

The role of built rural heritage in the contemporary landscape of Central Algarve

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Abstract: Traditional rural settlements and various landscape structures are increasingly thought to be valuable heritage as part of cultural landscapes. This paper examines questions related to the conservation and rehabilitation of this heritage, highlighting the contrasting circumstances in urban regions and depopulated interior zones. To this end, this paper looks at the central zone of the Algarve in the south of Portugal, which is notable for its remarkable diversity of typology in rural settlements and in landscape units. Based on a brief description of the traditional economy in these diverse regional areas, the principles for preserving built rural heritage are presented in the context of contemporary landscape transformation.

Key-Words: - Rural settlement; vernacular architecture; landscape units; urban regions; desertification; heritage conservation and rehabilitation.

1 Introduction

The debate about how to conserve and rehabilitate rural structures or buildings has gradually acquired greater importance within the larger issues of landscape as heritage. One of the important topics in this debate on which this paper focuses is the role that built rural heritage can play while taking into account the changes in patterns of land occupation. Among the basic methods used in this study are field work and research within the area of study, from inventory of rural settlements to the delimitation of landscape units.

The area under study is the Algarve region which lies on the southern rim mainland Portugal and more specifically the central area of this region (including the municipalities of Faro, Olhão, São Brás, Loulé and Albufeira, and in which can also be included Tavira to the east and Silves to the west). This area is particularly relevant to the topic of this paper in that it includes sharply contrasting geographical units and is at the same time subject to nearly oppositional processes of transformation in land use patterns. These include a tendency to concentrate population near the coast and depopulation of inland areas.

As a first step, the traditional landscape of the above mentioned geographical units will be described, including the various patterns of settlements and resources used in the traditional local economy. Secondly, this paper focuses on patterns which shaped the transformation of these units beginning with the third quarter of the past

century, in particular the implications these patterns had at the level of built rural heritage. This second section will additionally propose standards for rural heritage preservation in strongly contrastive contexts such as the coast or interior areas covered by this study.

2 Geographical units of the Algarve

The Algarve includes three distinct geological zones which are from north to south: the Mountains (schist and greywacke), the Hills (calcareous) and the Coast (sedimentary). The diverse geology which characterizes these zones is naturally reflected at the orohydrographic, biotic, and cultural level. It shapes the landscape units into different forms within the region and produces quite distinct patterns of occupation [1].

Additionally, the characteristics of built rural heritage are necessarily connected to these three geographical units not only in terms of the construction materials or resources available but also fundamentally in how built rural heritage is integrated into this landscape.

2.1 Coast

The Coast is the geographical zone which has experienced the most profound transformation in the last half century, resulting from different forms of urban expansion and the growing importance of emerging activities such as tourism. The traditional rural landscape here is associated with a highly

diversified landscape mosaic as noted in numerous historical sources such as H. F. Link at the turn of the XVIII century [2].

In addition to pine groves along the coast, this mosaic includes diverse agricultural activities such as irrigated and non-irrigated fields, dry orchards, citrus groves, or vineyards. Irrigated crops confer a special quality to the most fertile lands of this plain. The organization of the landscape has been clearly stamped by the lines of traditional irrigation systems consisting of waterwheels (*noras*), stone water courses (*levadas*), and water tanks (fig.1).

The same diversity can be seen in the size of rural settlements since the coastal population follows a significantly hierarchical occupation within the area [3]. This population, polarized by the larger urban centers, was shaped by a rural economy into towns and villages and into in-between areas of scattered hamlets. This scattered built heritage is also highly diversified, as the result of, among other factors, the size and location of farms.

Among the most important clusters of buildings in the coastal plain are manor farms (*quintas*) which are almost always located on the outskirts of the main urban centers. These farms have tended to emphasize the importance of irrigation associated with large land plots within these deeply subdivided zones.



Fig. 1: Quinta Bivar Cumano, Faro (mrc).

2.2 The Hills

The diversity which characterizes the flat lands of the coast tends to diminish in the first line of hills in the calcareous region. The Hills are characterized by a predominance of dry orchards which include in different combinations almond, fig, carob, and olive trees. The importance of these species in the traditional economy included, whether as undergrowth in orchards or in more open fields, cereal crops which provided grain and fodder [4].

