



Confronting Fachadismo

Peter Korn

The Monumental Palace Hotel just might be the most iconic building in Porto, Portugal. Not because of its design—a 1923 mash up of architectural styles that always seemed more imposing-solid than imaginative. Nor has the public’s embrace of the building made it symbolic, in the manner of the Sydney Opera House or the Eiffel Tower. Though through the 1930s and 1940s, tea in the Monumental’s lobby was one of the classic Porto things to do.

In recent years, the Monumental’s broken windows and shuttered storefront have been a blight on the city’s majestic public square, Praca de Liberdade. It is the Monumental’s state of decay and potential for rebirth that make it a symbol of what is happening in Porto, and how architecture may determine Porto’s future.

In 2015, a team of private Portuguese developers began the process of resurrecting the Monumental. Initially, they claimed a willingness to retain as much of the building’s history and structure as possible. But walk by the construction site today and you’ll see—behind a construction curtain and scaffolding—that all that remains of the old Monumental is a portion of its facade, a majestic frontispiece with absolutely nothing behind. The rest of the old hotel has been demolished so that construction can start from scratch.

Porto is a city in architectural crisis, where historic facades hide absent structures and derelict buildings abound, the result of national ordinances first adopted in 1951 as well as local codes which basically make it illegal to demolish or alter historic facades.^{1,2}

Almost one in five buildings in Porto are abandoned. In addition, the city has lost an estimated 80,000 residents who have moved away over the last 25 years.³

But just as visible is a potential resurrection. Porto is as timeless a city as Europe has to offer—a fact UNESCO recognized in 1996 when it named the city’s historic core a world heritage site. Portugal managed to remain neutral in World War II, which means the country escaped the bombing that destroyed many of Europe’s architectural treasures. For decades Portugal has been among the poorest countries in Europe, so there hasn’t been pressure to knock down historic buildings in the city’s core in favor of office and condominium towers. City center tourists have easy



access to Roman walls and intact churches such as the 11th century Church of St. Martinho de Cedofeita, the 15th century Igreja de Santa Clara and the 16th Century Igreja da Misericórdia.

In addition, Porto's residential streets are full of worn 19th century row houses built as single family homes and later divided into apartment buildings. They are among the most common of the city's abandoned structures.

Porto's endless display of untouched architecture has made it a tourist hotspot. Cheap weekend flights ferry European vacationers in throughout the year. Revenue from tourism has turned what once were dark and dangerous city streets into safe, lively, cafe-filled wonderlands.

There is development money in Porto, but there are also abandoned buildings. The fate of those historic buildings and their facades will be a major factor in determining whether Porto retains the charm and beauty that has drawn tourists in the first place. If they are left to crumble, as some of the city's architects say, gritty charm will give way to unsightliness. But renovating most of the historic buildings is too expensive, according to local developers. The solution, increasingly, has been to maintain the facades and find affordable ways to build new structures within old shells—the Monumental as the prime example.

The Monumental's developers hope their restoration is making the building timeless. Their literature describes the renovation as "respecting its architectural heritage, the Monumental Palace Hotel is a project that links the past to the future."

Porto architect Pedro Figueiredo has another word to describe the project: "Hypocrisy,"⁴ Figueiredo says. Timeless? Only in the way that Disneyland is timeless, he insists. Not real. Timelessness in his view must include an architectural integrity that Porto's rebuilt facade buildings have sacrificed.

Figueiredo no longer works as an architect. Three years ago he co-founded, with two other under-employed Porto architects, an alternative tour company called Porto Worst Tours. He leads three-hour walks through the city's neighborhoods, explaining and debating the reasons Porto is unable to house its residents while hundreds of homes and apartment buildings stand vacant and decaying.

Figueiredo likens buildings to people. Saving a facade and building behind it would be like saving a person's skin but transplanting a new body inside—it wouldn't be the same person. In the same way, he says, "The facade doesn't match with

the real building. It's fake." Yes, Figueiredo says, it costs much more to restore an old building, but that is what must be done. "We are classified as a UNESCO world heritage site not just because of the facades, also because of the interiors... architecture works always as a unity, inside plus outside."

