



# LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS  
MODOS DE HABITAR

**ABADA EDITORES**

# LA CASA

## ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD  
GRANADA, 23-25 ENERO 2019



Este Congreso ha contado con una ayuda del Vicerrectorado de Investigación de la Universidad de Granada obtenida en concurrencia competitiva.



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C/ Gobernador, 18  
28014 Madrid  
www.abadaeditores.com

**Imagen de portada:** La cabaña primitiva, frontispicio realizado por Charles-Dominique-Joseph Eisen para el *Essai sur l'architecture* de Marc-Antoine Laugier, edición de 1755  
Fuente: ETH-Bibliothek Zürich

**Imagen de contraportada:** Grabado encabezando el capítulo "Adspetus Incauti Dispendium" del libro de Theodoor Galle *Verdicus Christianus*, 1601  
Fuente: Vilnius University Library

ISBN 978-84-17301-24-8  
IBIC AMA  
Depósito Legal M-607-2019

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**II Congreso Internacional Cultura y Ciudad**  
La Casa. Espacios domésticos, modos de habitar  
Granada 23-25 enero 2019

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## **Tropical y Colonial: viviendas como laboratorio moderno en Angola y Mozambique (1950-1970)**

### *Tropical and Colonial: Single Houses as a Modern Lab in Angola and Mozambique (1950-1970)*

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#### **Resumen**

En las regiones tropicales, las soluciones arquitectónicas de la vivienda reflejan una preocupación específica de construcción. La casa moderna se convierte así en un laboratorio del espacio doméstico en geografías tropicales. En Angola y Mozambique, las antiguas colonias portuguesas, el diseño urbano se basa en el modelo de la "Ciudad Jardín", la ciudad de baja densidad, donde la vivienda unifamiliar es el modelo más común. La intención de este artículo es analizar un conjunto significativo de viviendas unifamiliares en Angola y Mozambique que nos permitan identificar el modo como se ensayó el vocabulario del Movimiento Moderno. Recurriendo a la herencia corbuseriana, a la plasticidad brasileña o al imaginario de las casas de California, los arquitectos se adhieren al proyecto moderno e intentan responder de forma eficaz a las condiciones del clima, aunque muchas veces de "ojos cerrados" al contexto social y colonial.

**Palabras clave:** vivienda, África lusófona, colonial, tropical

**Bloque temático:** El proyecto doméstico como núcleo de la modernidad: casa singular y vivienda colectiva, del Movimiento Moderno al siglo XXI

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#### **Abstract**

*In the tropical regions, the architectural solutions for the single-family house reflect a specific construction concern. Thus, the modern house further becomes a laboratory of the domestic space in tropical geographies. In Angola and Mozambique, former Portuguese colonies, urban design valued the "Garden City" model, a low density spreading city, where the single-family house was the preferred housing model. This paper intends to examine a significant number of single-family houses in Angola and Mozambique, which will allow us to identify the way in which the Modern Movement vocabulary of various references and approaches was tested. By using the Corbusian legacy, the Brazilian plasticity or even the California house imagery, architects took up the modern project and tried to respond in an efficient way to the climate conditions, although often with their "eyes closed" to the social and colonial context.*

**Keywords:** housing, lusophone Africa, colonial, tropical

**Topic:** *The domestic project as the heart of modernity: the single, one-off house and collective housing, from the Modern Movement to the 21st century*

## Introduction

Single-family housing was, all along the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ideal field to rehearse not only domestic space but new architectural ideas and languages, both as to spatial feature and as to formal and material plasticity. Single-family housing acquired an iconic dimension, not only upon exploring new prototypes of the dwelling space, but also as a result of its formal essays and affirmation of author languages.

After the Second World War, housing was one of the crucial themes in European reconstruction. The new post-war reality will allow for applying, on a wide scale, models and prototypes of individual and collective dwelling spaces tested during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the European continent will not be alone in seeing a massive housing development; the new world geopolitical map and the agenda of the post-war years will bring about different global development strategies, and the housing theme surely is one of the core issues. In the specific case of colonial territories, whether African or Asian, various orientations are taken up as far as the dynamics and development of public and private housing are concerned, both in the instance of new independencies and in new overseas policies by the different European States.

