

# Fernanda Seixas, a Woman's Take on Architecture as Social Intervention

## Fernanda Seixas, el posicionamiento de una mujer sobre la arquitectura como intervención social

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### Abstract

This paper sheds light upon architect Fernanda Seixas (1942-2017) as a trailblazing woman in her disciplinary field in Portugal. Her archives, a set of interviews, and bibliographical research allow us to pinpoint certain characteristics that make her stand out amongst her peers, and consider her as a woman succeeding in a 'male profession'. Trained during an era of political dissent in which she actively participated against the dictatorship of Estado Novo in the 1960s, Seixas created her own practice right after the 1974 revolution and envisaged her work as a space of socio-political activism. In the 1980s her social consciousness broadened to include environmental concerns and she became a pioneering architect on the issues of energy efficiency and bioclimatic architecture. This technical approach combined with her social ethos stand out in her planning projects and built work.

### Keywords

Women Architects, Bioclimatic Architecture, Portugal, Estado Novo, Feminist Practices

### Resumen

Este artículo arroja luz sobre la arquitecta Fernanda Seixas (1942-2017) como una mujer vanguardista en el contexto disciplinar de Portugal. Su archivo, una serie de entrevistas y la búsqueda bibliográfica nos permiten señalar ciertas características que la hacen destacar entre sus colegas y considerarla una mujer triunfadora en una 'profesión masculina'. Formada durante una época de disidencia política en la que participó activamente contra la dictadura del Estado Novo en la década de 1960, Seixas creó su propia práctica justo después de la revolución de 1974 y concibió su trabajo como un espacio de activismo sociopolítico. En la década de 1980, su conciencia social se amplió para incluir preocupaciones medioambientales y se convirtió en una arquitecta pionera en el tema de la eficiencia energética y la arquitectura bioclimática. Este enfoque técnico combinado con su énfasis en la conciencia social se destaca en sus proyectos de planificación y obra construida.

### Palabras clave

Mujeres Arquitectas, Arquitectura Bioclimática, Portugal, Estado Novo, Prácticas feministas

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## Introduction

Maria Fernanda Machado Seixas was a Portuguese architect, born and deceased in Porto (1942-2017). She graduated from Porto's School of Fine Arts<sup>1</sup> (ESBAP) in 1973, and developed a wide-ranging and long career, with a regularity and diversity of project work unusual given both the historical period of her work and her success as one of the few Portuguese women architects of her generation. She operated her own architecture studio in the city of Porto, the second largest Portuguese city, from the mid-1970s until 2013, a relatively uncommon enterprise considering the era and the fact that so few women studied and practiced architecture in Portugal from the 1960s to the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, she developed and pursued an interest in the passive solar behaviour and energy efficiency of buildings, which she applied or tried to introduce in a large part of her work developed since the 1980s, despite little or no interest among her fellow architects in this aspect of architectural building and environmental sensitivity. The research carried out for this paper brought to light complementary aspects of her personality, both personal and public, which are not dissociated from her practice, and indeed supported and informed it, testifying to her distinctive character and approach. Core to this understanding is the period in which she was born. In essence, this socio-political context framed Seixas' upbringing both as a person and a woman and constitutes the cultural broth that consistently fed her practice.

This interpretation is grounded on two distinct sources, besides the literature review. Significant information in Seixas' architectural estate proved of great importance; her archives contain most of the projects she designed, their descriptive specifications, some loose note sheets, newspaper clippings, and both her detailed and self-annotated Portfolio and *Curriculum Vitae*. Insights and details also came from interviews, both in print in newspapers/periodicals, and some recorded with people familiar in Seixas' life (some of which are available online). We also conducted three semi-structured interviews, which resulted in statements that were occasionally completed or adjusted by the interviewees. Interviewees included Seixas' son, Leonardo Costa (1965-), with whom Seixas remained close all her life; her brother-in-law Manuel Fernandes de Sá (1943-), who was her teacher at ESBAP in the late 1960s and who was both a friend and professional colleague, and with whom she collaborated in several works/projects; and also Cidália Queirós (1947-), a social worker/sociologist whom Seixas met in the late 1960s at *Cooperativa Confronto*, and who became one of her first collaborators within the multidisciplinary teams on which Seixas worked, and with whom she developed a lasting relationship throughout her years of practice. Objective information thus combined with personal interpretations and memories, unavoidably subjective, depending on whether new data came to their minds or to their knowledge as the interviewees sought to revive and refresh their recollections by establishing contact with family, friends and companions from certain stages of their own lives.

## The *Estado Novo*: Fernanda Seixas' Cultural Milieu

Fernanda Seixas lived for three decades under the Portuguese dictatorial regime (*Estado Novo*), led until 1968 by António de Oliveira Salazar and then by Marcelo Caetano until its demise with the Revolution of April 1974. In the heyday of the *Estado Novo*'s rule in the 1930s and 1940s, in Portugal as in other European fascist regimes, "a new breed of Portuguese women and Portuguese men, regenerated by the genuinely national ideology that the regime considered itself to be the bearer" was created in the light of a comprehensive project.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely by this nationalism that the Salazar dictatorship differs from and distinguishes itself from its European counterparts. Fernando Rosas identified seven main ideological

1 *Escola Superior de Belas Artes do Porto* (ESBAP).

