

Visual Essay

Layers of Invisibility in Portuguese State Furniture Design, 1940–1974

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In Portugal, the political regime resulting from the 1926 military coup – led almost throughout by António de Oliveira Salazar (1889–1970) – was known as *Estado Novo*. One of its main features was a policy of promoting architectural works and basic infrastructure in the country through the centralised organisation of services and a strict definition of procedures. In 1929, even before the creation of the Ministry of Public Works some three years later, the Directorate-General of Buildings and National Monuments (*Direcção-Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais* – DGEMN) was set up, an institution responsible for the planning and construction of public service buildings and the maintenance and conservation of Portugal’s national monuments. In 1940, the intentions that motivated the DGEMN were replicated in the realm of furniture, with the creation of the Furniture Acquisition Commission (*Comissão para Aquisição de Mobiliário* - CAM), which remained active until 1980. As laid down by the law that created the commission (Decree-Law no. 30.359), the work of the CAM was to focus on ‘studies and the acquisition of furniture for the State’s buildings that are to be newly created, and others that have undergone radical alterations or extension works’, with the aim of ensuring ‘harmony between the furniture used and the architectural language of these buildings’ to ensure the adoption of common principles’, and to ensure ‘the appropriate technical management and controls’.

However, the research project entitled *Móveis Modernos* (Modern Furnishings) has led us to acknowledge that the greater part of the work done by CAM was limited to a group of well-defined programme categories: buildings representing the state, including Parliament and the official residences of the president and prime minister, public offices, public care and health structures (with particular attention to tuberculosis and mental health), some schools, tourism (some hotels and the *Pousadas*), and installations for military and security forces (army, police and customs).¹ We also discovered that apart from CAM, other authorities in Public Works and other ministries also had responsibilities in furnishing and equipping state facilities, namely those promoting installations for specific functions, often having responsibility for large sets of public buildings across the entire country. We should also point out, among others, those authorities working in the realm of elementary and secondary education facilities, health services, justice venues, the agencies of the state bank, post offices and the universities of Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra, including the teaching hospitals. The Ministry for Overseas Territories (*Ministério do Ultramar*) had competencies for the furnishing of public buildings constructed in territories that were then Portuguese colonies; the Ministry of Justice was responsible for court buildings (with the exceptions of the central facilities in Lisbon and Porto); and the Ministry of Finance conducted works for diplomatic representation and facilities abroad.

This diversity of promoters meant that there were professionals working on furniture design in all of these authorities, employed in the fundamental work of guaranteeing the image and operation of the country's public services. This shows that the objective of centralising and imposing standards expressed in the law that created CAM was not fulfilled. And since the universe of agents with responsibilities for the design and decision-making process in this field was divided among different authorities and working programmes, its true dimension remains, even today, ignored by historiography.

The examples we have selected to illustrate the work of this group of agents help to build up a picture that throws light on a narrative that is often seen only in black and white. Through this approach we intend to provide a snapshot of significant cases of furniture design that have remained hidden under consecutive layers of invisibility – masked by preconceived ideas about the nature of the official architecture used by a repressive, conservative state, by a widespread lack of interest in architecture designed for the network of public services, and by a general failure to understand the smaller scale items (fittings and furniture) found in the universe of public buildings. From among the examples that we will look at, we will find evidence that even under restricted economic, political and social conditions, there was room for serious research and for a balanced search for consistency without excess, the results of which can be considered satisfactory. By acknowledging these works, we aim to contribute to a more integrated, complete view of the built environment, and to enrich the discussion on the products, processes and producers involved in design tasks within the sphere of the civil service.

