

The transformation of a Lisbon urban block

Reading and designing with time

Rui Justo

Universidade de Lisboa, Faculdade de Arquitetura, CIAUD, Forma Urbis Lab, Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT: The city is a dynamic object in permanent evolution, which makes its physical changes a fatality, justified by the constant need for man to reinvent his urban environment. It means that the city urban form is made from an adaptation effort between the need for change and the preservation of the existing and legible urban matrix.

The urban block is the physical object that best represents this extraordinary dynamic based on the constant and asynchronous movement of the elements that conform it. However, it is due to this dynamic, aligned with an absence of time perception, that the urban block has lost space as a defining element of the urban form. The loss of influence in the city design process, discernible in many of the urban conceptions of the twentieth century, matches with periods of greater formal uncertainty and urban solutions that deny one of the most important design tools available: time.

To refuse the urban block is refusing the time, the safest place where we can read the intentions that guided the evolution of the city, where the urban block has repeatedly proven its ability to adapt to several types of buildings and the changing urban and architectural models.

Thus, this study uses the city of Lisbon and one of its most representative urban blocks – the old Monumental Cinema Theater – to reveal the importance and usefulness of reading and designing the city with time.

Methodologically, the work offers a morphological and diachronic reading of the urban block, exploring over time its different evolution processes and formal oscillations. Complementary, it intends to reveal in a more operative approach how time could be an essential adviser in the city design process.

Designing city with time is searching for new compositional solutions that are not only compatible with the actual needs of urban living but, also, solutions capable of evolving and responding to future needs.

KEYWORDS: urban block, time, transformation, urban form, Lisbon

TIME AND URBAN FORM

It is widely apparent that the richest city environments are also the oldest. However, the quality of the built fabric does not necessarily focus in its longevity, but mainly the capacity to incorporate successive information over time.

The city we are talking about is nothing more than the condensation of its history, of the different and successive evolution stages of the urban fabric in a process that is slow but permanent. It is enough to think that the initial formation of the city stems from the evolution of a rural structure to an urban configuration and its growth follows a gradual tendency for the addition and overlapping of new elements.

The urban fabric's formal changeability is therefore entirely linked to the asynchronous movement in time of the elements that give it shape and build their own history in different velocities. Different evolutionary processes trigger these movements as a result of a declared intention to change by different urban agents or unforeseen events.

It is, above all, in the sedimented city¹ that we recognize the physical expressions of time, that is, the phenomenon of sedimentary evolution. The overlapping of new urban strata with the pre-established ones is

¹“Sedimented city” refers to, in a geological analogy to the progressive deposit of sediments, all urban spaces that result in its evolution from the overlap of different morphological strata.

complex and can be more, or less, obvious. It may result from less radical evolution phenomena that in some way does not significantly alter the preexisting morphological order or from structural changes that presupposes an overlapping of a new order in substitution of the preexisting one.

The sedimented city is, in fact, the safest place where we can read the actions that led the city evolution to what we know today. Therefore, its explanation would be less reflected without the decoding of those evolutionary phenomena that offer us synchronous and diachronic essential readings of the built fabric. Moreover, it allows us to recognize the evolutionary rhythm of each element that is part of it, the street, the square, the plot, the building or even the urban block. Even so, the elements of the city private component, which in aggregation constitute the urban blocks, are the ones that clearly represent this urban activity. Each plot has an autonomous and distinct time from those that are close to it and is its asynchronous movement in time, densification, building renovation, plot aggregation or segmentation, as well as the change between the public and private domain, which is its clearest expression.

1.0 THE URBAN BLOCK OF MONUMENTAL

This chapter proposes a diachronic reading of a singular urban block in Avenidas Novas² - the old Monumental Cinema Theater. This type of approximation understands that any physical object, taken at a given moment, can only be explained as a result of a sequence of actions and events in time.

