

# Living Among the Ruins: Alvaro Siza's Chiado and the Rebuilding of Portugal's Historic Neighborhoods

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## INTRODUCTION

Just over a decade has passed since its inclusion in the European Economic Community and Portugal finds itself under pressure to catch up to its fellow member-nations after a 40-year dictatorship and accompanying conservative economic policies. Portuguese cities are taking advantage of available funding from the Community to improve transportation infrastructure in the form of major roads and highways and to build an unprecedented number of housing units. The economic activity has also brought new life to Portugal's cultural sphere leading Lisbon to be named the Cultural Capital of the World in 1994 and to the planned staging of the 1998 World Exposition in Lisbon. Funding has found its way to tourist infrastructure, cultural facilities and activities and the restorations of historic monuments. Although EEC funding is not available for existing housing stock, new attention has been focused on historic centers and their rehabilitations, a European movement that began in the late 1960's.

While much of this interest in monuments and neighborhoods of the past can be attributed, ironically, to the underlying interest in the tourist dollars that can help boost Portugal's economic and political position in the new age, recent public events have shown that Portuguese citizens are concerned with the drastic changes affecting their familiar environments. While there appears no attempt to slow the pace of development spurred by EEC funding – no yearning for a past lifestyle in economic or political terms – there are signs of the need to cling to some symbols or familiar images of the past that might resist the tide eroding the country's sense of cultural identity. The fire that destroyed much of the Chiado area of Lisbon in 1988, provided a venue for growing public outrage over what was happening to the historic fabric of the country. This year, 1998, marks a decade since that fire and the beginning of the reconstruction effort of the architect, Alvaro Siza, that is still underway. It seems, therefore, an appropriate time to reevaluate the project and its potential lessons for the rebuilding of other historic neighborhoods in Portugal and, possibly, other countries as well. The rebuilding of the Chiado area of Lisbon made Siza both scapegoat and savior over a wide range of issues including a general sense of waning cultural identity among the public, the role of architects in historic fabrics and the physical and social degradation of historic neighborhoods. What Siza has achieved is a remarkable integration of the weighty pressures involved: a sensitive response to public opinion and its yearning for some continuity, a stern example to the "design-oriented" architectural profession and a provocative model for the rebuilding of historic neighborhoods. These accomplishments are partly justified and conveniently cloaked in an 18th-century city blueprint.

## THE HISTORY OF THE CHIADO

The Chiado neighborhood represents a piece of an originally medieval fabric of Lisbon's downtown that was reconstructed in 1755 following the historic earthquake that leveled most of the city. A minister of the ruling King Jose I saw this devastation as a political opportunity and lost no time in preparing the city for its great renewal. The Marquis of Pombal requested proposals for a plan to rebuild the city in line with his "Enlightened" ideas, a city embodying a noble ancient simplicity and efficiency. The plan he chose required the removal of all that was left of the downtown section of the city and the consequent building of a new rational grid plan that would provide wider streets lined with buildings of uniform height and width. The facades of those buildings were to adhere to a set and rigorous design that would project a unified image of efficiency and nobility. According to Pombal's plan, a special public works department was set up to provide planning and construction assistance to the owners who were given a piece of property in the new downtown that would correspond approximately to the size of their original property. The strict design left only the interiors undefined except for placement of access routes (stairs and entrances) and small atrium spaces. The structural makeup of the new buildings was also designed and rigorously imposed in an attempt to provide greater resistance against future catastrophes. The new structure was comprised of a stone foundation and first floor (shop level) bearing walls with brick vaulting built upon a series of wood pilings to provide stability in this high water-table area. Upon the vault, and protected from ground water, was constructed the wooden cage that provided