During the second post-war, the house remains as a laboratory for the dwelling cell due to the need for flexible, cheap and quick building. Minimum areas are studied, dwelling functions are systematised, modular structures are standardised,<sup>1</sup> evolving single-house schemes are developed. *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* magazine, for instance, dedicated a large number of special issues to *single-houses*, offering a markedly transcontinental reading.<sup>2</sup> The awareness of the ever more comprehensive presence of the internationalisation of the Modern Movement admits, little by little, a different, more distant, more critical look at the "house as a dwelling machine".<sup>3</sup> The functionalist axiom that *form follows function* was softened by a new synthesising reading between function and form, and new looks at the relevance of place and nature were introduced.

In the tropical and subtropical regions, the architectural solutions for the single-family house reflect a specific construction concern, such as location, sun and wind exposure, a specific design of roofs, walls and openings, solar protection, such as *brise-soleils* galleries or shade canopies, or rain or mosquito protection. Thus, the modern house further becomes a laboratory for the home space in tropical geographies.

In Angola and Mozambique, former Portuguese colonies, urban design valued the "Garden City" model, a low density spreading city, where the single-family house was the preferred housing model. This paper intends to examine a significant number of single-family houses in a few Angolan and Mozambican cities, which will allow us to identify the way in which the Modern Movement vocabulary of various references and approaches was tested. By using the Corbusian legacy, the Brazilian plasticity or even the California house imagery, architects took up the modern project and tried to respond in an efficient way to the climate conditions, although often with their "eyes closed" to the social colonial context.

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Candilis, "Habitation Individuelle Minimum", *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, n.º 49 (October 1953): 1.

<sup>2</sup> *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 6 (May-June 1946); *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 18-19 (June 1948); *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, n.º 30, July 1950; *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, n.º 44 (September 1952); *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, n.º 49 (October 1953).

<sup>3</sup> «The house is not merely a *dwelling machine*. It is also a place where men are born, live and die». Alexandre Persitz, "Habitations Individuelles", *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, n.º 18-19 (June 1948): 18-19.

## 1. *La Maison Tropicale*

In the late 1940s, Jean Prouvé designed *Maison Tropicale*, a prefabricated house that claimed to be fit for the tropics. Such prototypes, erected in the former French colonies of Congo and Niger, were to be manufactured in a standard form and *en masse* to fill in the shortage of housing in those countries. While *Maison Tropical* was deemed an exemplary project of industrial production in the context of the Modern Movement, it is, simultaneously, a strongly colonial object considering its universal interpretation of local specificities and imposition of a dominant culture.

Conversely, Le Corbusier's (1887-1965) designs during the post-war period, such as the Shodan (1952-1954) and Sarabhai (1951-1955) houses in Ahmedabad or the Curutchet house (1949), seek to establish a bridge with the place, not only in response to the climate but by seeking an identity genesis in local cultures and traditions. The opportunity to build in territories as diverse as India and Argentina allowed him to put into practice, in an intensive way, the use of devices aimed at responding to the climate while testing new plastic features and expressions. The single houses in Ahmedabad – the Shodan House (1951-1954) and the Sarabhai House (1951-1955) – allowed him to test the *béton brut*, which he then underscores in his response to the tropics. His site insertion allows him to play with dominant winds and to solve not only natural ventilation, but also space shading, through volume and grid modelling. Houses offer a new interior space reading through the creation of a variety of domestic open-air spaces by reinventing a garden-terrace adapted to the tropics. In the Shodan house, the scale of the grids and *brise-soleil* becomes excessive, monumental and sculptural. In the Sarabhai house, Le Corbusier explores the vernacular theme and recovers the design of the “Catalan” vaults and visible brick surfaces.

The Ahmedabad houses are a few of the examples presented by Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew in “Tropical Architecture in Dry and Humid Zones”, where they define a combination of architectural solutions responding to the problems of a house in the tropics. They propose a vast range of solutions, expressively illustrated by works located in such climatic regions, for specific building problems<sup>4</sup> or for domestic space organisation problems.

Another significant example consists in the Brazilian architecture of the 40s and 50s, where single-house projects are also an expression of formal consolidation researches in modern architecture. The designs of those houses represent a synthesis of the lexicon developed by Brazilian architects during that period. Such lexicon is translated, within the general framework of the Brazilian geography, as a combination of invariant constituents: the response to the climate by means of the plastic or functional multiplicity of the *brise-soleil*, blinds or *cobogós*, in verandas, galleries or internal patios, as a way to protect the house from the sun, heat or rain; the relationship with the topography or the landscape asserted by the mapping out of the location as well as on the design of the gardens; the strong relationship between internal and external space; the plastic features of the volumes, and particularly the plastic variety of the roofs; the tectonic nature of new materials articulated with traditional ones.