The reason is simple, this urban block is representative of the site's urban and architectural evolution, condensing a set of unique characteristics that stems from its position within the Avenidas urban structure - next to the Duque do Saldanha square. This is precisely the point where two of the plan's settlement orders merge, producing urban blocks with tendentially irregular shapes within an assumedly orthogonal urban system. It is simultaneously a site marked by the existence of an old way out of the city - Estrada das Picoas - that would assume a major role in the formal oscillations of this object, especially in the relation between the public and the private space.



Figure 1: Avenidas urban structure (google earth and author)

² "Avenidas Novas" is a nineteenth-century expansion area of Lisbon.

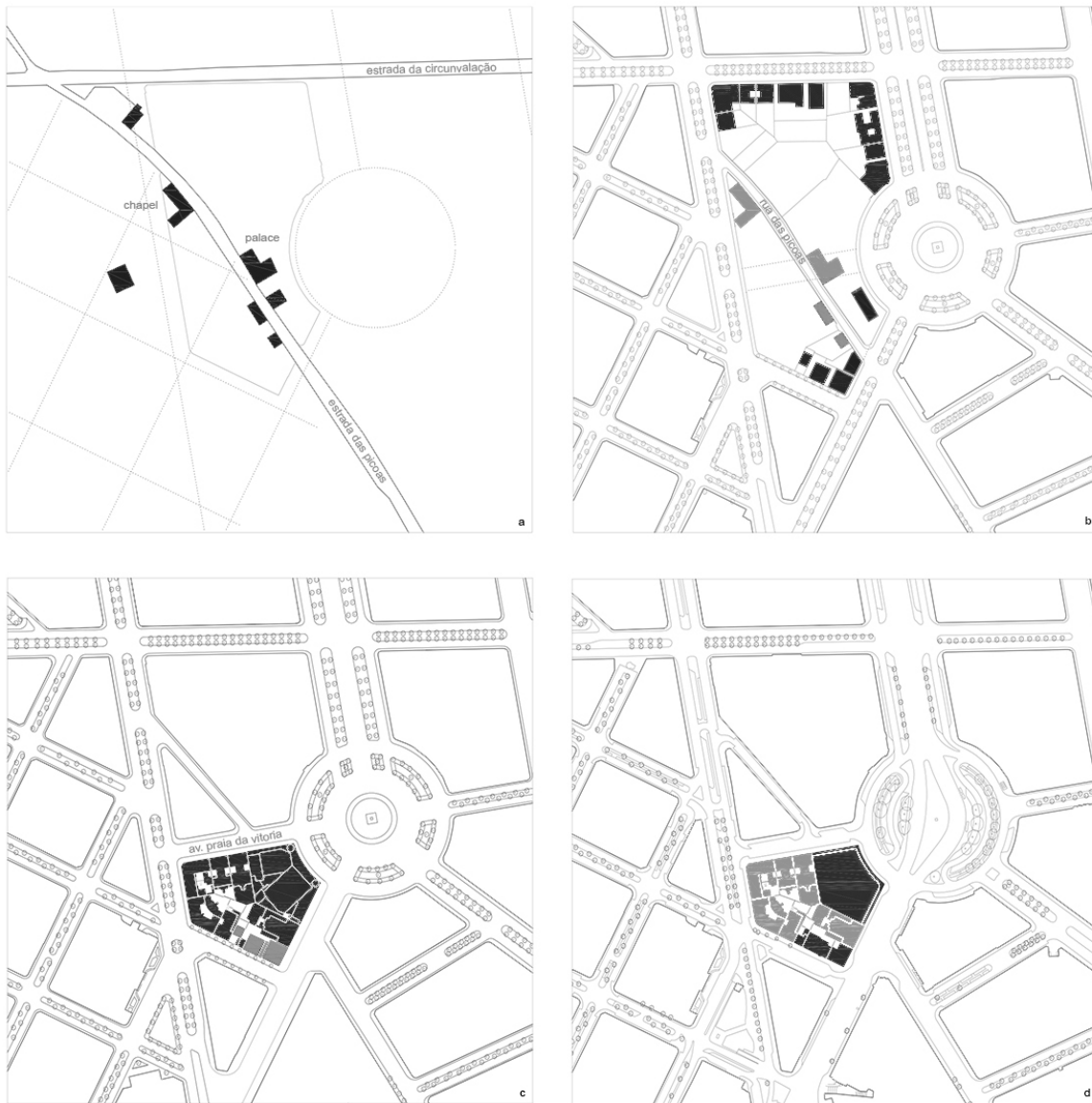


Figure 2: The evolution of the Monumental urban block (author)

