir do Automóvel. os Planos Gerais de Urbanização; 1934–1960*. PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Architecture of University of Porto.
- 5 → The lower historic part of Coimbra.
- 6 → Santa Cruz Church took a central role on Portuguese cultural and territorial definition in Middle Ages. Since Coimbra was the first capital of the Portuguese Kingdom it became pantheon for the first and second kings of Portugal.
- 7 → Coimbra Viva SRU (SRU-initials for Sociedade de Reabilitação Urbana (Urban Rehabilitation Corporation) was founded following the publication of specific legislation regarding urban rehabilitation: Decree-Law No. 104/2004 of 7th May which defined the legal framework for the activity of that kind of public companies.
- 8 → The higher historic part of Coimbra.
- 9 → Emilio Tuñon + Luis Mansilla were part of the group of architects that joined at International Seminar on Urban Design – Inserções. Cf. BYRNE, G. et al. (2003). *Inserções – Apresentação do Seminário*. Ecdj, 6, 60–61.
- 10 → Accordingly, it is importante to underline that the suspend buildings in Bota-Abaixo host private apartments and offices.

References

- Bandeirinha, J. A. (2006). 1131-1993, As duas data de um projecto, Fernando Távora, Santa Cruz e o Largo de Sansão. *Monumentos*, 25, 146 – 153.
- Bandeirinha J. A. (2003). Muito mais do que um Mero Pretexto. *Ecdj*, 6, 12 – 13.
- Byrne, G. et al. (2003). Inserções – Apresentação do Seminário. *Ecdj*, 6, 60 – 61.
- Correia, P. B. (2003). Metro sobre um elétrico rápido. *Ecdj*, 6, 28 – 34.
- Costa, S. V. (1998). A Cidade Universitária de Coimbra: um projecto de modernização cultural – utopia e realidade. M.Sc. dissertation, University Nova de Lisboa.
- Dias, J. C. (2012). *Episódios Significativos de Espacialização Urbana a Partir do Automóvel. os Planos Gerais de Urbanização; 1934 – 1960*. PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Architecture of University of Porto.
- Divisão de Planos (1993). *Urbanismo Coimbra Anos 90*. Coimbra: Câmara Municipal de Coimbra.
- Faria, J. M. S. (2000). Etienne de Groër urbaniste à la Ville de Coimbra. PhD Dissertation, University of Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne UFR de l'Histoire et Archéologie Art, I, 2.1 – 2.3.
- Figueira, J. (2006). No Lugar da Avenida Central. *Monumentos*, 25, 141.
- Marinetti, F. T. (1909). *Manifeste du Futurisme*, Le Figaro. Paris, year LV, 3th series, nº 51.
- Mealha, R. P. et al. (2006). *Projecto-Base do Documento Estratégico para a 1ª Unidade de Intervenção na Cidade de Coimbra*. Retrieved September 10, 2015, from http://www.coimbravivasru.pt/pdf/de_1_unidade_intervencao.pdf.
- Rosas, F. and Brito, J. M. B. de (1996). *Dicionário de História do Estado Novo*. Lisbon: Bertrand Editora, I.