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18. Architekt Alfredo Viana de Lima, ze zbiorów Autora
18. Architect Alfredo Viana de Lima, from Author's collection

VIANA DE LIMA (1913/1991) – WITHIN THE PANORAMA OF MODERN EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE

JOÃO CAMPOS

In a time where travels were difficult and Europe was faced with serious problems, a consequence of international conflicts (Spanish Civil War, WWII), Viana de Lima travelled early in search of information. He sought Paris and his soon-to-be mentor, Corbusier. Later, he became an active part of CIAM (Hoddesdam /1951, Aix-en-Provence /1953, Dubrovnik /1956, and Otterlo/1959), being appointed the Portuguese delegate.

At the end of his academic training in mid-1930, he travelled to Belgium and the Netherlands, which serves as a justification of some attitudes in his earlier works. During that trip, he discovered a forgotten work by Le Corbusier (the house of Painter René Guette, Antwerp, 1926), becoming fascinated in the observation of the famous Maison de Verre in Uccle (also in Belgium) and built in 1935 by Paul-Amaury Michel, after the author had stayed with

Le Corbusier and also benefitted from the singular production by Pierre Chareau, on the Parisian Rue de Saint Guillaume, certainly by travelling the path near Seine towards the Swiss master's office. (ill. 2)

Considering his wandering across Flanders, we will therefore invoke the beautiful production by Viana de Lima at Rua de Carlos Malheiro Dias, at the city of Porto, a project that succeeded *Casa Cortez* on his drawing board (1941-42). That work may be seen as one of his purified exercises of style, with all Corbusian attributes, although in a lot of scarce width, as is the case of the parcels where the works of Antwerp and Uccle are implemented. (ill. 3)

At this house in Porto, one witnesses, for the first time in Portugal, a communication ramp between floors, creating a *promenade architecturale* and consecrating a great room with double height ceilings with an enormous window on the street façade, facing South.

Viana de Lima also had tremendous knowledge on the Portuguese-Tropical environment, a consequence of his relationships with Brazil, with Lúcio Costa (*et pour cause, Corbu*) with Augusto da Silva Telles, Óscar Niemeyer and, especially, of his interest for the Portuguese-origin urban and architectural heritage, which caused him to connect with an entire geography and to understand a scale of the phenomenon that was not common to the majority of Portuguese architects at that time.

Historical background of Viana de Lima's activity - The glorious decade of 1920 and Le Corbusier

The glorious 1920's, in the aftermath of World War I, creates several challenges to Housing, considering the economic reconstruction, the urgency to satisfy the massive needs of housing, the use of new materials and the industrialization - all within a framework of economic deprivation and imbalances that eventually lead up to the first great depression of capitalism, in a complex equation of a world of new social and aesthetic paradigms, where architecture plays a hitherto unexpected role, given the social dimension it encompasses.

The idea to integrate arts was a concern felt and chased at that time: Architecture, as a construction and a technique, simultaneously becomes part of a new aesthetic – Cubism – and is associated with other objectives, becoming part of a broad spiritual movement in Aesthetics.

The parameters of the new proposals of construction language, together with advances in technique and urbanization, catapult several great names to the spotlight, starting with the pioneer Adolf Loos and also Gerrit Rietveld, with Schroeder House, in Utrecht (1924). In German Stuttgart, the “Weissenhoff city” will be built (around the *Verkbund* exhibition, 1927), where one may observe some housing proposals by the greatest architects of that time, among which Bruno and Max Taut, Gropius, Le Corbusier, Peter Behrens, Pieter Oud, Hans Scharoun, and Mies van der Rohe. Later on the decade, Walter Gropius (ill. 6) and the *Bauhaus'* constructions, Fuller, Alvar Aalto, and Mies (with his pavilion for Barcelona) also bring their creations to a golden era, during which Le Corbusier completes a remarkable series of *villas*: Besnus e Ozenfant, both in Vaucresson (1922); La Roche/Jeanneret, in Auteuil/Paris (1923); Cook, in Paris (1926) (ill. 7); Stein, in Garches (1927); and Savoye, in Poissy (1928) (ill. 7).