We begin this reading by identifying the urban block most representative evolution moments: (a) the stage that precedes the execution of the Avenidas plan reproduced in the topographic map of Lisbon surveyed by Filipe Folque (1856); (b) the end of the nineteenth century with the implantation of the new urban structure, reproduced in the cartography of Silva Pinto (1908); (c) the mid-twentieth century represented in the Lisbon plan of 1950; (d) and the present situation (2014).

1.1 Urban transformation

Two roads – Estrada das Picoas and Estrada da Circunvalação - compose the primary structure that is at the origin of the urban block formation and constitutes the first moment of the site image. These roads established the connection between the city and the small rural nucleus developed beyond the Lisbon term. It is precisely in the meeting of these two roads that the first known occupation is developed. It is organized along Estrada das Picoas road by buildings and agricultural farms, in a plot structure marked by irregular configurations and extensive areas. From the set of buildings that were originally concentrated on the site, it's relevant to highlight two of them for the importance they assumed in the urban block evolution. The chapel located in the north of this occupation (the West of the road) and the palace located more to the south of this nucleus (the East of the road).

The permanence of these singular buildings and the corridor that ties them assumes an important role on the second evolution stage and perhaps the most significant of all. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century occurred the most drastic transformation ever known in this site. This stage marks the transition from a rural to an urban nature, supported by the Avenidas plan. The plan clearly appears as a response to the emergence of a new bourgeois class claiming for habitable, qualified, spacious, airy and green spaces.

The urban block formation results, in this new form of the city, from the overlapping of two morphological units to which is added the preservation of the old Estrada das Picoas road, now with a street attribute. The tension created by these two orders and by the implantation of the Duque do Saldanha square gave origin to a set of urban blocks with singular dimensions and forms. It is precisely in two of these urban blocks that the chapel and the nineteenth-century palace are integrated. These two singular elements contributed, at an early stage, to the resistance of the preexisting urban layout.

These two urban blocks gradually gained a set of buildings structured through a new logic of land subdivision that brought changes in the building shape and organization. We no longer speak only of houses surrounded by gardens and inserted in large properties, which despite the persistent renovation they continue to survive, but also of income buildings that were built around the urban blocks perimeter with more regular dimensions and new limits of height. However, the changes in the built structure are not limited to the addition of new built forms but also to the change of existing ones: the nineteenth-century palace became a school. This change led to the introduction within the plot of a new built body that points to a more direct relationship with the Duque do Saldanha square, gaining a dual relationship with the public space. The urban block that we know today began to take shape at this stage.

This new relationship with the square would become one of the most striking features of this urban block, reinforced a few decades later with the construction of the Monumental Cinema Theater over the nineteenth century palace. It is certainly one of the main transformations that characterize the third phase of this evolution that also points to the stabilization of the boundary in the urban block that we know today.

A progressive process of renewal and consolidation of the Avenidas urban fabric sign the temporal space between the next stage and the previous one. The Monumental urban block is no exception revealing considerable changes in their public and private form.

Starting with the urban layout, we verified that there was a simultaneous process of suppression and tearing of streets, with immediate reflexes in the private space shape. It corresponds into a coexisting process of fragmentation and aggregation of the urban blocks. On the one hand, there was an interruption of Picoas street, having been partially suppressed and oriented to the private domain and, on the other, the Praia da Vitória Avenue was opened over the space of the nineteenth century palace demolished in 1939. This process allowed the appearance of three new urban blocks.