2 Lucía C. Pérez-Moreno and Patrícia Santos Pedrosa, "Women Architects on the Road to an Egalitarian Profession – The Portuguese and Spanish Cases," *Arts* 9, n° 1, 40 (2020): 2.

3 Fernando Rosas, "O salazarismo e o homem novo: ensaio sobre o Estado Novo e a questão do totalitarismo," *Análise Social* XXXV, n° 157 (2001): 1032.

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- 4 For reference, according to these would be: the palingenetic myth, the myth of the new nationalism, the imperial myth, the myth of rurality, the myth of honourable poverty, the myth of the corporatist order, and the myth of the Catholic essence of national identity. Rosas, "O salazarismo e o homem novo," 1034-6.
- 5 Rádio e Televisão de Portugal, *Ler+ ler melhor - Irene Pimentel* (2012), accessed November 2, 2021 <https://ensina.rtp.pt/artigo/irene-pimentel-faz-um-retrato-da-mulher-no-estado-novo/>.
- 6 Rosas, "O salazarismo e o homem novo," 1036.
- 7 Helena Neves, "A mocidade portuguesa feminina," in *O Estado Novo e as mulheres: o género como investimento ideológico e de mobilização*, coord. João Mário Mascarenhas (Lisboa: Biblioteca Museu República e Resistência, D.L. 2001), 58.
- 8 Helena Neves, "O Estado Novo e as mulheres," in *O Estado Novo e as mulheres*, 24.
- 9 Helena Neves, "As ditaduras fascistas e a questão feminina," in *O Estado Novo e as mulheres*, 10.
- 10 Neves, "As ditaduras fascistas e a questão feminina," 8.
- 11 Irene Flunser Pimentel, "O Estado Novo, as mulheres e o feminino," in *O longo caminho das mulheres: feminismos: 80 anos depois*, ed. Lúcia Amâncio (Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2007), 91.
- 12 Pimentel, "O Estado Novo, as mulheres e o feminino"; Neves, *O Estado Novo e as mulheres*.
- 13 Neves, *As ditaduras fascistas e a questão feminina*, 15.
- 14 Lia Viegas, *A Constituição e a condição da mulher* (Lisboa: Diábril, 1977), 25.
- 15 Pimentel, "O Estado Novo, as mulheres e o feminino," 100.
- 16 Pimentel, "O Estado Novo, as mulheres e o feminino," 101.
- 17 Viegas, *A Constituição e a condição da mulher*, 30.

myths<sup>4</sup> on which the regime was founded; of these two appear, to our view, to have contributed to the understanding of the role of women within the period impacting Seixas: the myth of the corporatist order, and the myth of the Catholic essence of national identity, particularly as it related to social conditions for women.

From the first myth comes the idea of a hierarchical 'national order' headed by a paternalistic state, which set to each citizen a specific place in that order and therefore an individual role and contribution to the larger collective. Irene Pimentel emphasised this in an interview: "men and women, children, old people, everyone had a specific role".<sup>5</sup> From the second myth comes the essence of *being Portuguese* as grounded essentially in the Catholic religion, "a defining attribute of nationality itself and its history"<sup>6</sup> and a framework for the structuring concepts of the new order – 'authority' and 'nation'. Salazarism was thus synthesized in the triad "God, Fatherland and Family", a hierarchy that in a determinant way organized the role of women in Portuguese society.

The concepts of biological essentialism – "foundation of the culture and political order of the Estado Novo"<sup>7</sup> – represented the natural complementarity between men and women and distinguished their roles. The regime defined them clearly and showed them to be equivalent, though fundamentally different and mutually exclusive: "the exclusion in one sex of everything that belongs to the other".<sup>8</sup> The woman had a destiny that – different from that of the man – was the same for all women who shared the same matrix: that of being a woman-mother. This common 'nature' equally assigned them the same domain: the woman-as-home; and the same mission: woman-as-motherland.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the irreplaceable leading role of women manifested, therefore, in the ruling of the house – the home and the family – the private space, the "place for the transmission of values, the permanence of tradition, the cult of nationalism, reproducing model of obedience to the leader", as stated by Helena Neves.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the "apparent social valuing of the female function"<sup>11</sup> – to use Pimentel's words – namely through motherhood and household work, had implications for the relationship between women and the labour market. As a consequence, employment was not only discouraged, but actively constrained by legislation that prohibited women's access to certain professions, or restricted them on the basis of marital status, and in general, if they were married made them subject to the husband's permission.<sup>12</sup> The fact is that 16.9% of women in the labour market in 1940 decreased to 13.1% in 1960 (606,000 women), "while active women increased from 2 million and 283 thousand to 2 million and 894 thousand", including those occupied with domestic tasks.<sup>13</sup> By 1970, enlarging their presence in the labour market, women represented "about 19% of all women and about 25% of 'economically productive' workers", 86% of whom were unmarried workers and about half of them under the age of 24, and for the most part unskilled.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, education also played a decisive role in the exclusion of women from the labour market and public life in general, with girls being discouraged from attending high school "where education was... intended to create a 'male' elite".<sup>15</sup> Pimentel notes, however, that in 1960 the female presence in high schools was already the majority,<sup>16</sup> even though Lia Viegas, writing in 1977, stated that "more than half of the illiterate people are women" and that most of the ones who had "higher education have degrees in letters and/or human sciences, with few participating in technological or scientific sectors".<sup>17</sup>

