

The art of ordinary architecture: On intimacy, exposure and the playful borders of a façade

Antigoni Geronta, 15 March 2021

In the fishing village of Afurada de Baixo, Portugal, the architectural façade speaks of everyday affairs and circumstances without needing to utter them. In this article, researcher Antigoni Geronta outlines the results of her five-year field research in the village, where thresholds, windows, curtains and tiles give visual clues about the status and desires of its inhabitants.

Keywords: Afurada, Architecture, Psychogeography.

In a small red book called 'Habitar' [Inhabiting], Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, explores and categorises the main elements that compose the notion of 'home'.¹ As he claims, 'Home seems to consist of three types of mental or symbolic element: elements which have their foundation in the deep unconscious bio-cultural level (entry, hearth), elements that are related to the inhabitant's personal life and identity (memorabilia, inherited objects of the family); and social symbols intended to give certain images and messages to outsiders (signs of wealth, education, social identity, etc.)'. Walking the streets of the fishermen village of Afurada de Baixo, on the edge of Porto, one may feel that these three elements intertwine while also visually come to the fore.



"It fell alone", Rua de Miguel Bombarda, Porto, 2013

AnimaLoci

A JOURNAL OF IMAGES IN PLACES

Shaped by everyday urban life, and affecting it in return, these elements crystallise into that typical Portuguese experience of space and architecture introduced by the language, rhythms and geometry of the *façade*.

Façade: the final curtain that comes down

Facadism is a term that refers to a frequent condition in Portuguese urban rehabilitation. It is mostly applied to neighbourhoods classified as heritage sites, and consists in the obligatory preservation of a building's *façade* even if the whole architectural structure requires demolition. This aesthetic preoccupation results in the production of a 'work-in-progress' urban landscape scenography, which often seeks to provide a modern refurbished future by superficially conserving the past. In many cases a robust metal structure is necessary to support the *façade* wall of a building during the weeks or even months that it stands alone after the demolition of the whole structure behind it, leaving its hollow windows frames to be filled with sky. In this way, the shell and content progressively advance and gradually obtain their destined architectural form and function. Yet, there are times that the whole built scenery follows its very own course of life.

The scenic dimension

In a series of *dérives* through the Portuguese fishing neighbourhood of Afurada de Baixo, the ordinary architecture that we encounter – usually anonymous and deprived of common heritage characteristics – acquires an affective visual significance that derives from a kind of temporal vernacular *facadism*, worthy of note. Afurada is situated at



Rua Alves Correia, Afurada de Baixo, 2014

AnimaLoci

A JOURNAL OF IMAGES IN PLACES



Rua Vasco da Gama, Afurada de Baixo, 2015



Rua Costa Goodolfim, Afurada de Baixo, 2016

the very end of the Douro river, right where the watercourse meets the Atlantic Ocean. It is a small village, known in the area of Porto for its mostly two-floor colourful houses. As we walk its tiny roads, we come across a microcosm of domestic objects in a meticulous, vertical organisation, illustrative of the local identity and practices of everyday communal life. Shoes carefully arranged to dry under the sun, a recently used broom that rests against the wall, chairs at the threshold, plants on the pavement, canaries or other species of bird enclosed inside their cages that hang next to entrance doors. Everything fits and lives on this vertical axis of the exterior wall. Everything appears to be ordinarily and yet casually arranged, forming an extraordinary, personalised façade. A temporal exhibition of the daily private sphere is posed in public view.

Threshold slippers

A rather typical image in Afurada is composed of a pair of shoes or slippers on the threshold of the house, right in front of a closed door and pointing towards the interior. When observing this static footwear in limbo, one cannot help but wonder about their owner's presence or movements. Decoding the meaning behind such a practice can only be done with the assistance of local knowledge. A pair of slippers by the door is a sign that the homeowner is inside the house. Had she gone out, she would have taken the slippers. This hermeneutics is due to a common fact of the Afurada de Baixo neighbourhood: women tend to wear this type of footwear outside the house, while men opt for shoes. This habit alludes to the outfit of the *varinas*: the once barefoot ambulant vendors – a frequent job of the women of these fishing communities. Nowadays, behind closed doors and in the absence of the threshold's 'evidence', a window can offer a clue about the person living within.