But before, quite obsessively, the *Maisons Citrohan* (from the 1st version in 1920-21, until the 5th in Stuttgart in 1927) (ill. 8) and the *Pessac lot* (from 1922), on the outskirts of Bordeaux, occupied his work and mind and, as true *laboratoires d'architecture*, granted him safety for the decisions he will later assume across the different solutions that we find on the house-palaces that he tirelessly built (ill. 9).

In fact, Pessac is not Le Corbusier's pioneering essay towards the experimentation of new types of architecture and construction. Indeed and also commissioned by Henry Frugès, in Lège (1920) near Arcachon (approximately thirty kilometers from Bordeaux), a dozen houses was built, which may be considered prototypes of what will be attempted by the construction of the serial of houses at *Quartiers Modernes Frugès* – initially considered to hold more than 200 housing unit, after being promoted as more than one hundred and, finally, materializing only 51.

It is interesting to note that the implemented formulas and inclusively the materialization of some specific aspects announced in previous projects (such as *Maison Monol*, experimented since 1919) are present in Pessac, denouncing and solving the technical difficulties of pre-fabrication.

The entire background of this febrile production is present in Pessac, superiorly reinterpreted after the end point achieved at *Citrohan Houses* of 1921. And not considering the theorization and the

successive experimentation of the modern housing type, started by the idea of the constructive process *Dom-Ino* (1914-15) and the pivotal fixation of the need to module and simplify the number of elements, which produced some clarification that is at the base of the certainty of the success of the new path for Architecture.

The allotment for industrial workers by Frugès, on the outskirts of Bordeaux, was settled in the assumption of producing modern, low-cost and healthy, proposing a new lifestyle, the “housing machine”, the connection of an ideological harmony with the industrial production: a neighborhood that is functional, rationalized, geometrically understandable, cubist, diversified but homogeneous.

The results, however, without prejudice to the idea and sense of social mission that is foreseen, would not be very exciting by the investor himself.

Ten years apart, but many similarities in a stubborn personal quest

As with many other schools of the same type and era, Viana de Lima attended the Porto’s Fine Arts School, which failed to have, in its curricula, the learning of housing programs. Le Corbusier says the same thing in his *Conversation with Students* (1943).

An object such as an ambitious house, an urban palace such as *Villa Stein* or *Casa Cortez* features innovation as the greatest concern of the architecture while carrying out his task. This characteristic belongs fully to the mission of the Modernists. In Portugal, Viana de Lima is an example of this new professional attitude, setting a dominant position right at the start of his professional career. (ill. 10-15)

Firstly, one should identify the similarity between Viana de Lima’s attitude, by following the project example of Le Corbusier. Viana de Lima gave himself the chance of believing and defending a theory, materialized by the adoption and respect for the “Five Points of a New Architecture”. He took for himself and as his own what Le Corbusier had transmitted to him, which was pragmatically and exemplarily expressed in the rapid succession of examples in the domestic architecture (*Maison Cook*/1926, *Villa Stein*/1927, *Villa Savoye*/1928, following the initial exploration of the allotment at de *Citrohan*/1920-22), by formulating the famous *Les 5 Points d’une Architecture Nouvelle*:

– *The Pilotis*, erecting the mass of the building above ground;

– *The Free Plan*, making the subdivision of the structural fabric independent;

– *The Free façade*, corollary of the free plan on the vertical plan;

– *The horizontal spans*, opening up towards the light without the restraints of the pillars;

– *The Roof garden*, restoring the fruition of nature and beauty, which the implementation of the building took from the terrain.