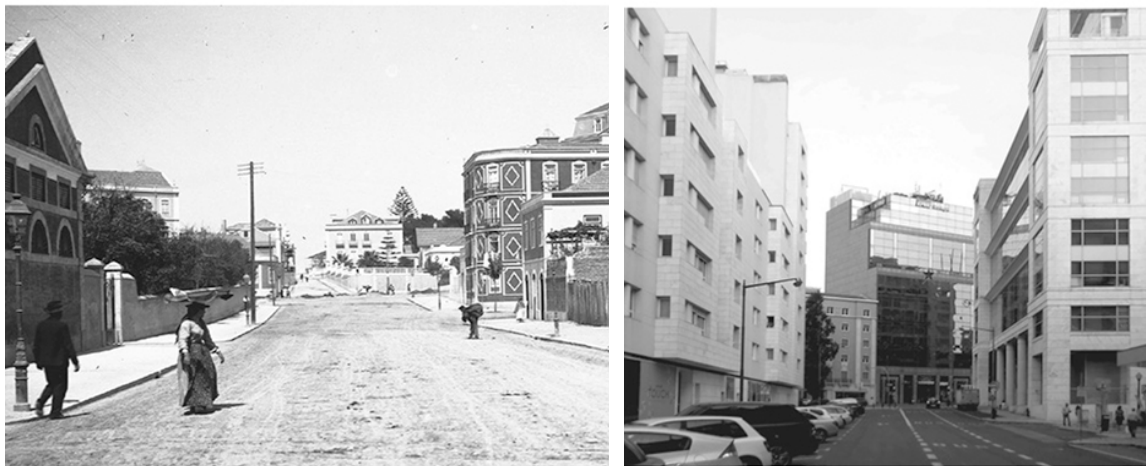


Figure 3: (Left) Palace view from Picoas Street, early 20th century. (Right) Monumental building view from Engenheiro Vieira da Silva Street, old Picoas Street, 2014 (Municipal Archive of Lisbon and author)

In the same way, we confirmed that there were deep changes in the urban blocks built structure, which now have high densities and their useful space is mostly occupied by construction, contrasting what happened in the previous phase. From the beginning of the century remained only three buildings, with the others being part of a new generation of larger buildings. With the demolition of the palace and the chapel emerged a set of housing buildings and the most emblematic equipment built on the site since the 1920s - the Monumental Cinema Theater (1944-51) – making the urban block a reference in the Duque do Saldanha square and in the city of Lisbon itself.

Finally, we note the fourth phase of the urban block evolution, marked by important transformations in the architectural form. We are concretely referring to the demolition of the paradigmatic Monumental Cinema Theater in 1984, in a controversial process of great social impact. In the same space emerged the Monumental building with a commercial vocation and completely demarcated from the surrounding urban environment, as we can attest by its materiality and architecture. However, this was not the only change that occurred, in which new constructions replaced the last three buildings of the early twentieth century that survived in the prior period to the renovation process. These last transformations defined the image and shape of the urban block at the present moment.

The Monumental urban block constitutes the physical result of a progressive and evolutionary process that in just over 100 years underwent successive and different urban transformations.

1.2 Architectural transformation

The urban language of the Avenidas marked significantly the Lisbon architecture of this century part of a great and persistent typological, volumetric and aesthetic variation. The built fabric has in its origin the Avenidas plan that from the first moment admitted the existence of different building typologies. This can not be dissociated from the absence of architectural regulations that allowed the appearance in the same space of erudite, eclectic, new art, revivalist and modernist architecture, that still today coexist side by side.

We began the architectural transformation process in the urban block of Monumental from the first phase of building implementation. It coincides with the period of greater morphological, functional and even stylistic opening. Nevertheless, we recognize a tendency for a certain historicism, absorbing qualities of the nineteenth century traditional architecture and the influences of the French production of the beginning of the century.

However, this period is ruled by some lack of quality in the applied materials and in the buildings design. There was a clear intention of the owners to hide it with a strong use of decorative arts and elaborated details.