A door's glimpse

Almudena De Benito Alonso argues that 'all doors are initiatory, all thresholds magical and erotic and crossing them means changing scene, passing from the known (inside) to the unknown (outside)'.² The author continues by returning to Georg Simmel, according to whom 'if the inside is the space of the structure, the outside is the space of the event'. The door is *par excellence* the primary element of both passageway and its prohibition. It is a constructive component that, according to Simmel 'represents in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act'.³

Thus, between the private sphere of the home and the public one that surrounds it, the door is the most common, obvious and conscious means to transcend the physical limit connoting the interior and the exterior. As Paul Virilio claims, in the history of architectural elements such as: walls, doors, windows and chimneys, the door constitutes the "first window", the one that allows bodies to pass through it.⁴ Alluding to its material dimension and beyond what a door represents physically and symbolically in terms of accessibility, a very important component that is worth mentioning is that of visibility. Amongst the various types of doors that we find in Afurada de Baixo, the most common consists of a wooden leaf (or two), with a window frame incorporated into the upper part. This window opens inwards and usually also has exterior protection metal bars.

Manuel do Mar, is a retired fisherman and master in the local fishery of codfish in the "Campanhas do Bacalhau" (during the Overseas War, between 1961 and 1975, the only way for a man to avoid compulsory military service was to embark on the so-called "Campanhas do Bacalhau" – an economic recovery programme based on cod fishing launched by the Estado Novo in 1934). He was born and raised in Afurada as is his wife too. In our conversations, he nostalgically remembers the role that this window played for adolescents of his time, when distinct rules and costumes prevailed, typical of a small, closed community. For young people, this upper window was the usual way to practice courtship. The slits allowed for the fleeting exchange of glances behind the semi-transparent curtains of opposite facing homes, even when the door seemed to be firmly closed.

AnimaLoci

A JOURNAL OF IMAGES IN PLACES



Rua Vasco da Gama, Afurada de Baixo, 2011

AnimaLoci

A JOURNAL OF IMAGES IN PLACES



Rua Vasco da Gama, Afurada de Baixo, 2016

Everyday window theatre

Despite the almost invasive, intrusive way that public life in the neighbourhood “enters” the private sphere, such fusion of limits is consensual, since the doors and windows remain voluntarily open. Beyond the scenography of the façades, enriched by the posed objects and their temporality, a kind of changing theatricality is added to the background, generated by the life inside the houses. Instant domestic fragments are projected through the openings, causing a plurality of scenes, unexpected for the passers-by. This is due to the fact that the entrances of the houses rarely face a hallway or corridor, but instead directly access the living room, kitchen, bedroom or a common space that combines these three compartments.

Amélia Azevedo, a passionate and remarkably active woman in the cultural life of Afurada – where she was also born and has lived ever since – has been in charge of the “Polo de Leitura” (Facilities of Municipal Library in Afurada) for the past two decades and involved in distinctive individual and collective local projects. She has some useful insights on the subject and explains how the social status of each family is directly reflected by how the ground floor of a single-family home is articulated. This type of house usually has three areas. The largest space of the house is located at the front, facing the street. The other two spaces are smaller and usually placed towards the back of the house, reaching the wall that, generally, is shared with the house located just behind it. These two rooms are the kitchen and the bedroom destined for the children. In the large front room, which is a common space, the double bed occupies a key position with a highly symbolic meaning. As the doors of the house tend to remain open, families with a prosperous economic position, place the bed right in front of the door exposed to the public eye, as an act that displays their wealth. The bed becomes a sign of status.