It is those interiors that have Porto architect Jose Lage most upset. Lage, an outspoken assistant professor at the University of Porto, feels day by day, neighborhood by neighborhood, he is watching the built history of his city disappear. Developers are ripping out wainscoting and grand staircases, and putting in cheap windows and exposed plumbing in their rush to create warren-like buildings full of Airbnb rentals. In his view, the vacant historic homes from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries are being cannibalized to the point that they can no longer claim to be historic structures, and certainly not timeless.⁵

The new Monumental Palace with its old facade doesn't even represent an homage to the past, and certainly is not a work of architectural preservation, according to Lage. Much of the original building could have been saved "if developers had been more ethical." Lage believes the city's declining population is directly tied to its neglected historical buildings. Tourists may be flocking to Porto, but long-time residents have been moving to its cheaper suburbs.

The cost of rehabilitating Porto's historic buildings is not financially viable given the rents local residents are able to pay, an average of 250 euros a month. However, apartments rented to tourists can net about twice that on an annual basis, so nearly all the rehabs taking place are the result of developers turning old buildings into short term tourist rentals as cheaply as possible. Exposed plumbing and drafty bedrooms are fine for people who are only staying for a few days.

Someday, Lage is certain, the tourists will start flocking to a new city. And those historic facade buildings with their shoddy apartments won't be suitable for residents who will want to re-inhabit the city.

"The center will be without residents in ten years maximum," he says. "We could be Detroit."

Porto architect Alvaro Campo isn't so sure. Consider, he says, the word fachadismo—a term of art in Portugal. Fachadismo, according to Campo, has become common Portuguese slang. It's definition? "When a building has a wonderful façade and is completely destroyed (or just plain terrible) on the inside.

When a person has a wonderful smile but is in fact a drug lord warmonger. When a ring blings like a Nova Scotia lighthouse but is in fact well cut zirconia," he says.⁶

Through the eighties and nineties, Campo says, civil engineers and more than a few architects took advantage of gray areas in the city code to destroy the interiors of buildings, rather than undertake more expensive reconstructions.

Today Campo is a manager at Casa de Musica, one of Porto's most recognizable modern buildings design by OMA/Rem Koolhaas, and he's become more aware of the economic pressures that might make saving a facade (but nothing else) a justifiable solution.

"This particular building has been ravaged and destroyed with all kinds of interventions over the 20th century," Campo says of the Monumental Palace.

"Therefore," Campo continues, "if no more of its original identity (remains), what is there to preserve? Isn't it also an opportunity to show that time goes by and adaptation is possible? Could future dwellers learn some lessons? Was its interior a fundamental and absolute masterpiece of architecture or interior design? One that mankind could not live without? Versailles? I believe not."

In the view of Porto architect Luis Sobral, the transformation many of Porto's historic buildings are undergoing is responsible for their salvation. Like Campo, Sobral is focused on the ways in which buildings evolve. He is certain that the alternative to building within facades will be worse. Too many historic buildings will crumble and disappear, replaced by modern large hotels to accommodate the flood of tourists. He'd rather work with the facades.

Sobral and Margarida Leitao, partners in life as well as in their architectural firm, recently completed a compromised rehab that just might satisfy everybody. Two years ago they were able to buy a 19th century house at a discount because the first floor is one grand apartment leased by an elderly woman who is covered by Portugal's slowly disappearing rent control. Their tenant's rent is only 48 euros a month.

Sobral and Leitao have kept the first floor and the building's front facade intact. They have turned the second floor into three apartments they rent for between 50 and 80 euros a night to tourists. The income from the Airbnb rentals allowed them to replace a leaking roof and rebuild the severely damaged upper two floors. The couple lives on the completely remodeled third floor.