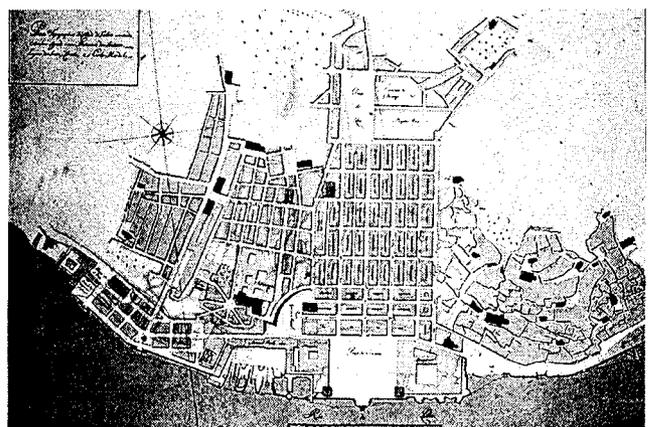


Fig. 1. Pombal's 1755 Plan for Lisbon.

structure for the following 4 stories of apartments that were to be built above and which attached to the stone facades with metal fasteners so as to allow for the separation of the collapsing facade from the rest of the structure in the case of an earthquake, thereby saving the structure and the people inside. (Ironically, it was fire that eventually took the structures leaving the facades behind and consuming the structure.)

The Chiado area became an important social and commercial area for the city in the late 19th and 20th centuries. It became the gathering place for writers and poets and saw the establishment of many newspapers, bookstores and cafes. Its popularity attracted new commerce that brought with it new ideas about building. A team of French architects brought to the Chiado one of its distinctive large department stores, the Grandella, designed in the style and materials of the wrought iron and glass constructions that were flourishing in France. Other buildings were being converted to new uses by the introduction of other modern materials such as concrete. The Convent of Espirito Santo became the Grandes Armazens do Chiado, another landmark department store.

### RECENT HISTORY

In the last decades, the Chiado had been plagued by the same problems faced by other areas of Lisbon and indeed of Portugal. As in many other cities, the degradation of historic areas was the result of many factors that stemmed from the changing uses of the city. The area, which had historically been characterized by a variety of activities including residential, was slowly taken over by commercial and office uses. Residents began vacating the apartment buildings leaving the area deserted at night. The buildings were subsequently transformed to provide more storage and office space by the introduction of new floors and through the building of clandestine additions to the backs of buildings which had the effect of closing off interior courtyards that provided light and ventilation. The degradation of the buildings and the birth of new commercial centers in other parts of the city that were more easily accessed, saw the abandonment and replacement of the more affluent shops for lower rent establishments. These transformations, in combination, led to the loss to the Chiado of its symbolic and social importance in the city and represents a pattern of slow degradation that characterizes most of the historical areas of Portugal and many other European countries. In some cases, well-intentioned government policies have contributed to the problem. In the 1940's, strict rent controls were established in Lisbon in a conscientious effort to keep lower income residents from being displaced. Those policies have been maintained to this day, frustrating building owners' attempts to profit from or even simply maintain their buildings. Later policies introduced to stem the tide of demolition of these buildings, strictly limited the demolition of any building within zones designated as historically valuable. In desperation, some owners have turned to arson in order to remove the impediment to the more profitable sale of the property. The Chiado fire of August 25, 1988 was under suspicion of just such action but charges were never substantiated. The fire started in the Grandella department store and quickly spread to envelop 18 structures.

### SIZA'S PLAN AND THE "NEW" CHIADO

The essential elements of Siza's plan to rebuild the Chiado lie not in the projected physical image of its buildings but in reestablishing its proper role and functionality within the city. To that end, he restructured the uses of these buildings to re-approach their intended original compositions. Most of the structures, excluding what were previously the large department stores, have been divided approximately into thirds giving over the ground floor area to shops, the floor above to office space, and the remaining, to residential. The attic houses the mechanical equipment which is not allowed to protrude in any way from the form of the building. The two large

department stores have been given new functions. The Grandes Armazens do Chiado (the only unfinished building) is to be converted into a hotel and the Grandella has been restored to its original grandeur for use as a mixed commercial center. Other important changes to the area include the opening of courtyards on the interiors of blocks and in some cases the reduction of building depths in order to improve the qualities of light and ventilation. The turning over of these interior courtyards to the public is also an attempt to remove the temptation for building owners to reoccupy and close off the spaces again. Access into the area has been improved by the reopening of some alleys and stairs that had been buried over the years as well as the integration of a new metro stop into the Chiado building.