### Fernanda Seixas, Politics and Activism

Born at the height of the *Estado Novo*, Seixas was 19 years old in 1961 when the colonial war broke out – a "seismic shock", in Antunes' words, "that shook up (...)

the structure of the regime”.<sup>18</sup> In addition to a generalized social dissatisfaction that had been growing since World War II and the transformations that followed it. Even if Portugal placed itself in voluntary isolation from the conflict, “[i]n the spring of 1962, the war in Angola was one of the catalysts for the politicized student protest”.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Joana Lopes recalled the turmoil of the last few years of the dictatorship in which “political parties, organizations, more or less informal groups... tried to interconnect... in an attempt to create a consistent structure that could resist and succeed in defeating the regime”.<sup>20</sup> Lopes highlighted this environment in the rise in Porto of a political-cultural institution – *Confronto, Cooperative for Cultural Promotion, SCRL* –, in 1966, both an ideological and physical space that served as a unifying pole “for a very large number of people that never aligned themselves, or had stopped identifying, either in the classic parties..., or in those that appeared during Marcellism”.<sup>21</sup> Presenting it, Mário Brochado Coelho, one of *Confronto*’s founders, described it as “deliberately focused on the principle of dialogue between differences”.<sup>22</sup>

1962 was also an end-of-cycle moment for Seixas. That year, the deeply religious and young woman met her first husband Maurício Barreto Costa (1942-1974) and opened up to activism under his influence. Militant in the Communist Party and later a journalist, he “was the one who politicized her”, recalls their son, Leonardo Costa.<sup>23</sup> Within this context, dissatisfied with the dictatorship and already participating in public demonstrations against it, Seixas joined *Confronto*, and became a part of its management board between March 1970 and March 1971 during “one of its most active and dynamic periods”.<sup>24</sup> At the time still a student of architecture, she founded and deepened some of her most fruitful relationships under the frame of this extreme cultural, political and socio-professional diversity. It was also through *Confronto* that Seixas met Rui Oliveira (1932-2021), who will later become her second husband, a civil engineer with social concerns and marked by both a stint in the Communist Party and political imprisonment.

It was, however, during the 1960s that some of Seixas’ most assertive attitudes drew her out of social middle-ground and placed her as a political activist. She entered into the celebrations of Women’s Day (March 8, 1962), an event used as grounds for a broad demonstration against the existing authoritarian regime. Like so many others, she was arrested by the *International and State Defense Police* (PIDE).<sup>25</sup> She was beaten, interrogated and imprisoned for about a month.<sup>26</sup> During this confinement she met and fell in love with the young communist activist who became her first husband, from whom she got pregnant later that year and whom she married against her parents’ wishes.<sup>27</sup> In 1963, to help with family expenses, Seixas began working at the “Telephone Company”.<sup>28</sup> In 1966, with two dependent children, she decided and ‘imposed’ a divorce, driven by personal reasons that she felt overrode other concerns and regardless of the inevitable labels and stigmas inflicted on divorced women at the time.<sup>29</sup> Subsequent to her first marriage ending, she addressed her desire for furthering her education into Architecture, and in that same year enrolled, managing to reconcile both her studies and work.<sup>30</sup> According to Sá, she was one of only two women in her class.<sup>31</sup> Seixas graduated in 1973 at the age of 31. Three years later she applied to and was approved as a member of the *Associação dos Arquitectos Portugueses*,<sup>32</sup> when, of the total of 261 members in the respective Northern Regional Section, only 20 were women.<sup>33</sup>

1974 was a kind of second threshold for Seixas as once again in line with the country’s key-moments a new phase in her life began. Within the immediate aftermath of the April revolution, two facts stood out: her participation in SAAL as a newly graduated architect, a *Service* that aimed at responding to the housing needs of the most

18 José Freire Antunes, *Salazar Caetano. Cartas Secretas 1932-1968* (s/l, Círculo de Leitores, 1993), 81.

19 Antunes, *Salazar Caetano*, 82.

20 Joana Lopes, “Prefácio,” in *Confronto: memória de uma Cooperativa Cultural: Porto 1966-1972*, Mário Brochado Coelho (Porto: Afrontamento, 2010), 11.