This kindergarten (inaugurated, 1936; demolished, 1958) was a small part of a significant and exceptional plan implemented by the *Junta Geral do Distrito de Coimbra* in the central part of Portugal, under the direction of Fernando Bissaya Barreto (1886–1974), a physician and politician who adopted the most recent European initiatives as models in providing facilities for public care and health. Architect Luís Benavente (1902–1993) was associated with projects in this context from 1934. The use of tubular steel furniture was a recurrent theme in these works and a pioneering approach at the time in Portugal. This was clearly a legacy of central European modernism, promoting the use of replicas that closely resembled their international models – German and Austrian, as well as French – adapted to the specific needs of the programmes for which they were required and the country's available industrial resources.

Benavente was on the staff of the Ministry of Public Works from 1932, after receiving his diploma in architecture from the Porto School of Fine Arts in 1930. Over the following decades he would spend the most substantial part of his career adapting existing buildings to new functions, such as the *Palácio Foz* (1941–1953), in Lisbon, an eighteenth-century building which became the headquarters for the regime's official propaganda services. In this case, Benavente resolutely opted for revival furniture in the form of replicas rather than contemporary reinterpretations, thus attempting to establish links of continuity and mimicry with the architecture of the spaces he was dealing with. We might say that both in architecture and furniture design, this move away from a clearly modern language to a more classical, revivalist flavour is mainly due to his efforts to adapt to functional programmes and a specific architectural context. But this process also had a clear ideological basis: to relinquish international trends and technically-oriented solutions in favour of the products of the erudite elites of the past, considered better suited to conditions at that time.



The furnishings and equipment intended to be used in high schools and technical colleges built throughout the country were designed at the *Junta das Construções para o Ensino Técnico e Secundário* (active within the ministry of Public Works during the period 1934–1969), namely by Jorge Tavela de Sousa (1914–1998), one of the designers working in that office.

The designs were meant to respond in a systematic and coordinated way to all planned functional needs (seats, tables and desks, containers, laboratory benches, gymnasium equipment, etc.), to be available in numerous dimensions and to take into account the various hierarchical categories. The catalogue thus created was used in around one hundred building projects (twenty-nine secondary schools and sixty-nine technical colleges), which were designed and executed up until the end of the 1960s, using common functional and ideological guidelines.

A certain art deco taste is visible in the shapes of these items, with their elementary volumes, flat surfaces and straight lines, combined with natural, elegant curves, mostly built from the dense, dark, heavy, highly resistant types of wood that the vast colonial territories provided at the time. Such a preference was justified by the expectation that they would be used on a daily basis by many pupils, teachers and other staff for decades to come. The existence of a catalogue of furniture types testifies to the need to find a way to facilitate the process of school installations, but also to the fact that a level of understanding had been reached on the needs and uses of these facilities, providing a tried and tested *corpus*.

Tavela de Sousa did not complete his training as an architect at the Lisbon School of Fine Arts, and his professional career led to scarce personal visibility. He employed his graphic skills in collaborating with older professionals or in partnerships with colleagues of his generation.



For the Palace of Justice in Porto (inaugurated 1961), architect Raul Rodrigues Lima designed an extensive plan, with complete, formal coherence between architecture and furniture, and in a tone both monumental and authoritative, much favoured by the conservative and totalitarian character of the regime. In finding a solution to this project, Lima then recognised that he had established a close dialogue with the agents of power, namely the Director General for Justice, in order to codify the desired order and materialise the intricate hierarchical web of justice.

Rodrigues Lima (1909–1980) graduated as an architect from the Porto School of Fine Arts in 1931. Appointed deputy architect of the Commission for Prison Construction (1939), he was responsible for planning several dozen prisons throughout the country. At the same time, in his own private practice, and with an undeniable overlapping of status, he worked on several official commissions – sixty or so building projects for law courts, including furniture – executed in a solid formal language but with no particular boldness.

Rodrigues Lima's extremely fruitful career in public procurement has received scarce recognition from either critics or historiography, no doubt due to the stigma of his having been an architect close to the regime, the nature of the programmes in which he worked (particularly within the context of restricted freedom and repression), and the language he adopted to achieve this.



