

Being a Female Architect in Portugal: A Short Introduction to a Long Ride

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Portugal was left relatively unharmed by the World Wars I and II. During WWI the participation of Portuguese soldiers was modest and in WWII Portugal was - at least in theory - a neutral country. Economical repercussions were felt but they didn't include man labour reduction. As a consequence of this, contrarily to what happened in other countries, Portuguese industry and architecture had no need to recruit female professionals.

In the 1930's the Portuguese political context was marked by the consolidation of Estado Novo, the recently imposed dictatorship headed by Oliveira Salazar. The regime was based on a rural vision of society and women were called to go back to their families to fulfil the traditional role of wives and mothers. With the meaningful exception of teaching and nursing, working women found a number of obstacles to pursue their professional careers.

The first female Portuguese architect, Maria José Estanco (1905-1999), graduated in the 1940's, never became a member of the Portuguese Architects Association and struggled to find work, eventually giving up practice and becoming a secondary school teacher. By the second half of the 1940's there were a few female students of architecture, but still with no consequences in the work market.

During the 1960's everything started to change in Portugal. Cultural, economical and social realities pressured the regime to open to more liberal ways of life. It was also then that the presence of female students in architecture schools increases significantly. Still, attending and graduating in architecture did not necessarily assure women of access to the professional practice. In the last decades few female architects had a visible role in the Portuguese architectural production. Although the two genders are equally represented in the university field, architecture industry is still not open and democratic. My work analyzes the consolidation processes of Portuguese female architects in the XX century.

In Portugal, the entry of women into the realm of architecture, as professionals, draws an analogy to the route taken by the country which only in the 1970's became a democratic state. As an introduction, this work intends to outline over 60 years of work obtained from this partnership, drawing attention to the initial cases and spanning the period up to today. The structure of this work is divided into three main parts. Firstly, succinctly explaining some data regarding the existing professional situation of women architects. Subsequently, both the pioneers are introduced: Maria José Estanco and Maria José Marques da Silva. Finally, we conclude with what we designate as the reinvented original paradigm, in today's context.

The recent data points to a marked increase in the feminization of the profession. Actually, around 30% registered in the Portuguese Architects Guild are women¹. In the case of the Southern branch, in the last five years, over 52% of newly registered were young women architects². Even then, this figure is surely smaller than the number of women which have completed their degree in Architecture. In Portugal, like other European countries, the presence of women in universities grew significantly over the latter half of the XX century. In the Portuguese example, in the school year 2007-2008, nearly 54% of students of higher education were women³. The significant increase of the female presence will have, naturally results in an

¹ Official data from the Portuguese Architects Guild, Portugal (March 2010).

² Official data from the Portuguese Architects Guild, Southern Branch, Portugal (March 2010).

³ Students enrolled in Universities/Colleges of Public/Private Higher Education (National Institute of Statistics, 2009).

effective growth of degree holders in Architecture which does not directly correspond to a relevant reinforcement of women as sole leaders of architectural practices.

The existing cases constitute an exception generating further inquiry. Amongst others, we will try to answer the question pertaining to the beginning of this process that connects women and architecture, as well as to gauge the eventual relationship between the initial moment and the actuality.

Portugal lived a significant part of the XX century within a specific speed quite different from the rest of Western Europe. In the aftermath of the advent of the Republic in 1910, it witnessed a period of political instability that culminated in 1926 in a military coup. Four years later, the New State takes power and the lengthy leadership of António de Oliveira Salazar will see in 40 years of dictatorship⁴. The official policy of neutrality assumed by Salazar during the Second World War resulted in a near normality for the country⁵. As opposed to what is seen in countries involved in the conflict, female labour is not mobilized as the labour crisis never becomes an issue. The general labour changes due to women, will still take time to be experienced.

In 1935, at the School of Fine Arts of Lisbon, Maria José Estanco (1905-1999) becomes the first woman to finalize the curricular part of the Architecture course⁶. Born in the Algarve, she will live in Lisbon after concluding her secondary school and there she will enrol in a painting course⁷. Following a stay of two years in Brazil and her association with the birth of the town of Marília, in the northeast of São Paulo, she returns to Portugal, abandoning painting and joining Architecture. This experience, accompanying the activity of the Belgian engineer, in charge of the works, will definitely redirect her academical training⁸.