The experimentation allowed by the fortunate commissioning of *Casa Cortez* walked hand in hand with Le Corbusier’s theoretical production, who immediately in 1923 published the convictions translated into the greatest examples of those urban palaces of a wealthy middle class, both refined and cosmopolitan.

The *Maison Cook*, near the Bois-de-Boulogne in Paris, is a townhouse with ground floor almost entirely hollow and a garden on the rooftop. I have no doubt that the Viana de Lima observed the number 6 of Rue Denfert Rochereau for quite some time.

He failed to see many of the *pilotis* on the ground floor, since there is only a round isolated pillar, but he retained the semi-circular shape that the *Casa Cortez* displays as a (fake) axis of volume symmetry, centering the composition on the great balcony of the great room of this Porto’s house.

Le Corbusier repeats the semicircle on the floor plan of *Villa Savoye* and some of the terraces. Following him, in Porto, Viana de Lima establishes an identical relationship on the first and last floors, where the solarium’s wall is quite similar, from a formal point of view, to the one of Poissy, also importing, from the same model, the limitation of the perimeter of the *pilotis* on the ground floor.

The references of Porto’s house with the *maison* at Boulogne-Bilancourt are visible on a more subtle level: at the Parisian house, the glass house that creates, on the upper part of floor of the great hall, the curved movement of the terrace wall grants a dramatic movement to the double ceiling of the vast area of Cook’s third level. In a way, it can be seen in the design of the movement of the great central frames of *Casa Cortez* an echo of such memory, where the movement of the glass allows Viana de Lima to create a covered outdoor space overlooking the street, marking the nobility of the inside areas

and distinguishing the balcony from the terraces, which are quite striking in the construction. (ill. 16)

Other possible, even likely, influences

When (and if) Viana contacted with *Maison Tzara* in Montmartre (Av. Junot, 15 - Paris), Adolf Loos (1870 - 1933) would probably have been dead by then, since his first field trip to France occurred after he completed his education on Escola de Belas-Artes (1938).

The residence of Josephine Baker and Tristan Tzara, built between 1926 and 1927, would become quite famous in the Paris that the young Viana de Lima knew. The couple, living in a neighborhood that gave glamour to the city, was the *crème de la crème* of foreign elites that caught the visitors' attention and the residence would most certainly be another motive for their projection.

The author of the project was also quite famous. And although there are some doubts as to whether or not Viana de Lima travelled to Prague to see Muller's mansion, it is likely that he saw images of the project or the work, built between 1929 and 1930, already cited at the time as one of the examples that informed an entire glorious decade of the discovery of the routes of Architecture. But he was certainly in Montmartre. (ill. 17)

The Austrian architect is considerably older than the other names highlighted in this essay, but it is important to include Loos in the same group, where, indeed, he was the real mentor behind an entire philosophy of the art of designing the architecture of the twentieth century.

Not only is the *Villa Muller* one of the most triumphant icons of the golden age of architectural Cubism, the reference to *Maison Tzara* is justifiable because it seems to suggest an immediate bridge between the front balcony of the main floor of the Parisian building and *Casa Cortez*.

During that golden age, Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies and Walter Gropius are simultaneously invoked. If such invocation is made here, it is not unreasonable or inappropriate to, regarding its counterparts, align *Casa Cortez* by Viana de Lima as one of the greatest examples of the *Villas Muller* by Adolf Loos in Prague, *Savoie* by Le Corbusier in Poissy and *Tugendhat* by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, in Brno. There is one difference: whereas the latter modernist urban palaces were concluded around the

same time (1930), the Porto's house is only begun to be designed eight or nine years after.

Around this time, when Viana de Lima is completing the Course of Architecture in Oporto and starting his project for *Casa Cortez*, Walter Adolph Gropius creates his iconic American house in Lincoln, Massachusetts (1938). But Gropius (1883-1969) had already left, in Dessau, the *Masters' Houses* (1926), the extraordinary exercise of architecture that aligns with the rest of the greatest masterpieces of this decade. Today, it includes parts classified as World Heritage by UNESCO regarding the Bauhaus movement, as well as some works of Mies and Corbusier or Loos, shortly.