One of the architectural typologies that characterize this period is the luxury house or the palace, which is part of a bourgeois program that combines historical conservatism with urban and decorative details, in a posture of greater boldness, in line with the image projected for the new city. Taking into account the old maps we believe that one or another example of this typology had been built in the space of the Monumental urban block, but the truth is that we only know the nineteenth century palace, transformed at this point in a school.

We can affirm with more certainty the establishment of several tenement buildings, the architectonic typology more used in Avenidas. This typology is characterized by a more defined street front, organized by the building implementation on the urban block perimeter. If, on the one hand, a greater urbanity was projected onto the street, due to the size and the treatment given to the main façade, on the other hand, we recognize a certain rurality on the back façade turned to the urban block interior.

In the 1930s the built fabric began to be renewed initiating the consolidation process of Avenidas built structure. It corresponds with a phase of typological and constructive changes carried out during the Estado Novo³ regime. The architectural form acquired at this moment a political expression through a more monumental and deperated language.

It is during this transition period that most of the urban block buildings are produced. Buildings representative of Avenidas typology and buildings of Estado Novo are built inside the same limit. Deep building occupations inside the plot with inner side light wells and large corridors, developed until the 1930s,

³ “Estado Novo” is the name of the authoritarian and corporatist political regime that was in effect for 41 years in Portugal, from 1933 to 1974.

characterize the first typology of buildings. Deep building occupations inside the plot with the inner side light wells cropped, and thus opened to the plot, known as the “rabo de bacalhau” (codfish tail), characterize the second typology.

The demolition of the nineteenth century palace, due to the opening of the Praia da Vitória Avenue, gives way to the construction of the Monumental Cinema Theater, inaugurated in 1951. Designed by the architect Raul Rodrigues Lima, this great and emblematic equipment, takes a prominent position in the Duque de Saldanha Square, a place of reference in the city of Lisbon. About the building architecture, the author highlights the monumental image based on classic elements. With the construction of this building, the urban block gained a great volumetric and aesthetic balance. The three surviving buildings of the early twentieth century would be replaced in different decades (1950, 1970 and 1980) by other buildings, two of them with modernist conceptions. They are also part of the renovation process that lasted until the 1960s and a new trend of services and commerce buildings that would mark this area from the 1970s onward.

We finish this architectural transformation process in a tone of controversy, with the demolition of the Monumental Cinema Theater in 1984. Not only was the building demolished but also the harmony it offered to the space and the urban block in which it was implanted. It remains to be seen if the new commercial building that it replaced was able to give back some of the quality to this space.