In the Hills, the irrigated fields have been mostly confined to riverside areas where vegetable gardens can be supplied by underground watercourses and wells or directly from rivers. In some valleys, irrigation meant a more complex system of dams and water channels linked to a large number of land parcels, requiring community management of irrigation schedules. This solution, while very common in traditional agriculture of various northern regions of Portugal, is less frequently seen in the south and is a worthwhile heritage to rehabilitate.

The Hills are characterized by stony red soil so that stones are prevalent in the landscape in large stone walls and terraces which were used to expand productive lands and reduce erosion (fig.2), as well as in a variety of buildings in this landscape. The scattered population pattern described for the coastal area is present throughout the calcareous hillsides of the Hills. However, this pattern is here often associated with noticeably lower population density and it becomes less relevant closer to the northern mountains. Although large properties are present in the Hills, the greatest number of scattered buildings is connected to small properties. These are generally buildings to which rooms with single slope roofs are added, this being one of the most widespread practices in rural architecture in the various sub-regions of the Algarve.



Fig. 2: Azinheiro, Faro (mrc).

2.3 The Mountains

In the central zone of the Algarve region, the transition from the Hills to the Mountains is almost always easily recognizable, not only because of abiotic and biotic factors but also from cultural features. One of the important features in this transition is in particular the settlements, differentiating the characteristic scattered buildings of the Lower Algarve (Coast and Hills) from the

network of small population centers in the mountainous areas.

These settlements frequently included a few dozen houses which mostly belonged to small-scale rural landowners. This type of settlement is largely typical of many mountainous areas of the Mediterranean region. It was the preferred pattern in areas which poor soil, traditional economies and the distance to important commercial and travel routes encouraged concentration into settlements without allowing larger centers to develop.

The Caldeirão Mountains are of low altitude, rarely rising above 500 meters. The condition of mountain area results from a repetitious orography of numerous small hilltops typical of schist mountains. The small mountain settlements tend to be located near the most fertile lands (fig.3). In the traditional economy, these areas concentrated the permanent agriculture land plots, such as small vegetable gardens along rivers or non-irrigated fields of cereals.

Outside of this ring, the mountain slopes were used for occasional crops, pasture, apiculture, or the manufacture of charcoal. The first half of the last century (especially the second quarter) saw a strong push for cultivating cereals which resulted in the depletion and erosion of topsoil [5]. Because of plentiful forests and cork groves, the mountainous area of the central zone of the Algarve is clearly distinct from the more arid eastern zone. The economic importance of cork trees increased in the last half century at the same time as cultivation of cereals became untenable on the mountain slopes.



Fig. 3: Carriços, Tavira (mrc).

3 Contemporary land occupation patterns and the role of built rural heritage

Changes in land occupation patterns over the last decades have resulted increasingly in a contrast between the two different worlds of the urban

coastal region and the sparsely populated interior. The boundaries of these worlds do not always coincide with natural regions. Especially from the beginning of the fourth quarter of the last century, the diminishing importance of traditional activities and improvement in living conditions of these communities resulted in a profound transformation of land occupation patterns.

As part of an observable global tendency, albeit with localized effects, in the Algarve there has also been a tendency towards urban growth in coastal areas and a significant drop in the importance of interior population centers.

3.1 The coastal urbanized region

The changes above mentioned started in the 1960s with the process of urban expansion of the larger population centers of the Lower Algarve and with the predominance of tourism activities in some centers along the coast. If at first this urbanization process resulted from a steady growth outward from traditional urban centers, it next began to include a diffuse urbanization of surrounding rural areas and a gradual appearance of polynucleated systems.

The diffuse urbanization of the central region of lower Algarve took place over the typical rural landscape mosaic. It intensified the traditional patterns of scattered buildings (fig.4) and the construction along important transportation routes.



Fig. 4: Campina de Faro and Barrocal (mrc).