By listing these examples, I want to underline that the precocious professional production by Viana de Lima with his *Casa Cortez* represents undoubtedly the most important case of a housing type for a wealthy bourgeoisie in Portugal, as much as the others represent the same in the places where they were created. It was a new strain of people, who did not comply with the traditional methods of commissioning urban mansion.

Let us consider two or three more facts about a fortunate young author of a building that breaks away from all parameters in force on construction techniques, urban image, functioning and aesthetic of architecture in Portugal:

- Viana de Lima, born in 1913, would be 25 or, at the most, 26 years of age when the *Casa Cortez* was commissioned to him;

- At the time, he was preparing his Competition to Obtain the Title of Architect, granted in 1941 when the project has already began construction;

- At *Casa Cortez*, Viana de Lima created the most intriguing and boldest project of the entire single-family housing type in Portugal. The building displays all the grammar of a posterior path, which has other breakthrough achievements;

- The decade differentiating the Portuguese production from its European counterparts attests, first of all, the Portuguese national delay, hamstrung by the special contingencies created by the Spanish conflict;

- At the same time, nevertheless, it emphasizes the innovating posture and calling of young Alfredo Viana de Lima towards an expression that failed to submit itself to the destiny of the country and to align with the faux Modernism of the most advanced characters of the dictatorial regime.

The first Brazilian Modern and the commissioning of *Casa Cortez*

The Brazilian lead about the origin of the project must not be overlooked, via two conjugated factors, even if both are related to the didactics of modern Architecture advanced by Le Corbusier, materialized by his presence in training sessions in S. Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Here, the Swiss master will leave his direct influence in the discussion and sketches (1937) of the project that is yet to be developed by the team led by Lucio Costa for the Ministry of Education, now the Palace Gustavo Capanema in Rio de Janeiro (Affonso Reidy, Óscar Niemeyer, Carlos Leão, Jorge Moreira, and Ernani Vasconcelos).

But already before, quite out of place considering the South-American panorama in force, there is the innovative risk of the Ukrainian Gregori Warchavchick (1896-1972), trained in Odessa and Roma, a disciple of Marcello Piacentini, projecting the so-called *Modernist House* of Rua Itápolis in São Paulo in 1930. This small townhouse was visited by Le Corbusier while it was still under construction; as a consequence, Gregori is invited to participate at CIAM representing Latin America.

Gregori Warchavchick also marked the construction panorama of the early 1930's at Rio de Janeiro with a pioneer example - *Casa Nordschild* (similarly to *Casa Cortez*, demolished quite early in 1954 and both are, theoretically, the most exciting productions of the respective authors).

This Brazilian architectural icon, celebrated by the entire avant-garde elite of that time, then produced a great bang for the propaganda generated with the inauguration of the house on October 22nd 1931, which included the presence and famous statements by Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as consequent controversies waged, by the Moderns, in defense of the new architecture. The avant-garde representatives of Brazil were quite active and projected a sensible and triumphant era, fighting for new expressions and associations, as the one culminating in the *Brazilian Pavilion* for the 1939's New York World Fair, by Lúcio Costa and Óscar Niemeyer.

The question here is whether or not there was a convergence of the interest of the commissioner and the work of Viana de Lima, who was touched by this aesthetic affirmation of the generation of Brazilian Modernist.

Since the commission was made by a Portuguese emigrant at Brazil, the desire for a futuristic townhouse, fighting against pre-established cannons and within a rigorous framework of cultural demand, this could only have been produced by someone who was closely watching the country, which was becoming a fertile ground for the progress of ideas.

Therefore, it is quite possible (or even likely) that this Brazilian connection explains the origin of a project as the one that was commissioned to the young Viana de Lima, when he hadn't even presented his final proofs to obtain his degree in Architecture.