Complex bracing and shoring was set up immediately after the fire in attempt to save remaining structures so that most of what remained was restored and integrated into the new construction. In fact, to the untrained eye, the Chiado appears much as it had pre-fire, though perhaps a cleaned up and more polished version. The actual restoration of these structures, however, is more interesting and complex than at first appearance. The unusual and original nature of Pombal's plan of 1755 and its physical repercussions have provided an irresistible blueprint for the subsequent work of Alvaro Siza and the staff of architects and engineers set up specifically to handle the project. Just as Pombal had done, Siza provided carefully detailed instructions for the design of facades and the positioning of stair and elevator access routes while leaving the rest of the interiors to the owners and their architects. To increase the flexibility of these spaces, the wood floors of the office levels were substituted with concrete coffered slabs. Interior walls were to be built of double

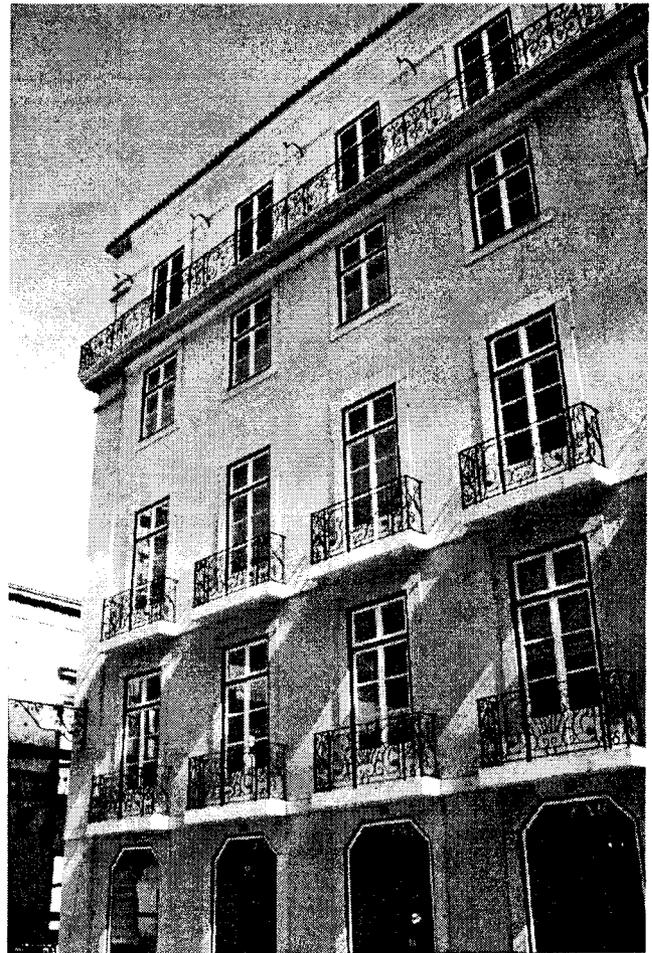


Fig. 2. Reconstructed Facade in the Chiado.

brick construction with pocket doors except for the stair and elevator cores which were built of concrete to provide seismic resistance and to serve as fire walls.

The facades that remained were reintegrated into a new cage that is now a concrete cage which, in a manner reminiscent of the metal fasteners used to attach the facades to the original wood structure, is anchored into the stone facade providing the new support. The face of the concrete frame, where it meets the existing facade serves as a steel reinforced backing across its complete surface. In the case of a facade that was unsalvageable, a new wall was built according to contemporary common construction methods using a double layer of brick integrated and flush with the concrete frame and covered on the exterior with stucco. The design of openings and all details are consistent with the Pombal model. All dimensions and spacing remain the same as well as materials and their allocations. In fact, Pombal's reconstruction involved a pre-industrial example of mass production and pre-fabrication for such materials as the granite framing around windows and doors, metal balcony railings and roof tiles which Siza also turned to for his reconstruction. As a result, in the case of the buildings referred to as block A, the exterior appearance is indistinguishable from the original Pombaline designs with a cleaned up and reestablished courtyard. The only new, visible, introductions to this space are the openings giving access to the now public and commercial ground floors of the courtyard.

