

THE CARNIVAL ARTS CENTER, IN TORRES VEDRAS: THE CITY, THE MUSEUM AND THE SQUARE

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ABSTRACT

Carnival is celebrated in Portugal since the thirteenth century and occupies a central position in the collective imaginary of the city of Torres Vedras. In this particular case, Carnival has become, moreover, very important for the local economy, becoming an organized urban feast since 1912.

In 2011, the Municipality promoted an international architecture competition for the Carnival Arts Center (CAC), therefore creating a unique chance to materialize this collective reference. Our winning proposal is expected to be built soon. The site chosen for CAC is located in a marginalized residential district, and is characterized by two powerful elements: a slaughterhouse and a quarry.

The remains of the currently disabled slaughterhouse preserve its iconographic value, which reflects, in some way, the identity of the place. The quarry, also disabled, is now a platform embraced by an escarpment that gives a dreamlike character to the site.

The slaughterhouse will be rehabilitated to serve as entry and temporary exhibition room. The platform, encircled by the escarpment as well as by the new part of the building (permanent exhibition, deposits, documentation center, workshops, cafeteria) will be transformed into a public square. This square, designed to hold parades, invokes archetypal memories of the Roman arenas which, curiously, had its origin in death, just like this one. Places like Piazza dell'Anfiteatro, in Lucca, or Arènes de Lutèce, in Paris, were once arenas that became civic squares, just like this quarry-slaughterhouse, becoming again part of space and time of their cities.

Above all, it is expected that CAC and its square together will have a place-making capacity: on the one hand, as a stage for the daily practices of citizens, on the other hand, as an urban-theater for the celebration of Carnival, thus contributing to the urban rehabilitation of this part of the town and its civic life

The city

Located on the edge of the historic centre of the portuguese city of Torres Vedras, the Hill of S. Vicente is a fragmented collection of small and decaying neighbourhoods which grew around a quarry and the main slaughterhouse of the city, both now disabled for decades and currently in ruins.

The site chosen for CAC is exactly the same site of the quarry and the slaughterhouse, being thus absolutely unique given its situation and the powerful characteristics of the elements that shape it.



Fig. 1. Torres Vedras Municipality. *The original slaughterhouse in the 19th century: plan and section* [Drawing]; José Neves, G. A. (2011). *View of the quarry crater and ruined corrals.* [Photograph]

The quarry remains as a crater with an extensive platform embraced by an escarpment whose size, shape and materiality gives a dreamlike feeling to the whole site.

The slaughterhouse, which once had taken the quarry's platform as pasture for the livestock, preserves its iconographic value, thus keeping the memory of the place. This building consists of two identical single floor volumes which are unified by a symmetrical main facade, representative of the historicist architecture promoted by the Estado Novo regime in the 1930's and the 1940's. The only drawings that are known to exist of the original slaughterhouse, which was built in 1878, let us take notice of a courtyard in the core of the only volume that composed the slaughterhouse, back then, when this patio was the device for the animals' blood ventilation and drainage.

The traces of this central space along with the traces of the old quarry would become starting points for our project, as it is noticeable in some of the very early sketches.

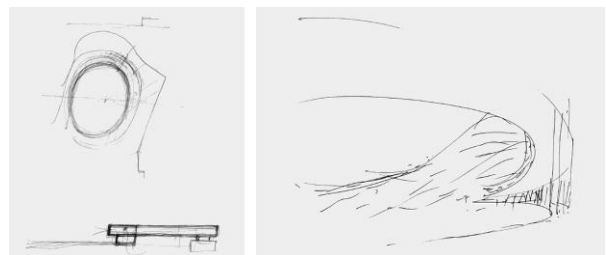


Fig. 2. José Neves (2011). *Early sketches of the project* [Drawing].

On one hand, the slaughterhouse patio is transformed in order to become the main staircase of the building, whilst the space around it is the starting point to the exhibition route. On the other hand, the crater is transformed into a square that we wanted to offer to this forgotten neighbourhood.