The modern-style blocks of the main building of the Service for the Development of Mining in Porto (*Serviço de Fomento Mineiro*; 1958–1959, inaugurated 1963) housed structures that represented the institution and its hierarchy (director's office, meeting room, auditorium, etc.), as well as laboratories and other working areas. For the furniture project, the architects engaged in an exercise of modern design that was somewhat eclectic in its choice of references: Scandinavian in the elegance of the structures, but also Italian in the refinement of construction details and geometric complexity.

A movement clearly intended to bring official Portuguese production once again closer to that of the international architectural culture of the time was implemented from the second half of the 1950s, both by civil service architects working for the state and independent professionals contracted specifically for occasional jobs. This happened either in Lisbon, where state control would supposedly have been tighter, or in Porto, where, according to more conventional historiography, the distance from the main decision-making centres allowed architects a greater degree of freedom of action.

In this particular project we find a partnership between architects Eduardo Coimbra de Brito (1930–1999) and António Linhares de Oliveira. Brito graduated from the Porto School of Fine Arts in 1957. He was on the staff of DGEMN from 1959 on and remained a civil servant for most of his career, becoming Director of Building and Monuments of the Centre Region (1995–1997). Oliveira was a civil servant with the *Serviço de Fomento Mineiro*; he graduated as an architect from the Porto School of Fine Arts in 1966.

Service for the Development of Mining, Porto. Architecture and furniture project (1958–1959; inaugurated 1963): architects Eduardo Coimbra de Brito (1930–1999) and António Linhares de Oliveira. Armchair (model 10). Photo: Luísa Ferreira, 2013.



The Officers' Mess (1955–1957) at Pedrouços in Lisbon was built as a support structure for the Institute of Advanced Military Studies, an institution dedicated to the higher education of army officers. Norberto Correia (b. 1926) worked on its furniture project and interpreted its functional programme as a hotel facility, adopting the modern expression of the most recent standards for this type of structure. Given that it was a building to be used by officers of the armed forces, it is surprising that its author achieved such a degree of creative autonomy in working for an authority that might have been expected to exert conservative pressure on those responsible for its design.

Corrêa graduated in architecture from the Lisbon School of Fine Arts in 1953. He worked as a member of the official body that planned the University Campus of Lisbon, and went on to have a long career as an independent professional, involved in projects that ranged from urban planning to architecture, interiors and furniture – particularly in the hotel sector. Despite the vast amount of work accomplished by Corrêa both at home and abroad, recognition of his work and critical acclaim are still slow in coming.

Officers' Mess, Pedrouços, Lisbon. Architecture project (1955–1957): architect Sabino Correia; furniture project (1957): architect Norberto Corrêa (b. 1926).
Main living room. Photo: Mário Novais (ca. 1957) FCG / BA. Mário Novais estate.



The Institute of Tropical Medicine (*Instituto de Medicina Tropical*) was one of the first furniture projects for which architect José Luís Amorim (1924–1999) was fully responsible. In its creation, he established a number of principles and models that he subsequently developed in several other furniture and facilities projects for DGEMN up until the 1970s. Amorim mainly designed furniture for public buildings in Lisbon and the surrounding region – namely, the *Junta de Energia Nuclear* headquarters (1961; 1965–1980); the National Agronomy Station (from 1962); the National Library (1965–1968); the Doctor Ricardo Jorge National Health Institute (1967–1971); the Palace of Justice in Lisbon (inaugurated 1970); and the Infante D. Henrique Naval College (1970; inaugurated 1972).

On the whole, Amorim reinterpreted traditional typologies, formally modernised with an eye to the international trends of the time. He developed a coordinated series of items clearly related in their formal familiarity, matured and established over time. They included hierarchical series of seats, containers, desks, support furniture and laboratory benches. Initially, his work bore the mark of precision and a demanding assessment of needs, as well as a critical monitoring of the technical conditions of production and the respective results. This attitude later gave way to a tendency that apparently accommodates and settles for solutions not so well adapted to the specific context (scale, spaces, style and geometry), giving an impression of a lack of adjustment.