Block B, on the other hand, exhibits some interesting rethinking in connection with the redimensioning of the building widths which created the necessity for a new interior facade where none had previously existed. The memory of the original width survives in the form of a false window on the remaining gable-end wall of one of the buildings. In order to increase the size of the courtyard behind, a new interior facade is created which is clearly distinguished from the Pombaline language. The construction is of a double brick wall integral with the frame and maintaining the Pombaline window rhythm but in modern materials and detailing. Comparing the street facade with the courtyard facade, the relationship is almost inverted. Where the windows on the exterior Pombaline facades are essentially flush with the building surface and framed by wide granite surrounds, the new interior windows and doors are deeply recessed with a reduced stone frame now sitting perpendicular to the window surface.

The Pombaline windows remain the traditional wood framed full height casements with single pane glass divided by mullions. In order to increase the insulation potentials of these traditional windows without compromising the existing frames, Siza designed a second window to be applied to the inside of the originals followed by a layer of shutters. The windows of the courtyard, in contrast, are modern aluminum framed and swivel operated with undivided double panes. The overall feel is even more austere due to the lack

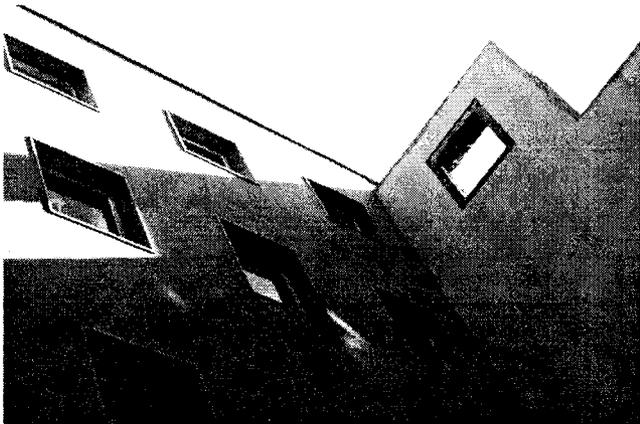


Fig. 3. New Facade, Courtyard B.