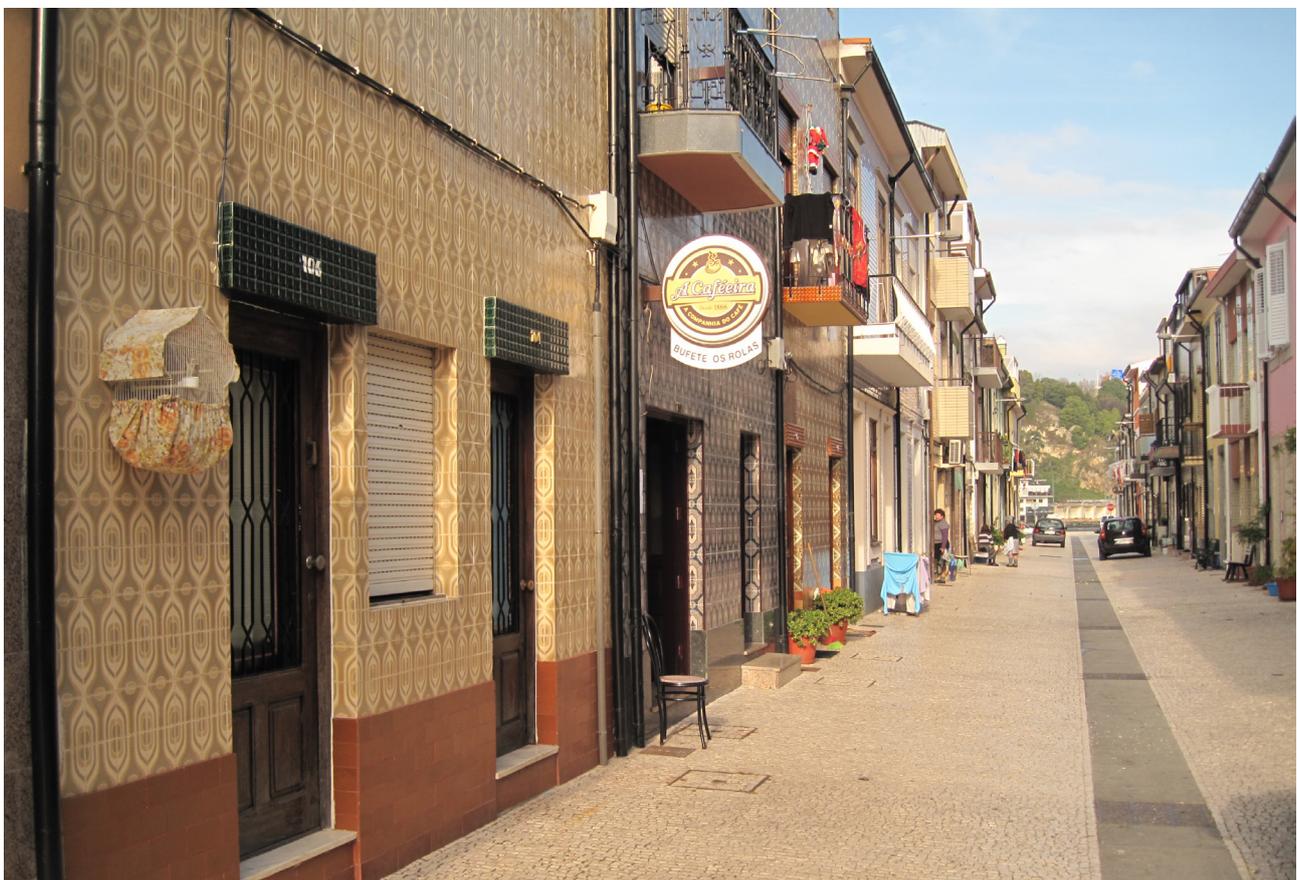
Rua Vasco da Gama, Afurada de Baixo, 2011

For some of the most privileged inhabitants of this neighbourhood, the desire to “exhibit their wealth” reached the point of travelling to Galicia in order to visit *El Corte Inglés*, where they could buy particular bedding. Amélia affirms that this used to be a fairly common custom in Afurada, especially among women of affluent families, who established this practice as a ‘symbol of wealth’ that exceeded the competition for territoriality and property possession.

Balconies of appearance

In a brief text entitled “Seen from the window”, Lefebvre refers to ‘the marvellous invention of balconies [...] from which one dominates the street and passers-by.’⁵ The majority of balconies in Afurada are required to follow specific dimensions determined by the façade’s typology and the projection of the ceiling level. This may prevent them from being considered as a continuation of the house and an open, public space for the enjoyment of its inhabitants. However, despite their limited size, which barely allows for the placement of a table or a chair, they do not lack the qualities of social interaction. In fact, their ability to oversee the street and the pedestrians turn them into an integral part of everyday presence and ‘appearance’.

This practice becomes especially palpable during festive and religious days, such as Easter. Yet, it is during the Feast of St. Peter when we observe the complete and absolute occupation of the balconies by their inhabitants. Men, women, boys and girls are crowded into a restricted space amongst the holy trinity and saints illustrated on bright, colourful fabrics hanging from the balconies. This conjunction of saints and congregants exalts the apex of the balcony liturgy. As a key element of the house projected towards the public, cantilevered over the street, staged as a semiprivate place that offers the possibility ‘to see and be seen’, this group of elements represents, the supreme feature of scenic architecture.