In 1942 she will present her CODA project, this trial will confer upon her the academical and professional recognition as an architect⁹. Her scholarly route is dually valued by her peers. On the one hand, she earns the prize for the best student of architecture¹⁰. On the other, she sees in 1945, the Kindergarten she drew for the CODA published in *Arquitectura* magazine, prominently portrayed on the cover, and containing five pages inside with the drawings, perspective and project statement [Fig. 1]¹¹. Already, three years before, the magazine had published the note that 'for the first time in Portugal, the diploma of architecture was granted to a woman', congratulating Maria José Estanco for the achievement¹².

If the academical field apparently accepted this novelty, Portuguese society of the first half of the 1940's was less flexible. In daily newspapers of the period, humorous representations of buildings, designed by the woman architect were depicted as crashing to the ground. But, identically, the professional field failed to respond like academia had and, after attempting to join various architectural practices, she gave up the profession and taught in a Secondary School¹³. This inability to effectively enter into the Portuguese architectural scene shows itself in her non registration of the National Trade Union of Architects¹⁴.

⁴ OLIVEIRA, César de – "A Evolução Política". In ROSAS, Fernando – *Portugal e o Estado Novo (1930-1960)*, vol. XII. Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 1992, 22-23.

⁵ Idem, *Ibidem*, 53.

⁶ MARREIROS, Glória Maria – "Maria José Estanco, primeira arquitecta portuguesa". In MARREIROS, Glória Maria – *Quem foi quem? 200 Algarvios do Séc. XX*. Lisboa: Colibri, 2000, 188.

⁷ Idem, *Ibidem*, 187.

⁸ MARREIROS, Glória Maria – "À conversa com Maria José Estanco, a primeira arquitecta portuguesa". *Nós As Mulheres*. Lisboa. 6 (1992), 13.

⁹ CODA – Concurso para a Obtenção do Diploma de Arquitecto (Competition to obtain the Architecture Diploma).

¹⁰ MARREIROS – "À conversa com Maria José Estanco, a primeira arquitecta portuguesa", 13.

¹¹ ESTANCO, Maria José – "Um jardim escola no Algarve". *Arquitectura*. Lisboa. 120 (1945) 8-12.

¹² Idem, *Ibidem*, 8.

¹³ MARREIROS – "À conversa com Maria José Estanco, a primeira arquitecta portuguesa", 13.

¹⁴ Designations of the professional associations of Portuguese architects by chronological order: National Trade Union of Architects (1933), Association of Portuguese Architects (1978) and The Portuguese Architects Guild (1998).

The other pioneer which we shall focus on is Maria José Marques da Silva (1914-1994), she obtained her diploma at the School of Fine Arts of Porto. The daughter of a renowned architect from Porto, José Marques da Silva (1869-1947), she obtained in 1943 the title of architect [Fig. 2]. The first step of her professional life was taken at her father's studio and there she meets the architect David Moreira da Silva (1909-2002) with whom she would later marry and work with, sharing the studio for over half a century¹⁵. Unlike her namesake from Lisbon, Maria José Marques da Silva registers with the National Trade Union of Architects in her graduation year, being the first woman to do so¹⁶.

David Moreira da Silva had studied town planning in Paris and, coinciding with a period of strong growth in town planning in Portugal, it is possible to find in the production of the studio a strong component of large scale projects. In these the signature unequivocally belongs to David Moreira da Silva¹⁷. If, given his specialization, it is understandable the precise authorship of the various urban proposals made, in the case of the architecture the situation is not so linear. Recognised the co-authorship and the involved participation of Maria José, in so much by the architect, as well as those close by¹⁸, it is no doubt surprising that, in the assumed public authorship, even today, the name of Maria José Marques da Silva continues to be virtually absent¹⁹.