The new patterns of construction coincided with a greater use of intensive agriculture (expansion of areas dedicated to citrus trees and to greenhouse nurseries) and with the emergence of different forms of deruralization (abandonment of many agricultural plots and built landscape features).

A diversity of new buildings typologies within this landscape and the reconversion of old rural hamlets into urban houses are part of this urbanization of rural spaces, resulting from new means of transportation associated with a new

infrastructure network in the area. This transformation will result in decreasing the importance of the connection between buildings and agricultural lands which has in many cases guided the transformation of the pattern of scattered building within metropolitan areas.

This process of urbanization has not only taken place in the coastal area but has also spread to the first calcareous slopes of the southern Hills. Therefore, the polynucleated systems which today structure patterns of land occupation (for example the Faro-Olhão-Loulé-São Brás area) cover landscapes with quite different characteristics which also encourage great diversity.

A large part of the agricultural fields on the calcareous slopes of the Hills have been abandoned or partially abandoned, resulting in a gradual expansion of bush areas. The landscape here is today notable for the preservation of dry orchard trees and for the disappearance of the patches of cultivation typical of the traditional economy. The Hills thus have functioned as a kind of transition to the mountainous areas where the patterns of abandonment is even more pervasive.

3.2 Abandoned lands of the Interior

As we approach the northern zone of the Hills, we can see that the scattering of new buildings thins out at the same time that more and more abandoned traditional hamlets appear. Some small settlements like Esteval de Mouros are overall notable for their large number of vacant houses (fig.5).



Fig. 5: Esteval de Mouros, Loulé (mrc).

The transformation of mountain landscapes over the last decades includes in great measure a return to the extensive wild bush areas which were common until the beginning of the last century. In the meantime, land use instruments and spatial planning

have favored forest areas, deeming these important for the mountain areas.

At present, this policy needs to be questioned for the resulting significant decrease in the prevalence of traditional species and the predominance of intensive plantations of eucalyptus (especially in the west) and of stone pine (more noticeable in the east) [6]. The central areas of the mountains, as part of the natural habitat for cork trees, have preserved the prevalence of this species which has taken over some slopes once dedicated to the cultivation of cereals.

Some of the vegetable gardens distributed along watercourses have been preserved, supplementing the pensions of an increasingly aged population. Many other garden plots, however, have been washed away by torrential floods in river valleys, while other vegetable gardens have tended to appear nearer to population centers, benefiting from the evolution of irrigation technology.

The evident decrease and aging of the population in mountain areas has resulted in the complete or partial abandonment of a considerable number of small mountain settlements (fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Mesquita, Loulé (mrc).

Construction in traditional villages was mostly of one floor structures with schist walls and tiled roofs. While in the last decades some of these population centers have been conserved without significantly altering their buildings, many others are being subjected to an intense process of architectural replacement.

3.3 The rehabilitation of built heritage in diffuse cities.

The purpose of the rehabilitation of rural heritage – subject to different international agreements like the Charter on Built Vernacular Heritage or The European Landscape Convention – depends on a great variety of situations within the area under

study, as briefly discussed above. Along with other aspects, this diversity arises out of landscape history and more recent transformations. It is affected in discrete areas by the particular characteristics of the three previously described sub-areas within this landscape – the Coast, Hills, and Mountains – and the contrast between southern zones of urbanized lands and northern zones of abandoned lands.

In a previous paper, we defended the importance which this heritage can acquire within the transformation of contemporary cities [7]. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the different sizes and shapes which here characterize old rural settlements as they raise different issues about the role they can play within contemporary cities. In the hierarchical population patterns of the Lower Algarve, it is important to mention some rural towns and villages which polarize the dispersal of hamlets scattered across the landscape.

The spatial organization and irregular outline of public spaces within these population centers are the result of unplanned growth, involving some patterns held in common with the historic centers of larger cities. Their shape manifests a community culture as shown by the prominence of public squares and other public spaces or buildings. By their size, these population centers constitute a centrality extending to scattered hamlets located within its sphere of influence.

The biggest challenge presently faced while rehabilitating these building complexes is precisely how to enhance the collective nature of these spaces and their importance to community identity within the transformation process of gradually emerging urban regions. In fact, traditional rural villages tend to acquire this role through their special community character in contrast to diffuse cities which are largely based on isolated individual housing units and on the general absence of small public spaces.