The museum

Over time the municipality has been storing a collection consisting of several artefacts manufactured for the annual celebration of Carnival - giant puppets, masks, floats - as well as an extensive graphic and audiovisual material. The main purpose of the CAC, as a museum, is to collect, preserve, enlarge, exhibit and interpret this collection, as well as to systematically promote a wide range of exhibitions and events related to the past, the present and the future of Carnival. Just as important as this, another mission of the CAC is to host people such as students, craftsmen, artists in residency, lecturers, etc. to work on Carnival related themes.

Therefore, the requirements concerning functional needs established by the curators of the municipality for the CAC suggest three main groups: exhibitions, deposits and workshops. These groups are complemented with a shop, a cafeteria and a multipurpose room, as well as all the indispensable technical rooms. The brief established a limit of 3.000sqm as the total gross area for new construction, in addition to the 600sqm of the existing slaughterhouse that we have decided to rehabilitate. The available budget for both the building and public outdoor space reaches €3.2 million euros.

One of the first decisions made to fit this available budget concerns the geological nature of the soil. Excavations are avoided, as much as possible, whilst the way that the building touches the ground seeks to take advantage of the slight existing slope between the old quarry platform and the street. Therefore, the building has three floors above ground, namely:

1. The first floor includes the existing building of the slaughterhouse, whose urban role was regained as the main entrance of the CAC.

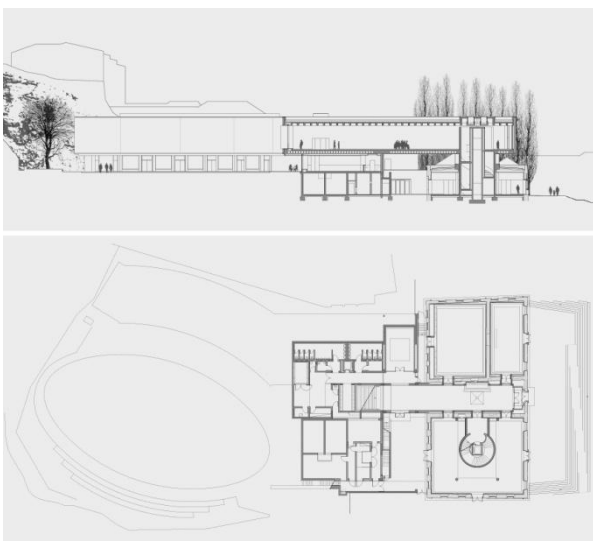


Fig. 3. José Neves, G. A. (2015). *Section through the exhibition rooms and first floor plan* [Drawing].

The importance of the slaughterhouse for the collective memory of the city makes it the right place for the representation and interpretation of the new set. Thus, given the architectural features of its original spaces, this building is perfectly suited to accommodate the temporary exhibition room, the multipurpose room and the CAC store. The temporary exhibition room is the starting point of the exhibition route, occupying the space that once was the space around the patio of the slaughterhouse.

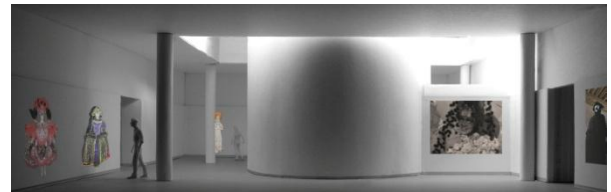


Fig. 4. José Neves, G. A. (2015). *View of the temporary exhibition room* [Photograph of design study model].

The spatial nature of the original ambulatory is now emphasized by the presence of a cylindrical volume at its center which, combined with a large skylight, contains the staircase to access the main exhibition room. The shape of this space and the position of the existing doors, which are preserved, allow the extension of the temporary exhibitions either towards the covered courtyard, northwest, or the street and the CAC forecourt. The multipurpose room is a black box, and the store, which is especially important in the whole set given the intense commerce of products associated with Carnival, is directly accessible from the street, turning the existing windows into street shop windows.