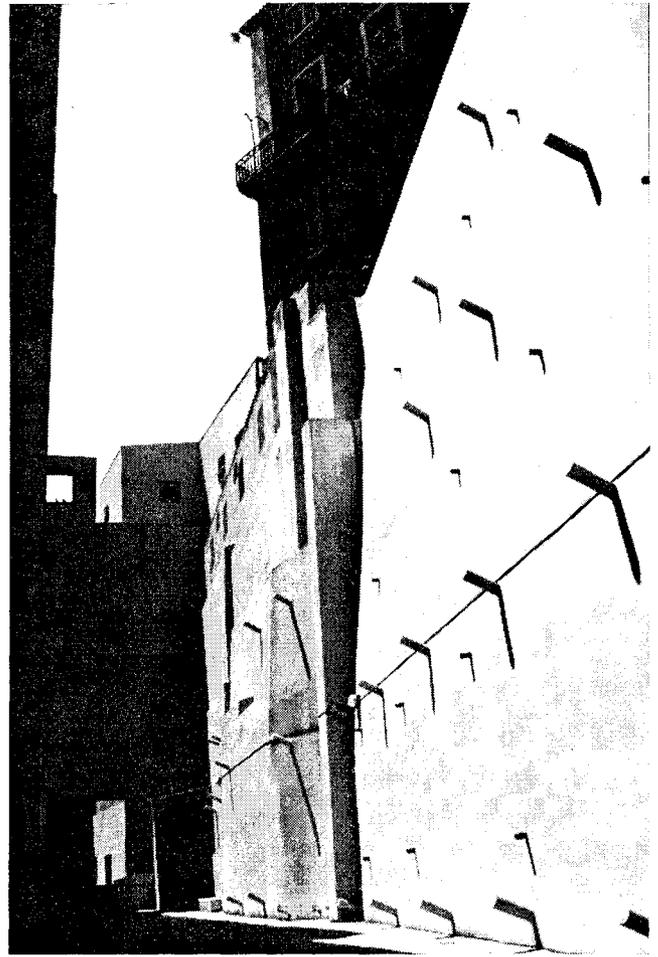


Fig. 4. Exposed Anchors, Courtyard B.

of balconies here. The opposing facade of the courtyard has become a concrete retaining wall which has been anchored into the previously existing wall for further support. The anchor heads are left exposed to the courtyard as sculptural elements, a reminder of the unexposed anchors applied to support the old facades. The existence of the new interior courtyard is expressed on the outside at the points of entry where unframed and atypical arched openings cut deep holes through the mass of the building. It is also in the courtyard of this block where Siza discovered and reintroduced a pathway which existed before the earthquake of 1755 linking this space to the ruins of the Convent of Carmo above.

#### THE CHIADO AS A MODEL

This lengthy description probably makes a good argument for appreciating Siza's project for the Chiado as a response to a very specific set of conditions which may put into question its use as a model for other historic neighborhoods of Portugal or any other country. In Portuguese cities, historic neighborhoods suffer from one of two problems. The most common problem is the slow deterioration of historic structures from neglect. The second, is the incremental substitution of historic structures for modern office complexes due to speculation practices. While the Chiado area suffered from the former, the fire that consumed it created a sudden and large-scaled catastrophe more akin to the kinds of destruction that led to the complete rebuilding of whole neighborhoods of European cities following W.W.II. Those models were of two kinds. For the most part, wholesale destruction of entire areas or neighborhoods after the war were followed by rebuilding according to

entirely new plans, with new materials, and with the intent of opportunistically improving access and efficiency. (We would also place the Lisbon of 1755 in this category.) Few cities, like Warsaw, took to wholesale reconstructions of previously existing fabrics. In its conception, however, Siza's project for the Chiado has more to do with the spirit of the international charters that were set up in the 1960's and 70's for the express purpose of saving historic groups of buildings that "are a function of every day life." The charters, because they are concerned with existing historic fabrics (and indeed those areas precisely *not* affected by W.W.II), have attempted to *prevent* the replacement of historic structures with new ones and have also been opposed, in principle, to *reconstruction*. Siza's attitudes must have been greatly influenced by his early work in the historic neighborhoods of his own home town of Oporto.

The move to protect groups of buildings of historic but not monumental value had early and specific activity in Portugal. In 1964, France's notable "Lei Malraux" and UNESCO's Venice Charter were introduced to begin focusing attention on groups of historic buildings as opposed to isolated monuments. Two years previously, Portugal had already begun to designate specific "historic areas" as worthy of preservation efforts. The city of Oporto, along with the celebrated case of Bologna, were the first examples of efforts to maintain existing populations as part of the efforts to revitalize and preserve historic areas whereas most other cities were relying on gentrification. Siza's early work as part of the SAAL (Local Ambulatory Support Service) program in Oporto, following the 1974 Revolution, involved efforts to oppose the relocation of existing populations from the city centers to the peripheries which were a common practice of government urban renewal policies. These practices in Portugal are early examples of what is now a universally accepted understanding in the resolution of the problems facing historic centers all over Europe. That is the understanding that economic and social factors must be addressed as part of the revitalization process necessary to preserving historic fabrics and are as crucial to that process as the physical recuperation of buildings.