Rua 27 de Fevereiro, Afurada de Baixo, 2011

AnimaLoci

A JOURNAL OF IMAGES IN PLACES



Rua Vasco da Gama, Afurada de Baixo, 2016

Solidarity smoke signs

Returning to Pallasmaa's symbolic elements of inhabiting, we acknowledge the intention to explore the range of conscious and unconscious bio-cultural communal behaviour. The Portuguese architect Francisco Saraiva refers to one such example when he highlights the distinctive meaning of the hearth, which was common in most houses of the neighbourhood in the early and mid-20th century. 'I've heard from the locals that when they saw smoke coming from a chimney nearby [...] it was then [a sign of] a meal [being prepared] and so the neighbours would knock on the door and say hello. We are talking about a phase that is already in the past, but by the information that has come to me, there were in fact serious problems [of poverty and starvation] here in Afurada' (fieldwork interview, 2015). In spite of the conflicts and antagonisms that may exist in lifestyles, we observe that the values of sharing, providing mutual help and being supportive are still in force.

The images and the oral stories that compose this communal scenery convey the meaning of distinct language and codes associated with ordinary activities, which allude to the concepts of intimacy (privacy), exposure (public life) and a spontaneous playful character in everyday life. The architectural and anthropological perspectives of place merge into a psychogeographic analysis that emphasises the silver line where the ordinary reaches the extraordinary. The aforementioned practices could be interpreted by what Italo Calvino notes as 'the search for a way out of the panic of life: by investing oneself in objects, by one's ability to be recognised in various omen, by transforming the world into a set of symbols; something like the first dawn of culture after the big biological night'.⁶

Thus, by transmitting and learning from the informal narratives and by the adequate use of scarce means that bear a vast plurality of meanings and values, the spatio-temporal experience of both locals and foreigners acquires a decisive importance: the survival of the distinctive local identity in a globalised everydayness. In this way, Afurada de Baixo, as well as many other local communities with a strong common awareness of collective life, have managed to shape and restructure the affective parameters of architecture and its tight connection with social behaviour. For that, the façade barely constitutes a limit. Ordinary life unfolds quietly – and, often, even with loud and animated intensity – revealing all its privacy and intimacy, indiscreetly exposed.

About the author

Antigoni Geronta is an architect and independent researcher based in Greece. She holds a PhD in Architecture (Polytechnic University of Catalunya, 2019) and a Master's degree in Theory and Practice of the Architectural Project (UPC, 2011). She is co-founder of the association *AntiArq* established in Barcelona which takes an interdisciplinary approach between anthropology and architecture, conducting classes, workshops and seminars. Using the ethnographic method as an analytical tool of the socio-spatial structure of everyday life, her research and practice are concerned with the hermeneutics of architectural experience through time, childhood, community life, urban conflicts and dialectics of power. She is also a member of the *Research Group Observatori Antropologia del Conflictu Urbà (OACU)* and *Grup de Recerca en Exclusió i Control Socials (GRECS)* of University of Barcelona.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to Amélia Azevedo, Manuel do Mar and Francisco Saraiva for their contribution to the above ethnographic study. The extraordinary fishing village of Afurada and its inhabitants were the case study of my PhD investigation; in particular, the neighbourhood of Afurada de Baixo is the place where I lived for two years and conducted a five-year fieldwork research which later culminated in the thesis: “Tiempografia in São Pedro da Afurada. Interpretive readings and practices of inhabiting”.

References

- [1] Pallasmaa, Juhani. 2016. *Habitar*. Barcelona, Editorial Gustavo Gili, SL. p.29.
- [2] De Benito Alonso, Almudena. 2017. ‘La casa como escenario lúdico: los objetos domésticos subvertidos. El jugar como acción creativa y experimental en el entorno cotidiano’, *Revista Europea De Investigación En Arquitectura*, 7-8: pp.105-106.
- [3] Simmel, Georg. 2001 [1909]. ‘Puente y puerta’, *El individuo y la libertad*. Barcelona: Península.
- [4] Virilio, Paul. 1991 [1984]. *The Lost Dimension*. New York: Semiotext(e). p.79.
- [5] Lefebvre, Henri. 2004 [1992]. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. London: Continuum. p.28.
- [6] Calvino, Italo. 2011 [1983]. *Palomar*. Athens: Ekdoseis Kastanioti. p.99.

All photos were taken by Antigoni Geronta