Despite the different paths undertaken by these two women, they had other things in common than their training in Architecture. The public debate, in different contexts and with differing aims, was something that brought them together. On the one hand, Maria José Estanco had an important role in the Democratic Movement for Women, as a democrat and a pacifist, the participation of which continued over various decades²⁰. On the other hand, Maria José Marques da Silva exerted herself in the creation of a foundation with the name of her father, José Marques da Silva, dedicated to the publication of his works, as well as exercising relevant positions in the years of 1970 and 1980 in the Association of Portuguese Architects²¹.

With this schematic introduction to the journeys of the first two Portuguese women architects we complete the second part of the article. We will now look to identify links to the situation nowadays. In Portugal, at the beginning of the XXI century, we live within a context that mirrors in a partial and updated framework, the analysed foundational movement. If, taken into account, the data would infer a significant amount of architectural graduates that do not dedicate themselves to the practice of Architecture, it is understood that the number of women architects as solely responsible for their studios is residual. They appear, normally associated to other architects, as a couple or as part of a more diversified and numerous groups.

To be accurate in our analysis of the actual situation we cannot forget the result of democratization and feminization of Higher Education. There, exists a third possibility which exhibits a high percentage of female presence: to be a qualified employee of an architectural studio. In Portugal, in 2008, women represented 40% of private companies architectural staff. You can guess the reason for this strong presence: according to the official data, women earn, on average, 15% less than their male colleagues²².

To conclude, like its origin, the paradigm seems to repeat itself generically but, also to reinvent and enlarge itself. To give up the profession or be part of a working couple remain the two possibilities for women architects. Anyway, the partnership versions

¹⁵ PIRES, Maria do Carmo Marques – "David Moreira da Silva e Maria José Marques da Silva Martins – Um primeiro olhar sobre um atelier do Porto do século XX". In FERREIRA-ALVES, Natália Marinho – *Artistas e Artífices no Mundo de Expressão Portuguesa*. Porto: CEPESE, 2008, 175-176.

¹⁶ In the case of Lisbon, only in 1948, with Maria Helena Guedes Vaz Santana (1922-?), will the first registration of a woman architect take place (information released by the Southern branches of The Architects Guild).

¹⁷ LÔBO, Margarida Souza – *Planos de Urbanização. A Época de Duarte Pacheco*. Porto: FAUP, 1995, 148-157.

¹⁸ TAVARES, André – "Maria José Marques da Silva". *Boletim Arquitectos*. Lisboa. 112 (2002), 8.

¹⁹ See, for example, the case of the Palácio do Comércio (1941), in Porto (SILVEIRA, Alexandra Trevisan da; SEARA, Ilda; PEDREIRINHO, José Manuel – "Arquitetura do Porto no século XX (2)". *Jornal Arquitectos*. Lisboa. 85 (1990), 31).

²⁰ MARREIROS – "Maria José Estanco, primeira arquitecta portuguesa", 187-188.

²¹ TAVARES – "Maria José Marques da Silva", 8-9.

²² Official data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, Portugal, 2010 (courtesy of Professor Virginia Ferreira, University of Coimbra).

have diversified with the appearance of others that do not imply marriage in life or at work. But, equally, the right to publically assume authorship and the consequent identity as women architects is an effective and relevant improvement. The third possibility referred, matches what the French refer to as “l’air du temps” or the generic and actual reality of the job market. The easy exploitation of the weaker side: youngsters and qualified women as cheap and disposable sources of labour. Imagine yourself being a young “she”.

A ARQUITECTURA PORTUGUESA

E CERÂMICA E EDIFICAÇÃO (REÛNIDAS)

UM JARDIM-ESCOLA NO ALGARVE



NUMERO 120 — MARÇO DE 1945

Fig. 1: Maria José Estanco, CODA's Project, Kindergarten, Algarve, 1942 (*Arquitectura*. Lisboa. 120 (1945) cover).



Fig. 2: *Maria José Marques da Silva, CODA's presentations, [s.d], photo, 16,79x13,37 cm, FIMS/fot.2041 (©Fundação Marques da Silva).*

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Official data from the following Portuguese institutions:

The Architects Guild, Northern and Southern branches

National Institute of Statistics

Ministry of Labour and Social Security