21 Lopes, Prefácio, 12.

22 Mário Brochado Coelho, *Confronto: memória de uma Cooperativa Cultural: Porto 1966-1972* (Porto: Afrontamento, 2010), 29.

23 Leonardo Costa, interview by author, Porto, November 19, 2021.

24 Coelho, *Confronto*, 119.

25 *Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado* (PIDE). MEMORIAL aos presos e perseguidos políticos, accessed November 5, 2021, <https://www.memorial2019.org/site/presos/maria-fernanda-machado-seixas>

26 Costa, interview, 2021; Manuel Fernandes de Sá, interview by author, Porto, November 17, 2021.

27 Costa, interview, 2021.

28 “Companhia dos Telefones”.

29 Cidália Queirós, interview by author, Porto, November 19, 2021.

30 Costa, interview, 2021.

31 Sá, interview, 2021.

32 Association of Portuguese Architects.

33 Ordem dos Arquitectos | Gestão Administrativa, e-mail message to author, November 8, 2021.

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disadvantaged populations; and her activism as a founding member of the *Socialist Left Movement*<sup>34</sup> (MES), one of the many political parties that emerged in the dawn of democracy. Seixas (like several others) left the following year, before the 25th of November 1975 when the party radicalized around the idea of a then possible civil war.<sup>35</sup> After this, Seixas distanced herself from the political-partisan-associative activism, even if remaining ideologically in tune with her second husband who remained politically very active. Arguably, the religious faith of her youth and her activism as a young adult met and merged in her professional work as an architect. She celebrated her individuality and made “the profession her political activism”,<sup>36</sup> forging for herself a new space of action where she engaged with causes she considered socially useful.

## Architecture: Profession and Political Statement

Seixas' distinctive contribution in the context of architecture is structured, within the democratic period, around two key aspects. First, she ran her own architecture studio in the city of Porto, in the 1970s and 1980s, functioning within a society still marked by many of the conservative pre-democratic referents, and in which the full assumption of the goal to establish women as ‘equal’ took time to consolidate. Secondly, she developed her interest in the passive solar performance and energy efficiency of buildings, which she applied, or sought to introduce in her work from the 1980s onwards. To these aspect, we should add a social focus – a conscience and ethos to which Seixas gave expression in different works and that emerged in support of the previous aspects of her professional practice.

Indeed, Seixas' private practice was deeply indebted to her social conscience which grew and flourished in contact with multidisciplinary work environments that brought her together with diverse people, some of whom became partners and clients. Her empathetic character, along with her technical expertise, allowed her to cultivate and expand these contacts, thus ensuring the regular flow of work in her studio.<sup>37</sup> Since the 1980s, she actively sought bioclimatic concerns, which took its genesis from both her notions of local identity and her sensitivity to the human and material resources of the places in which she designed. Such ideas were already present in her first works and found fruition in this era of her practice. Arguing for a need to acknowledge territorial specificities prior to its transformative appropriation (within the scope of the SAAL-Cruz de Pau project), Seixas wrote in 1976: “In view of both the rationalization of resources and ecological balance, in this type of operations the standard should be of never using land with good farming conditions for construction”.<sup>38</sup>

A selection of her built works helps to embody and illustrate Seixas' differentiated outlook, who, after the 25th of April 1974 seemed more evidently driven by concerns about ways of life and its qualification, and from the 1980s onwards, by the notions of sustainability and environmental responsiveness.

## Design as a Shared Task – Dwelling, Community and Common Values

Seixas' first demonstration of her social concerns was the *Local Ambulatory Support Service*, which became known by its acronym, SAAL and which lasted two years from 1974-76.<sup>39</sup> In its genesis, this operation reflected the government's concern with the housing problem of the poorest sectors of society, distinguishing itself by establishing a “specialized technical body... to support... the initiatives by poorly housed populations in the goal of collaborating in the transformation of their own neighbourhoods”.<sup>40</sup> The Coordinating Committee of SAAL/North appointed Seixas in the first group of “chief technicians” chosen to lead multidisciplinary teams to provide this *service*, selected to work on a specific area on the basis of

34 *Movimento de Esquerda Socialista* (MES)

35 Costa, interview, 2021.

36 Costa, interview, 2021.

37 Queirós, interview, 2021; Sá, interview, 2021.

38 *Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local*, *Livro branco do SAAL /1974-1976* (s.l.: Conselho Nacional do SAAL, 1976), 287.

39 *Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local* (SAAL).