2. The highest floor of the building includes the main exhibition room, the deposits and the administration offices.

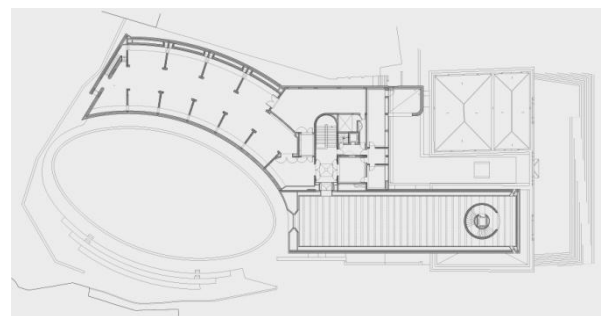


Fig. 5. José Neves, G.A. (2015). *Third floor plan* [Drawing].



Fig. 6. José Neves, G. A. (2015). *View of the main exhibition room and view of the deposits room* [Photographs of design study model].

The second stop of the exhibition route takes place on this floor, in the main exhibition room, as one ascends the circular staircase.

The proportions of this nave (41,00m X 9,50m X 5,00m) provide for an imponderable variety of exhibits and, once inside it, one can have a glimpse of the faraway hill of the castle through two narrow windows, while a large window opens up to the crater of the old quarry - the new square.

The deposits room, strategically placed in contiguity with the main exhibition nave, inviting to be visited not only by specialist visitors but also by the general public, is characterized as a curved nave with sky lit spaces on both sides in which the archived collection will be displayed. As in the main nave, this room also opens onto the escarpment through one single window that, in this case, is revealed only at the end of the visit.

This set of spaces thus organizes an architectural promenade in which visitors experience the most memorable moments of the walk through the building and of its exhibition content as elements of a parade, enhancing at the same time the relations established with the urban context.

3. The middle floor, at the level of the old quarry platform, includes the workshops and the cafeteria, which are the CAC spaces that relate directly to the square.

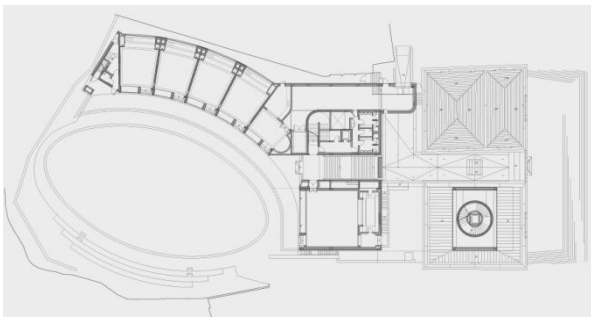


Fig. 7. José Neves, G. A. (2015). *Second floor plan* [Drawing].

The square, whose formal genesis is a result of the geometry suggested by the shape of the crater, is thus qualified by the mass of the escarpment in continuity with the elliptical surface of the new body, and animated by the presence of the cafeteria and the CAC workshops. All these spaces open up through big gates and large windows into a covered outdoor gallery, extending its activities to the square, thus contributing to the urban and civic vitality of this public space.



Fig. 8. José Neves, G. A. (2015). *View of the new square from the gallery* [Photograph of design study model].

Above all, the CAC is expected to be an expression of permanence and timelessness that allows it to be the adequate stage for the transience of Carnival. To do this, the CAC is not intended as a neutral, self-absorbed or amnesic place. Instead, what really matters is that the CAC may have the capacity to rehabilitate the memory and the life of this place, while offering a new central public space for the city.

The square

The square is designed not only as a parade ground to be a stage for the urban-theater of Carnival as well as for a wide range of other formal and informal urban events, but also as a place for the daily practices of citizens.



Fig. 9. José Neves, G. A. (2015). *View of the new square* [Photograph of design study model].

The new square is expected to be both the heart of the exhibitions and activities of the CAC, as well as the new heart of this marginal neighbourhood, built on the ruins of its lost vitality.