Someday, Sobral says, he and Leitao may have children and take back the second floor and perhaps even the first floor, and turn their historic building into the single-family home it was built to be.⁷

But Lage is worried that the timelessness Sobral thinks he's buying won't exist for most historic rehabs unless the city passes and enforces building codes to ensure the new tourist apartments are built to standards that will comfortably house families once the tourism boom is over.

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U.S. architects have their own stylistic version of fachadismo, says Seattle architect Andrew Van Leeuwen. Traditional columns and fake shutters stuck to the facades of McMansions are called "peel-n-stick."

"They may be attached structurally, (but) visually they're about as substantial as a sticker that's mindlessly plopped on the front," Van Leeuwen says.⁸

A few years ago Van Leeuwen started a blog asking readers, "What does it mean to be timeless?" That led to a post on ten architectural features that he saw as the opposite of timeless, and which he wishes would be taken out of use. One was new buildings with Doric columns, classic peel-n-stick.

But Doric columns hail from Ancient Greece. So why do they look appropriate on 19th century southern plantation homes, but phony in front of a 21st century McMansion? Van Leeuwen says maybe Doric columns work on plantation homes because they use the geometric proportions and architectural rules established by traditional Greek and Roman architecture. Or maybe history makes its own rules.

"I wonder too if the plantation homes and colonial architectures have been around just long enough that we accept them as authentic and timeless...It's what people want to see when they visit places like Monticello and 1600 Pennsylvania Ave—they are the most enduring architectures we have in America," Van Leeuwen says.

Van Leeuwen's list of timeless buildings does not focus on how long a building lasts or whether it remains unaltered. It is dominated by buildings that maintain different layers of functionality. Seattle's Ballard neighborhood was a Scandinavian fishing hub when its small brick buildings were constructed. When the fishing industry moved out in the early 20th century light industrial shops moved in. In recent years those same brick buildings have been turned into

apartments, restaurants and bike shops as the neighborhood has gentrified.

Ballard's buildings display all three iterations, Van Leeuwen says—original brick and wood trusses, loading bays and store shop signage from the light industrial period, penthouses added on top for high end condos. And that's what makes them timeless, in Van Leeuwen's view.

"It's not getting in the way of history or trying to copy it," Van Leeuwen says. "It's adapting the building sensibly over years. And it's financially responsible."

Both the facades in Porto and the three-generation buildings in Seattle are versions of timeless placemaking, in Van Leeuwen's view. With traditional architecture, he says, the place tends to be locked in time. Modern and evolving architectures, such as the buildings in Ballard, allow not only the building, but the place to evolve.

"The layers of architecture allow the functions to change as well as the character of the place," he says.

Porto's dilemma carries an additional faith-based consideration. Many of the city's buildings are mere facades because they have been vacant and neglected for decades. For generations it has been traditional for Porto residents who could not afford to keep up their buildings to will the properties to the Catholic Church or its adjunct social service agency, Santa Casa da Misericórdia. Neither entity has shown a desire to become a property manager, or even to track what they own.

According to Campo, in many cases the property bequests were an attempt to buy their owners' way into heaven. What could be more timeless than that.

Endnotes

1. Tinoco Guimaraes, Erika. Braganca, Luis. Almeida, Manuela. Mateus Ricardo. 2015. *Analysis of Portuguese Residential Buildings' Needs and Proposed Solutions*. Proceedings of EURO ELECS.

2. Branco Pedro, Joao. Meijer, Frits. Visscher, Henk. 2008. *Analysis of the Portuguese building regulation system*. Presentation at RICS Construction and Building Research Conference.

3. Evert Meijers, Koen Hollander, Marloes Hoogerbrugge. 2012. *Case Study Porto*. European Metropolitan Network Institute.

4. Pedro Figueiredo (architect) in discussion with the author, November 2016.

5. Jose Lage (architect) in discussion with the author, November 2016

6. Alvaro Campo (architect) in discussion with the author, November 2016

7. Luis Sobral (architect) in discussion with the author, November 2016

8. Andrew Van Leeuwen (architect) in discussion with the author, December 2016

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