40 SAAL, *Livro branco*, 64.

the intended adequacy between her profile and the specificity of both the territory and population involved.<sup>41</sup> Her selection hinged on the network of acquaintances that the pre-revolutionary years had nurtured in Porto's *Café Ceuta* circle and at *Cooperativa Confronto*, as Manuel Fernandes de Sá recalled, and who himself was invited to coordinate the work of one of the *brigades* operating in the city of Porto.<sup>42</sup>

Out of the seventeen requests for intervention identified in 1974 within Porto's district (fourteen in the municipality of Porto, two in Matosinhos and one in Gondomar), eleven were implemented in operations beginning that same year. Two of these were taken on by Seixas' team: the two requests from Matosinhos, that took shape in the *SAAL da Cruz de Pau* (or *Bairro da Cruz de Pau*), to which a third community joined later. These interventions "did many things unlike all the others", Seixas recalled in 1998.<sup>43</sup> Two foundational elements were indeed different from the others: among those first teams (SAAL/North), Seixas was the only woman who was both responsible for individually coordinating a team, and for designing the spatial integration of Romani and non-Romani communities.<sup>44</sup>

Interviewed by José António Bandeirinha about the SAAL da Cruz de Pau, Seixas highlighted the analysis taken to consider the specific ways of inhabiting inherent to each of the communities involved. Driven by a desire to understand their cultural specificities, Seixas responded to the considerations by reconciling, within the same proposal, a set of three distinct housing and urban typologies (figure 1).

A key member of Seixas' multidisciplinary team was Cidália Queirós, the social worker she recruited from her old days at *Confronto* and whom she assigned to organize the meetings between the three residents' associations. Queirós was additionally tasked with a literacy initiative on the Romani community, based on the experience Seixas knew she had in the late 1960s with the population of some social neighbourhoods in Porto.<sup>45</sup> Queirós recalled from those days the good relations that she and the architect had with the three communities, and especially with the Romani, with whom they "often had lunch and dinner"; in this regard,



Figure 1. SAAL- Cruz de Pau, Matosinhos, 1975. Site setting plan.

41 Universidade de Coimbra, Centro de documentação 25 de Abril, *SAAL: entrevistas a Margarida Coelho*, (1998), accessed November 12, 2021, <https://arqmultimedia.cd25a.uc.pt/pt/mmcs/1205>

42 Sá, interview, 2021. At that time teams were designated as "brigades".

43 Universidade de Coimbra, Centro de documentação 25 de Abril, *SAAL: entrevistas a João Martins Pereira e Fernanda Seixas (1/2)*, (1998), accessed November 12, 2021, <https://arqmultimedia.ces.uc.pt/en/mmcs/1272>

44 José António Bandeirinha, *O processo SAAL: arquitectura e participação, 1974-1976* (Porto: Serralves, 2014), 441-8.

45 Queirós, interview, 2021; Coelho, *Confronto*, 113.

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she remember both the empathy that Seixas showed and her ability to “sweeten tensions between them”.<sup>46</sup>

This feature of Seixas’ character showed in her resolve and in the values that drove her. The SAAL intervention confirmed her way of making politics through architecture, as well as her social commitment by means of it. “Every technical intervention is a political intervention”<sup>47</sup> – thus began the communication of the “Technical Brigade of Cruz de Pau”, coordinated by Seixas, at a meeting with the departments of SAAL/North on March 11, 1976, which concluded that: “SAAL must not renege itself as an instrument of technical intervention; rather, consciously assuming all the political scope of this intervention, it must provide an effective ‘technical’ response to the problems that arise... aiming at overcoming the social contradictions that are at the origin of these problems themselves. In this way, we will say that SAAL will be able to contribute to the creation of a new concept of dwelling”.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps this quote allows us to interpret the Cruz de Pau neighbourhood and its committed tripartite urban/typological structure as the materialization of this vision of “overcoming contradictions”, seen as ultimately possible through a new way of inhabiting. By the same token, it revealed the pragmatic and responsible nature, marked out by the “technique”, which Seixas assumed and which, albeit with different physical and thematic expressions, are encountered in her other designs.

Seixas’ empathetic connexion with the final users of her projects/designs was not exclusive to the relatively exceptional conditions of working directly with marginal communities within the social fabric, as was the case in the SAAL operation above mentioned. An example of her sensitive and supportive relationship with the «customer» is also seen at the *Teatro da Vilarinha* project (1996), which resulted from the conversion of a small tax post on the ring road around the city of Porto. About it, Marta Seixas, Seixas’s daughter, under the pseudonym of Fernando Falcão, emphasized: “the project was designed by the architect Fernanda Seixas; the construction team was led by engineer Rui Oliveira; the director, stage director and general manager of the Company, João Luís, participated in the overall design with his vast theatrical experience, and the painter Rui Aguiar, the Company’s set designer, is also a crucial element in what is a true work team”.<sup>49</sup>

The miscegenation between the project team and the ‘customer’ did not end, therefore, in the effort to understand the programmatic and functional specificities of the theatrical equipment. It was reflected in the actual form and architectural composition of the theatre, namely in the exploration of both colour and the scenography of the facades and of the pre-existing elements, dimensions of the architectural composition, until then, little explored by Seixas.

Seixas’ understanding of the project was an open challenge in which she sought, more than collaboration, the participation of other disciplines. This involvement rendered the architectural design more complex, but Seixas did not perceive a difficulty in that complexity; rather she grasped an opportunity to make the project ‘grow’, broadening the scope of its performance.