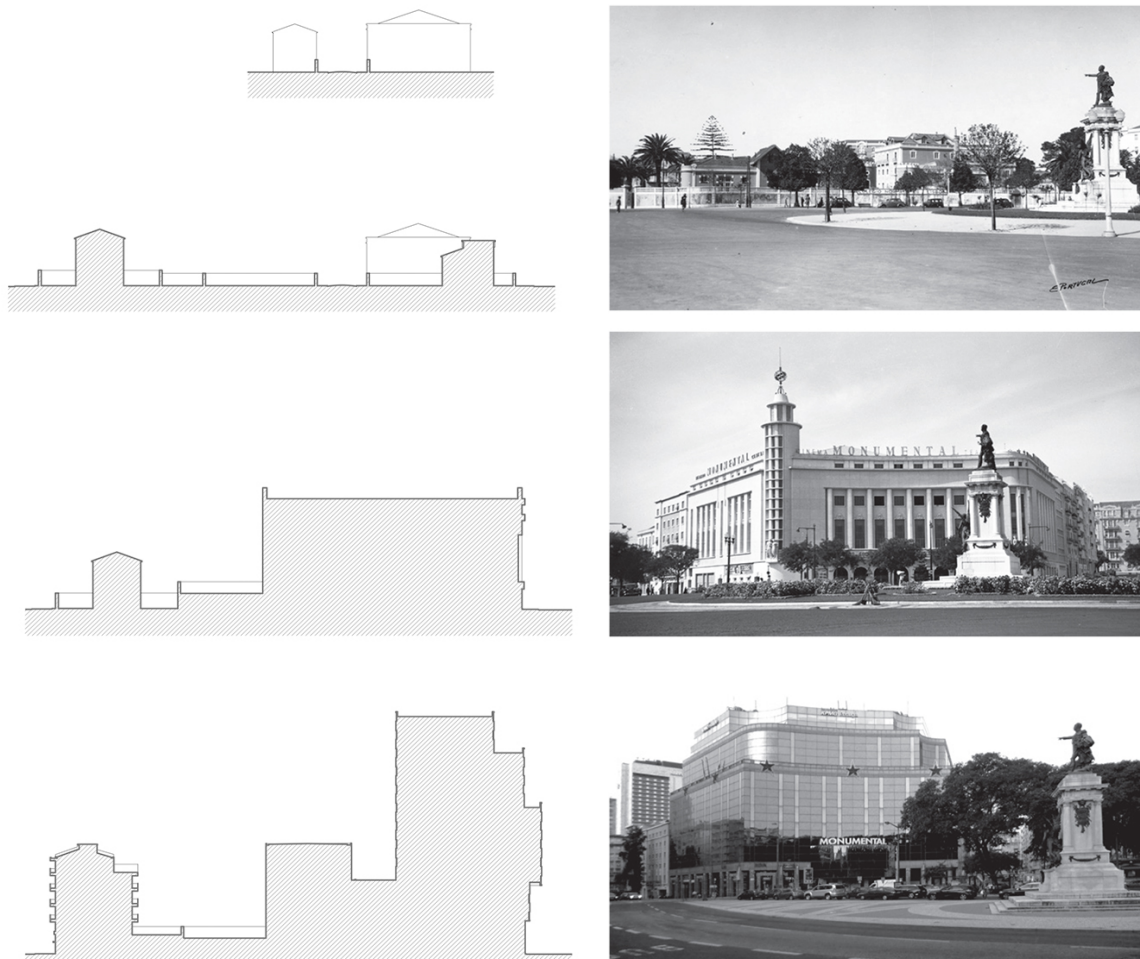


Figure 4: The architectural evolution of the Monumental urban block. (Author and Municipal Archive of Lisbon)



Figure 5: The typological variation of Monumental urban block. (Author)

TIME AND DESIGN

In our cities, particularly if the focus is on the urban block, we realize that the urban space heterogeneous specificity is the result of formal characteristics representative of different times. This quality reveals its great and continuous capacity for reinvention, sometimes questionable, but only understandable through the history and time that each element encloses.

It means that the explanation of the city form starts from the confrontation between the need to accommodate new spaces and built up and, at the same time, the preservation of the existing urban and architectural tradition, readable and understandable by the society that makes use of it. This is unequivocally a cyclical phenomenon, when we incorporate new elements or new urban orders in the city these will also be part of the new urban stratum preexistence. Therefore, we never produce finished objects, but rather objects that sooner or later will be reinterpreted or even transformed.

Designing an urban block with time is taking into account not only the moment of its conception but also the question of its sedimentary evolution. How time predictably will transform the object. If it is predictably the action of time on the object, the moment and the way it is going to happen is full of unpredictability. Nevertheless, it is essential to those who take over the production of these objects to contribute to its evolution.

Regarding this idea, and taking as an example not only the Monumental urban block but also the urban fabric structure of Avenidas, we realize how decisive it is to think the city in its evolution. We can easily see in this urban composition that we are facing two opposing approaches, given the great detail attributed to the public space design - hierarchical urban layout, infrastructure, urban equipment - and some lack of definition regarding the private space. We might think that the absence of building regulation constituted a disregard of the plan, but it is difficult this hypothesis taking into account its nature and importance. And it is precisely for this reason that we believed that this is indeed a "design option" with the aim of making the building process more embracing, with space to evolve, and not only to serve the needs of the moment. The truth is that this "rule" has avenged itself to the present day, setting up an eclectic unity that carries the identity and memories of the place.

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