Therefore, the CAC project is mainly a special occasion for us to deepen two of the aspects that interest us most in architectural work: a certain notion of architecture as a work of continuity and the belief that architecture is a work that concerns a certain kind of offering.

The notion of continuity, as it is here understood, was put forth in 1962 by Fernando Távora in his book entitled *"Da Organização do Espaço"*. This architect explains that *"space is continuous, it cannot be organized with a partial perspective, it does not accept boundaries in its organization (...)"* (1962, p. 18) and that *"space is also irreversible, meaning that an organized space can never be again what it was once, given the passing of time and everything that this passing of time implies and signifies, (...) the space is in constant transformation"* (1962, p.19). And he sets the notion of collaboration as a key condition to understand this continuity, which he classifies in two types: *"horizontal collaboration"* (1962, p.20-21), between men from the same epoch, and *"vertical collaboration"* (1962, p.20-21), between men from different epochs.

In fact, to meet this notion of continuity, horizontal and vertical collaboration can not have anything to do with passivity or complacency. Instead, this concept means that the work of architecture always involves a highly attentive and critical attitude towards the specific circumstances that arises with each project. As Távora reminds us, *circumstance "(...) may have terribly negative aspects and would be a cowardly position to*

cultivate these aspects rather than fight them (...). The difficulty of the position to be taken is to know exactly which portion of the circumstance will be to follow and what portion will be to forget or even counteract (...)" (1962, p.24).

Offering, as it is here understood, is the opportunity, under the pretext of a brief but going far beyond it, to build something that eventually becomes evident and indispensable for the life of a city and its continuity. Henri Lefebvre explains that for a long period in history and in the formation of the cities "*the holders of richness and power (...) justified their privilege before the community by spending their fortune on sumptuary assets: buildings, foundations, palaces, embellishments, feasts.*" (1968, p. 14). In fact, these "*sumptuary assets*" are frequently associated with urban and architectural spaces that come with the buildings but are not restricted to their property and use. We mean squares, courtyards, terraces, galleries and other kinds of spaces for collective use that go fairly beyond the strict requirements that were in their origin.

In the case of the project of CAC all the options were determined by a gesture of this kind: the offering of a public square to the city, in continuity with an old slaughterhouse, an escarpment and a fragmented neighbourhood.

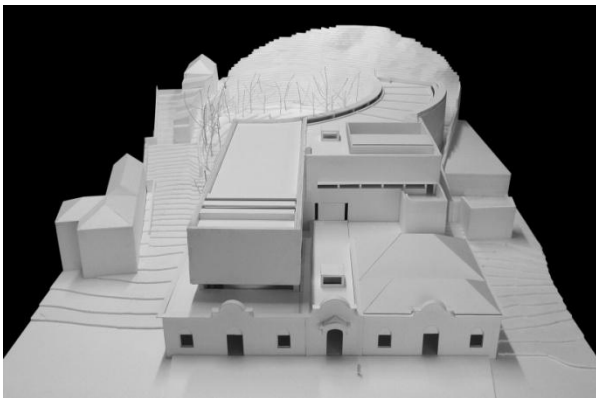


Fig. 10. José Neves, G. A. (2015). *General view* [Photograph of design study model].

Regardless of coincidences concerning the form of either space, the process that we have found to continue this piece of city is perhaps not very different from the process that led, for example, to build the Piazza dell'Anfiteatro in Lucca, 30 kilometers away from the place where we are now. Curiously, both the square in Lucca and this new square in Torres Vedras had their origin in the presence of death - an arena and a slaughterhouse. And both the Italian piazza and the Portuguese square are about re-appropriation of such spaces of death as civic squares, to thus return them to the space and time of their cities - to life.

The celebration of Carnival comes to us as the best of pretexts for this re-appropriation, through the civic exercise that architecture cannot fail to be, while labor of offering and continuity.

References

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 Lefebvre, H. (1968) *Le droit à la ville* (J. Neves, Trans.). Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1974