### ***Local Identities – Territorial Enhancement and Infrastructures***

Seixas pursued a broad set of work in differing building programs where the topic of local identity was a core issue. To focus, we restricted our assessment of this to the field of the Municipal Master Plan and the proposals for municipal facilities that she mostly carried out or supervised while working for the Municipality of Oliveira do Bairro as an external consultant (figure 2).

46 Queirós, interview, 2021.

47 SAAL, *Livro branco*, 284.

48 SAAL, *Livro branco*, 284. Text highlighted in the original source.

49 Marta Seixas, “Apresentação”, in *tela branca / Marta Seixas*, ed. Fernanda Seixas and Rui Oliveira (Porto: author edition, 2004), 232.



Figure 2. Oliveira do Bairro, city centre plan, 1981. Model.

The independence and affirmation of municipal authorities was one of the swiftest and most successful changes in the Portuguese political framework within the process of implementing a democratic regime after the revolution of 1974.<sup>50</sup> Until then, municipalities had very little autonomy and the mayors were appointed by the central government.<sup>51</sup> After 1976, the year of the first municipal elections, the mayors were henceforth directly elected, and local governments showed a great capacity of intervention in meeting the population's needs.<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that the most basic necessities were unfulfilled in a large part of the territory, so the role in infrastructure by the emerging local government was decisive in the accelerated transformation of the country and ways of life. Seixas actively participated in this process. Recall that in the 1970s her professional life was mainly focused on urban planning and later, in the following decade, in the design of municipal facilities: markets, schools, cemeteries, sports parks. Both dimensions are an effective expression of the leading role of municipalities in the transformation of the territory and her work within this realm.

As in her design of municipal facilities, Seixas's work on territorial planning brought forward three fundamental aspects which stand out: the belief in territorial planning as an instrument capable of shaping urbanization processes; the strong articulation between territorial planning and its transformation; the attention to the particular circumstances of each territory. Queirós recalls that Seixas understood urban planning could and should have its own field of authority and not be a mere shaper of disparate intentions and interests. The foundation of this authority relies on the necessity and capacity of articulating interventions at different time spans, longer than the immediate circumstances. In this sense, planning as an instrument of safeguarding natural/heritage values was particularly relevant.<sup>53</sup> Further, the work of territorial planning was, in Seixas' case, inseparable from the effort of urban infrastructure with development of plans running parallel to the design of municipal equipment. Equally important was the understanding of the need for planning instruments to be based on direct knowledge of the territory. This was evidenced by the *in situ* surveys that sustained and enabled planning documents as tools for managing transformations on an existing reality and not as adaptations of external models.

50 Ana Veneza, "O Poder Local, 1976-1985: da indefinição à descentralização estatal", *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* (1986): 693.

51 Veneza, "O Poder Local," 695.

52 António Barreto, "Portugal na periferia do centro: mudança social, 1960 a 1995," *Análise Social* XXX, nº 134 (1995): 852.

53 Queirós, interview, 2021.

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Figure 3. Maria João Delgado house, 1985.  
View from the garden.

### ***Natural Resources, Thermal Comfort and Energy Efficiency***

Since the early 1980s, energy performance and particularly passive solar use have been an integral part of Seixas' architectural principles and design work. This was a deliberate, as attested by the importance she gave to it in her Curriculum Vitae. From the limited information listed about each work (year, name and location), she took care to distinguish individually the system used, whether energy conservation by means of insulation and ventilation (CE) or energy efficiency with passive solar strategies (EF). In this document, Seixas highlighted: "With regard to architectural design, the concern with Energy Conservation in buildings has been evident since 1983, as well as, whenever possible, the design of buildings with Passive Solar Use, Integration of Active Systems and Natural Lighting and Ventilation".<sup>54</sup>

Seixas' interest in the energy performance of buildings was pioneering in Portugal; at the time this subject aroused little enthusiasm from her professional colleagues. As Manuel Fernandes de Sá recalled: "Fernanda read and looked for information when none of us did and had no particular interest in the topic".<sup>55</sup> It is relevant to remember that in Portugal, the first legal instrument on the matter, the "Regulation of Thermal Behavior Characteristics of Buildings" (DL n° 40/90) (RCCTE), did not appear until 1990. Unlike many, Seixas did not view her interest as a technical constraint limiting the architectural design, but rather as an opportunity to deepen the ecological and environmental performance of her intervention. In this context, she worked intensively with a research group from the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto, led by Professors Oliveira Fernandes and Eduardo Maldonado. Since 1984 she also participated in the *Sociedade Portuguesa de Energia Solar*<sup>56</sup> as part of the Local and National Directorates. Ultimately her concern with passive solar behaviour became consistent in her projects after 1983, and led to the public recognition of her expertise.<sup>57</sup>

54 Fernanda Seixas, *Curriculum Vitae*, Porto, 2013. Non-published.

55 Sá, interview, 2021.

56 Portuguese Society of Solar Energy.

57 Jorge Fiel, "Fernanda Seixas, uma arquitecta poupada", *Expresso-Única*, 24th September 2005.



Figure 4. Oliveira do Bairro Market, 1985-1990. View from south.