One positive feature of Amorim's performance as the official in charge of interventions of this kind in public works was his demanding and rigorous attitude towards monitoring the conditions of production in furniture contracts and their outcomes, sometimes in a very critical manner. The reports he made denote a constant demand for rigour in the production and installation of furniture and equipment, and present an inexhaustible diagnostic of problems, shortcomings and failures. Repeatedly over the years, he produced reflections on the system, developing plans and structuring solutions with a genuine commitment to solving problems and streamlining processes. Time and again, however, these efforts were hindered by the inertia of the other actors involved: managers, institutional officials and the industry.

José Luís Amorim graduated in architecture from the Lisbon School of Fine Arts in 1956. He was hired by the Ministry for Overseas Territories for urban planning and architecture functions (1958–1961), and was an employee of the Lisbon Municipal Council in the town-planning sector (1962–1968). Despite his considerable amount of work for the state, Amorim was never officially a civil servant of either the ministries of Public Works or Overseas Territories, and continued his career as an independent professional.

Institute of Tropical Medicine, Lisbon. Architecture project (1953–1958): architect Lucínio Cruz (1914–1999); furniture project (1955–1958): architect José Luís Amorim (1924–1999). Armchair and sofa (models P1 e PS1).
Photo: Patrícia Almeida, 2013.



Daciano da Costa (1930–2005) designed the most distinctive interiors in Lisbon's National Library (1965–1968): the principal reading room, the catalogue room, cafeteria, auditorium, director's office and meeting room. Some years after, he designed all the furniture for the documentation and meetings centre at the National Civil Engineering Laboratory (1971–1972). In both cases he managed to produce a mixed balance of civic monumentality and humanism, the familiar and the unexpected, together with an appropriate sense of scale for the whole and the detail, recalling the history of modern design in a clear, geometrical language and, with an undeniable author's mark, wisely avoiding monotony and repetition.

After graduating as a painter from the Lisbon School of Fine Arts in 1961, Daciano not only dedicated himself to interiors and furniture design, but also to industrial design and teaching. His own research involved a constant, critical attitude towards the public facilities' project – he consistently refused to become a civil servant in the design field for fear that this might make his position more limited or less demanding.

In defending methods of design in achieving an adequate and rational approach to context, Daciano did not underestimate the roles of sensitivity, intuition and virtuosity in challenging convention, even in his work on civil service interiors. The diligence and talent he brought to the various activities in which he became involved guaranteed him total professional autonomy, and – unheard of until then – distinction among his peers and in the eyes of the critics and the public, which irreversibly removed the many layers of invisibility that had impeded public awareness of those activities for so long.

Documentation Centre, National Civil Engineering Laboratory, Lisbon. Architectural project (1964–1972): architects Norberto Corrêa (b. 1926) and J. G. Pinto Coelho; interior architecture and furniture project (1971–1972): designer Daciano da Costa (1930–2005). Meeting Room. Photo: Anonymous, ca. 1972. Daciano da Costa estate.



Note

'Modern Furnishing. The work of the Furniture Acquisition Commission in the Scope of the Directorate-General of Buildings and National Monuments. 1940–1980'. This project was conducted by the *Centro de Investigação em Arquitetura, Urbanismo e Design* of the Faculty of Architecture, University of Lisbon, with support from the Foundation for Science and Technology. As a result, the exhibition *Respect and Discipline Imposed Upon All* was held in Lisbon at the Museum for Design and Fashion (MUDE, *Museu do Design e da Moda, Coleção Francisco Capelo*; July–November 2014). See also J. P. Martins (ed.), *Mobiliário para Serviços Públicos em Portugal 1934–1974* (Lisbon: Caleidoscópio, 2015); J. P. Martins, S. Diniz, 'Layers of Invisibility. Portuguese State Furniture Design 1940–74', European Architectural History Network, Third International Meeting 2014, Turin.

Biographies

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