In his project for the Chiado, Siza points to these considerations as the most crucial to the rebuilding of that historic neighborhood. Setting aside the criticisms of architects who considered any act of "reconstruction" to be pastiche, and who believed that the destruction presented an opportunity to introduce a new, modern commercial and entertainment attraction, Siza responded to strong public sentiment and to his own experience. His response was to focus on what would truly contribute to the future sustainability of the area, the reintroduction of the mixed uses originally designed into Pombal's city and the improvement of access and circulation for the people who would live there. The reintroduction of housing into the 18th century structures, and introduction of hotel and commercial mixed uses into what were previously the department stores, would restore the balance of social and economic factors crucial to viability.

This attitude stands in stark contrast to practices in other historic neighborhoods where similar changes in use from residential to tertiary activities are in progress. On the well known Avenida de Liberdade, high property values and the pressures of speculation economics have driven out all residential and smaller commercial establishments contributing to the complete demolitions of existing historic structures and the building of new ones at unlimited scales and heights. Efforts to control the destruction of that urban fabric have led only to a new, sinister building type referred to as "Chapa 3" ("chapa" meaning "sheet metal"). Developers have turned to a process that ensures them swifter building permits under the new regulations. While maintaining the original historical facade, the structures are gutted and replaced with inexpensive steel and glass structures which protrude absurdly from the top and sides of the historical facades relegating them to hollow symbolic elements and furthering the loss of the city's architectonic heritage.

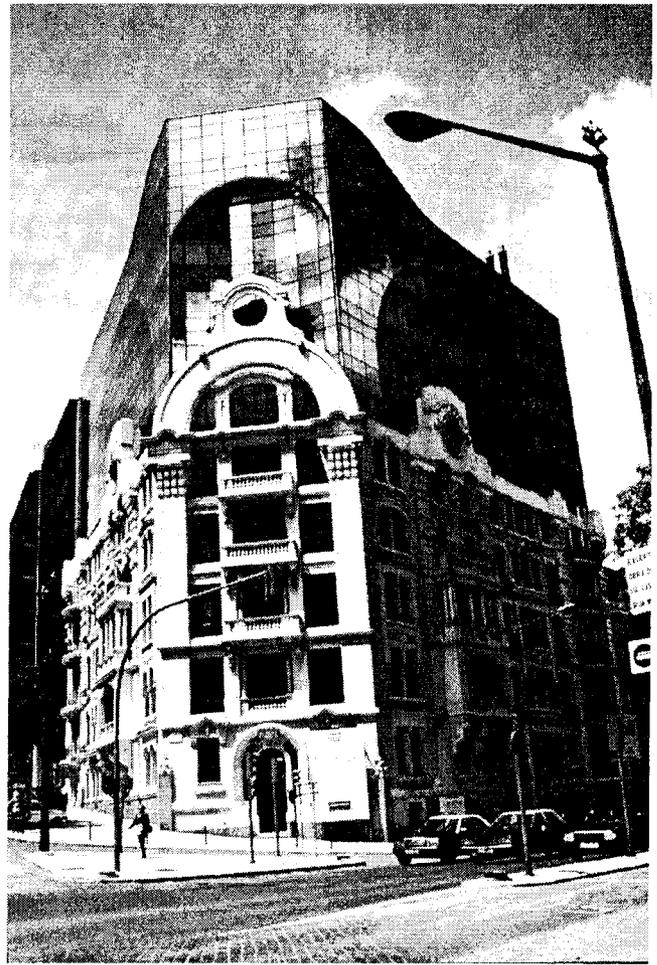


Fig. 5. "Chapa 3."

### THE PHYSICAL RECUPERATION OF STRUCTURES

Siza's belief in the complex integration of uses and social and economic concerns as the crucial element in the viability of these areas, takes into account the fact that social networks rely on the development of a sense of continuity and ownership in a particular place. That sense of connectedness can be fostered in familiar, often historic, environments. Siza attempts to allow for that continuity in his project for the Chiado. The aspect of Siza's project which provoked the greatest controversy among the architectural community, was precisely that which was demanded by the public, namely, the desire for a recreation of the original Chiado. While the reconstructive aspects of the Chiado project stand out from Siza's previous work, which is clearly based on modernist principles and form, it is entirely consistent with his assertion that every intervention must be specific to its own conditions, physical, historical, cultural and, indeed, social and economic. What the authors of the international charters and architects working in the field struggle to define is an authentic response that finds root somewhere between superficial mimeticism and ego-oriented "signature" architecture. The "new ethic of conservation" set forth by UNESCO's Venice Charter in 1964 still serves as the primary guideline for intervention in the historic fabric for many countries. It recommends restoration only when absolutely necessary and not of a mimetic or romantic kind. Instead, it encourages the recognition of existing materials and the clear identification of new interventions as well as ensuring the possibility for reversing any interventions that are structural. The