In addition, a part of these villages still preserve today a relevant heritage which, in our understanding, should be preserved or rehabilitated within the network of the polynucleated systems which are characteristic of contemporary cities.

In the same way, we should give priority to the integrated conservation of scattered building clusters and other built landscape elements of heritage value. In a sense, it can be said that these small population centers and scattered hamlets function within the diffuse city in the same way that historic centers, rehabilitated in the second half of the last century, function within the traditional city. But while these last tend to emphasize continuity and collective heritage, rural building features form a fragmented structure or a network within the

complex alternating patterns of diverse built elements which shape diffuse cities.

3.4 The rehabilitation of built heritage in the interior.

While unoccupied built heritage and patterns of deruralization are very common in the Lower Algarve landscape, it is, as we have seen, in the interior where this phenomenon is most prevalent. Further, there is no indication that the trend of decreasing population typical of this area over the last half a century is likely to reverse itself in the next decades.

The rural landscape associated with a traditional subsistence economy in mountainous areas was based on communities which dedicated a considerable part of their time to maintaining built landscape structures. A large part of these structures are remains of this lifestyle which therefore cannot be preserved in the future.

The landscape as heritage must particularly reflect the basic state of flux currently linked to a decreasing population, the prevalence of forests, and the almost complete disappearance of cereal cultivation. In terms of settlement patterns, this process includes the abandonment of a significant portion of small mountain settlements, which incidentally already happened in other historical periods.

At the same time, the continuity of a significant number of these settlements appears to be associated with the aging of the remaining population, the return at retirement of some former inhabitants, and an increasing number of second homes in more recent times.

It is within the centers which most clearly exemplify these new communities with material and non-material heritage value that we should consider supporting the conservation of built landscape elements, as well as maintaining agriculture based on vegetable gardens and orchards. Within these efforts, the importance of cultural tourism should also be considered, even though this cannot be the remedy of all ills (as has been suggested in some cases).

The enhancement of heritage to encourage local development has incidentally been given some attention at different levels of administration. In fact, programs formulated to counteract depopulation in these mountain areas have in many cases conferred a great importance to material and non-material heritage, seeing these as essential for the areas' revitalization. Some population centers in the Hills and Mountains have been included in programs which focus specifically on the

rehabilitation of inland population nuclei in order to promote cultural tourism by revitalizing some traditional activities and through the appearance of new cultural dynamics (fig. 8) [8].



Fig. 8: Cachopo, Tavira (Gtaa_Sotavento).

In any case, it is important that an understanding of the specific needs of different mountain population centers be translated into the definition of different categories for proposals reviewed at the Municipal Plans for Land Management level. Among proposed solutions for these building complexes are: the purpose of their overall conservation and rehabilitation; the renovation of building complexes without altering architectural volume; the establishment of an expansion zone in areas adjoining preexisting settlements or forming autonomous centers; or even, conversely, the possibility of the eventual disappearance of original buildings.

Taking into account that each mountain settlement is made up of entangled structures which can combine some of the different categories described above, planning regulations should favor the revitalization of some of these population centers where the cultural landscape could be a resource for regional development.

4 Conclusion

The conservation and rehabilitation of rural heritage refers in the Algarve to highly differentiated issues. These are related not only to the specific characteristics and integration of different landscape units but also to their place in the overall picture of gradual transformations in land occupation patterns. It is reasonable to conclude that in the central zone of the Algarve, the preservation of built rural heritage can become important as a resource for the revitalization of the interior as well as a way to

integrate networks of buildings important to cultural identity within diffuse cities.

However, whether in coastal urban areas or in less populated areas of the interior, built rural heritage is associated with different stages of abandonment and deruralization. The conservation of this landscape must necessarily be subject to careful inventories and to the definition of strategies based on important patterns of landscape transformation. Establishing different categories for the preservation of heritage should in this way be based not only on the specific value of this heritage but also on its place in a system of heritage covering the full gamut of urban and interior areas.

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