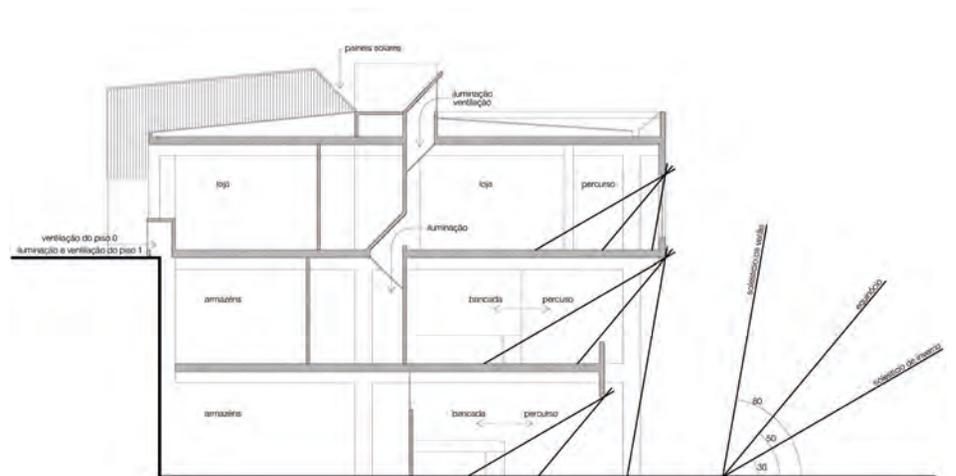


Figure 5. Oliveira do Bairro Market, 1985-1990. Cross section.

Seixas wrote that the 1985 Maria João Delgado House (figure 3) “corresponds to one of the first interventions with the introduction of active and passive solar technologies, solar panels, trombé walls, conservatories connected to the rooms, direct gain, transversal ventilation and insulation. The largest openings are oriented to the South; to the North, they are reduced to the minimum necessary for lighting and ventilating the adjacent spaces and to promote the transversal ventilation of the entire house”.<sup>58</sup>

That same year saw the beginning of the design for a nursery and a kindergarten at the Antas Construction and Housing Cooperative in Laborim, Gaia; and the design of Oliveira do Bairro’s market building (figure 4), in which Seixas experimented with the application of energy optimization and passive solar use in larger and more complex structures. Focusing on the latter, one can see that the vast majority of the market spaces are not enclosed and, therefore, the comfort conditions are solely determined by the physical configuration of the built elements (figure 5). Seixas noted: “In this case, there was no interest in any solar gain in the market’s sale areas... As can be seen from the cross-section, at no time of the year is there any solar incidence on the countertops of food products; Only in winter and mid-season there is solar incidence in the areas of the pedestrian paths ... natural ventilation is ensured through chimneys that communicate with the exterior on the north side, in the case of warehouses, and in parallel with the lighting skylights, on the top floor”.<sup>59</sup>

58 Fernanda Seixas, *Portfolio*, Porto, 2013. Non-published.

59 Seixas, *Curriculum Vitae*.

It is interesting to notice how in the last large buildings designed by Seixas – namely, the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology (IBMC, 1991), in Porto (figure 6), and the Social Service Superior Institute of Porto (ISSSP, 1994) (figure 7), in Senhora da Hora, Matosinhos – the concern with optimizing energy performance remained

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Figure 6. Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology – IBMC, 1991. View from south.

sharply present, but its plastic composition had evolved very significantly. Unlike at the Maria João Delgado House where the energy optimization elements (overhangs, conservatory, etc.) seem to dominate and even determine the architectural form, in these two later designs, the energy optimization features (orientation, louvers, trombé walls) were integrated into a more complex general composition that escaped any functional or energy performance determinism (figure 8).

Seixas' care in optimizing the energy performance of the buildings is part of a broader interest in safeguarding environmental values and an ecologically integrated vision of the construction of the human environment. When possible, she developed and worked on an Integrated Environmental Protection (water conservation, forestation, etc.). The particular focus on energy performance aligned with a domain in which she found partners and opportunities to intervene in the specific circumstances of her work, embodying the tenet of the ecological movement "think global, act local".



Figure 7. Superior Social Service Institute of Porto - ISSSP, 1994. Senhora da Hora, Matosinhos view from southwest.



Figure 8. Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology – IBMC, 1991. View from west.

## Conclusion

Considered against the backdrop of the *Estado Novo* regime, and particularly the protest movements emerging in the 1960s against this fascist dictatorship, Fernanda Seixas absorbed key ideas and took ownership of them, forging these formative ideas and opportunities to become a forward-thinking woman within the specific disciplinary and professional context of Portuguese architecture.