More on *Maison Cook* and the structural conception of *Casa Cortez*

The statement made by Le Corbusier about having achieved, with *Maison Cook*, "the first truly Cubist house" was related to the interpenetration of the scales of the volumes and the playful relationship achieved with full and empty space and, of course, the application of the postulates of *the 5 points of modern architecture*, which he advocates.

Well, one needs to recognize that, with Viana de Lima, the boldness of the design of *Casa Cortez*, the construction of the porticoed of the façade's external plans, with pillars and spans without a housing function and the scale of the terraces, which generate interesting light effects that participate in an enriched architecture, the existence of empty double-height ceilings, closed spaces without roof, and rooms without wall – all this achieves a complexity that adds and enriches, according to the vocabulary of 20th-century architecture, a personal *quantum* of authenticity and autonomy, of homage and affirmation, which puts the work being analyzed within the most precious group of a school and a superior type of production.

In the volumetric conception of Porto's townhouse, the aesthetic effect of the structural elements has a particular emphasis for the construction's architectural expression.

Before anything else, let us talk about the distinguishable elements, acting almost as postulates of a Corbusian grammar: the *pilotis* on the ground floor, the independence of the relationship between the peripheral pillars with the façade's spans, the rehearsal of a freedom of design that may be understood as being close to *plan libre*.

Apart from reinforced concrete, the building's structure also had stone masonry and vertical elements of cast iron.

On the first case, the apparent granite is present on the scenic curved wall of the eastern façade and also on the basis of the semicircular wall of the games room, establishing one of the axes of the symmetry of the composition, within the complex game between empty and full, concave and convex spaces.

The reinforced concrete vertical supports are distributed across an easily understandable structural mesh. The emphasis regarding the pillars involves two things:

- The first one regarding the fact that they are designed with the circular section and they are implemented (on the first floor, e.g., from the foundations) quite unevenly with the continuations that happen on the floors of the façade's external perimeter, except with the continuation occurs in a void; in this case, the recoil of the external plan is maintained. This is a principle harvested from Le Corbusier – allowing the windows to cross freely in front of the structural element, being that in *Casa Cortez* voids are not finished, but rather simple openings on the wall;

- The second is a consequence, not in reality its essence, of transferring the quadrangular section of the element of reinforced concrete to the expressive beams that design the imagination of the house's major volume – which constitute one of the most extraordinary inventions of this project's design by Viana de Lima.

It is obvious that the formal exploration of these resources was chased by Le Corbusier a dozen years before Viana de Lima's project at Porto, causing him the sensation of a new time, the one to discover cubism for architecture. By invoking this aspect, on Porto's work, I see that Viana de Lima went much further than what he had learnt from the Master, achieving a deep plasticity, without fear and transmitting a notorious self-reliance.

The most striking note of invention is the extraordinary counterpoint that the elegant pillar of the façade's right corner creates with the fabulous extension of the façade's loose beam (5 + 22,5 + 6 = 33 and a half meters of a line limiting the height of the 2nd floor). That same pillar, for its double height,

is reduced in a delicate dimension, dialoguing with iron plummets that compose the structural rhythm of the balconies...

In their turn, the iron supports, for the contrast that their thinness creates in the dialog with the concrete spans and pillars, refer to a modernity and a simplicity that the new tectonic of construction could materialize, announcing an entire avant-garde attitude.

Casa Cortez, unfortunately demolished in 1971, is the greatest example of the Portuguese architecture of this type and this period, becoming, nevertheless, an interesting motive for the History of Art in Portugal.

The author recently published the original drawings and other project-related materials, promoting them near a specialized audience and general public (João Campos, *Viana de Lima e a Introdução da Arquitectura Moderna em Portugal – Ensaio sobre a Casa Cortez / Porto [1940]*, Urbatelier, Dec. 2011, Porto).

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