contributions of different eras should be maintained. Finally, the use of traditional building techniques should be employed whenever possible and the careful, scientific and informed use of new techniques whenever necessary. While this charter still stands as the only authority in Portugal, the standards have changed somewhat. In 1992, Portugal's National Commission to UNESCO added to its Recommendations and Resolutions, the statement: "...The idea that monuments and sites are dynamic realities that are born, grow, change, and can also die, begins, in this decade of the 90's, to pertain finally to the domain of common sense...."

Upon immediate observation today, the Chiado appears as it did before the fire and engenders a sense of familiarity. Upon closer consideration, however, Siza's project maintains the spirit of the early UNESCO guidelines while adopting the attitude of the Portuguese Commission. Siza's projects exhibits a above all a simultaneous capacity for practicality as well as a clear respect for the value of the existing artifact. The justification for his actions in this area lie in the specifics of the project, in the integrity of the unified urban fabric and the strength of its historical rigor. Unlike most urban fabrics made up of a collection of similar but different buildings, the fabric of the Chiado is more analogous to the integrity of a single structure. To introduce inconsistencies in that clear pattern for the sake of "authentic clarity" would have been to destroy it. Where the original walls were saved, they were integrated: where walls had existed but were destroyed, they were rebuilt. The clear identification of new interventions occurs where a wall or opening was created where it had not previously existed. The wall of courtyard B, as previously described, is clearly detailed as a new intervention as well as any new passageways to interior courtyards. The scientific and informed use of techniques where necessary were carefully integrated in the spirit of their historic predecessor.

## CONCLUSIONS

What is truly inspiring about Siza's work in general and the Chiado project in particular, is its remarkable capacity for absorption; for the

sophisticated and thorough integration of seemingly incompatible and overwhelming pressures including public scrutiny, political and economic pressures and the sheer weight of historical precedent.

What makes the project a model for the construction or *re-construction* of urban infrastructures is, most importantly, its focus on the social and economic factors that lead to true and sustainable revitalization. As such, it addresses both areas decaying by neglect as well as areas eroded by excessive growth. Secondly, it provides a practical yet sensitive interpretation of international guidelines that hope to provide standards for a universal attitude of respect for historic environments. Thirdly, it takes into account the clear and innately human search for social and cultural identity that finds some base in its familiar environments and historic patrimony. What moves citizens to revalue their historic environments is a natural reaction to modernization in countries all over the world and one that has been made more dramatic in Portugal by the economic events of the last decade. In 1994, Fernando Tavora warned against the "hasty and disorderly" destruction of the Portuguese space and landscape caused by the sudden abundance and ill-distributed use of EEC funding. In his words, "Like many others, I dreamed of a developed modern country: but only when modernity guarantees vital continuity and allows a new projection to take root on the existing and real conditions proven by history and time, and which make up the culture of the country" (Dominique Machabert, "La Maison Portugal: entretien avec Fernando Tavora," *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, Oct. 94, 8-11.) In the alienation of the hastily built housing blocks invading the Portuguese landscape, far removed from centers of social and cultural exchange, the loss of identity has as much to do with the destruction of the social fabric as the loss of familiar landmarks and historic neighborhoods. Most who lament the loss of these environments live daily lives far removed from them. What they represent is a sense of place, a temporal continuity missing in their daily environments. While Siza's project for the Chiado may have a great number of lessons for rebuilding our *historic* neighborhoods, it also contains lessons for how we should be constructing our *new* neighborhoods.