In the political status quo of her youth, women were ideologically defined as “domestic”, to whom fell the management of the household and who had a primordially set purpose – of women-mother – derived from their intrinsic biological nature. Seixas, born at the zenith of the dictatorship, came of age in transition between 1950s and 1960s, when the signs of political decay were gradually clearer, and the country opened up to a new way of perceiving the world, particularly after 1962.

Seixas became an activist during the 1960s, initially more politically driven, and then following the 1974 revolution, more pragmatically centered on territorial and social issues. She forged her own voice to convey her value system and made “the profession her politics”. She produced independent work and shaped it to her own way of seeing and relating to the world, stressing the relevance of dwelling as



**10** Fernanda Seixas  
Plano Por Jorge Fiel

**Os edifícios que ela risca são como girassóis, que estão sempre com a cabeça virada para o Sol**

cenciada no Porto, em 1973, e autora do Plano Geral de Urbanização de Oliveira do Bairro, precursor dos Planos Directores Municipais no nosso país.

O reconhecimento da eficácia do seu trabalho é oficial. Fernanda é a principal contribuinte com exemplos para o livro *Edifícios Solares Passivos em Portugal*, do Instituto Nacional de Engenharia, Tecnologia e Inovação (INETI).

O laboratório estatal analisou edifícios desenhados por Fernanda — como o Instituto de Biologia Molecular Celular (Campo Alegre, Porto) e o do Instituto Superior do Serviço Social (Senhora da Hora, Matosinhos) — e concluiu que eles gastavam em aquecimento e arrefecimento metade do habitual.

A escolha dos materiais ajuda às poupanças na factura energética. Na casa que fez para ela na Foz velha, Fernanda optou por pavimentos mistos, na sala e quarto. Nas partes que apanhavam sol, usou ardósia, que durante o dia acumula o calor que liberta à noite. Nas áreas não beneficiadas pelo sol, recorreu à madeira, um material leve e isolante.

A arquitecta também poupa na água. Dotou o campo de futebol do Oliveira do Bairro com um sistema que permite recuperar para cisternas subterrâneas 80% da água usada na rega do relvado. No Instituto de Serviço Social, criou um aproveitamento da água do poço para rega. E agora está empenhada em derrubar os impedimentos legais ao uso de água salobra nos autoclismos. 

### Uma arquitecta poupada

**Fernanda** adora o sol, porque é uma arquitecta preocupada com o ambiente. O primeiro e mais importante dado da sua equação antes de começar a riscar um edifício é a exposição — a melhor é a **sul** —, porque maximiza o aproveitamento passivo (ou seja sem o recurso ao caro sistema de painéis fotovoltaicos) da energia solar. «**As centrais térmicas poluem, as barragens destroem ecossistemas, o nuclear não é seguro. Temos de nos virar para o Sol, que ainda é de borla**», explica. Fazer casas que são naturalmente quentes no Inverno e frescas no Verão é o maior desafio para esta arquitecta li-

PHOTO: GONCALVES

Figura 9. Fernanda Seixas interviewed by the newspaper *Expresso*, September 24, 2005.

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a critical node for discussing and answering social problems. She leveraged the municipal sphere as a framework for positive urban planning, encompassing both basic infrastructure and the preservation of local identities and specificities; and she advocated for the acknowledgement and valuing of architectural and planning interventions made in accordance to a mindful use of territorial resources and of systems of thermal comfort and optimized energy performance.

Seixas' social awareness broadened with time and gained added complexity as a result of her curiosity, her open mind towards multi-disciplinarity and her empathetic qualities which enabled her to learn from multiple and diverse people and experiences. Her works held as synthesis derived from the search for an integrated response to diverse and sometimes conflictual concerns. This distinguished her from the majority of her architectural peers. She was interested in what was socially useful and she privileged technology – how to do it well and how to do it right – over the aesthetics so cherished by the “Escola do Porto”<sup>60</sup> from where she graduated and whose tenets she rejected.

The uniqueness of her career is thus not confined to her being a woman in a “male's profession”, and shines through in several aspects of her professional path: (1) in *the enduring view of architectural designs as social intervention*, be it for fundamental presence of an utilitarian sensibility in buildings, or the importance they hold as a supporting element of the communities she designs for; (2) in *the bond and closeness to the final users of her works* that she developed in unique and different circumstances, placing the desires and needs of those users at the center of the creative exercise; and (3) in *consistently being open to integrate other disciplinary fields* (sociology, engineering, etc.) in the design process, as driving mechanisms of the solutions.

Seixas distinguished herself through an assertive pragmatism, straightforwardly laying out her ideas and principles. As woman and architect she forged a professional route that took an approach differing from the consensus of the time; she created her autonomy and distinctiveness in an independent practice lasting for almost four decades, and today is recognized as an authority in energetic consciousness in the national context (figure 9).<sup>61</sup>

## Figures Source

Figure 1-9. Fernanda Seixas' Archive.

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60 School of Porto.

61 Hélder Gonçalves e João Mariz Graça, *Conceitos Bioclimáticos para Edifícios em Portugal* (Lisboa, DGGE/IP-3E, 2004), 38, 42.

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