The large scale international dissemination of the Brazilian modern architecture enshrined some of those houses as reference models. For instance, the exclusive issue of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* magazine<sup>5</sup> dedicated to Brazilian architecture, devotes a significant portion to

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<sup>4</sup> Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, *Tropical Architecture in Dry and Humid Zones* (Londres: William Clowes and Sons, 1964), 43-75.

<sup>5</sup> *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, n.º 42-43 (August 1952): 65-81, 83.

“single-family houses”. Other than the more heterodox formal experiments of Niemeyer’s houses, many single houses were exemplary in asserting a Brazilian modern vocabulary, between the Le Corbusier-rooted lexicon, or within a larger framework of the International Style, and a re-reading of vernacular architecture.

This reference framework helps us understand single-house architecture as developed in Angola and Mozambique.

## **2. Dissemination and reception of international architectural models in Lusophone Africa**

It is under the sign of the idea of flow and exchange that we may understand the architectural production in Angola and Mozambique, both former Portuguese colonies, during the period of the second post-war, until their independences in 1975.

After World War II, when Portugal was still living under a dictatorship, anachronistically valuing its empire and its colonies, a number of young architects went to Africa and affirmed a modernity that was far from the State-sanctioned architectural models. Such modernity was translated into freedom in a firmer appropriation of the modern movement codes in an international meaning.

It is permissible to establish that the first sign of flexibility and openness of Portuguese architecture to the forms and principles of international modern architecture was ensured at the 1<sup>st</sup> National Architecture Congress, in 1948. In Portugal, upon the end of World War II and the democratization of the European States, the strife against the Salazar regime became manifest, leading to the organisation of the various oppositions, who believed in a swift fall of the so-called “Estado Novo”. A new generation of architects, trained in the Arts Schools of Lisbon and Porto, laid claim to a new social, ethical and political consciousness. If, on the one hand, they claimed a new vision of reality, on the other hand, they tried to theorize and reinforce an idea of architecture, international and orthodox, according to the premises of the Modern Movement.

The diaspora of these architects who, during the 50s and 60s, lived and worked in the Portuguese overseas territories was caused by personal factors with various origins – their birthplace, a family presence, political reasons or merely the ambition of new work prospects – and, in a way as well, fostered by the development policies for the colonies of the “Estado Novo”.

In order to understand the architectural production in the African territories, it is also important to underline the significance of the training supplement “away from home”, particularly in the case of the experience acquired as trainee in Le Corbusier’s ateliers by, for instance, Vasco Vieira da Costa (1911-1982) or Fernão Simões de Carvalho (1929-), who simultaneously studied urban planning in Paris, or else Paulo Melo Sampaio (1926-1968), who studied urban planning in Milan. In this internationalisation context, an architect stands out: Pancho Miranda Guedes (1925-2015), an exceptional figure, not only due to his academic training in South Africa, which will make him establish strong ties to the Anglo-Saxon culture, but also due to his constant travels (to Europe and Mozambique’s neighbouring countries) or his significant presence on some institutional stages of international architecture since the beginning of the 60s.

But, mainly, architects were in contact with international designs and works primarily through publications or periodicals, especially the magazine *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, the

international periodical that was most read amongst Portuguese architects or the magazine *Arquitectura*, which, during its post Congress period, often published exemplary international architecture works.

Regardless of the specific circumstances of those two African territories and the individual interpretations of the authors mentioned, it is possible to observe a common denominator in the developed works and assert an identity belonging to the various genealogies of the models conveyed by the Modern Movement. Such identity is clearly shown in the adoption of a formal and spatial vocabulary composed of a combination of invariable features. For these architects the chance to build in the African territory was the ideal laboratory, not only as to the more orthodox or more hybrid interpretation of the modern vocabulary, but also as to the construction techniques and adaptation to geography and climate. The specific nature of this architectural production was possible due to a strong mastering of the technical and structural capabilities of reinforced concrete as a standard, industrial production constituent, as well as due to its expressive qualities as regards plasticity or texture. As a good example of this we might mention the *brise-soleil* or the multi-drawing grids, which favour not only the shading but also the natural ventilation of the buildings in tropical climates.

### 3. Single family houses as modern lab in colonial Angola and Mozambique

In the context of the colonial society, two models of adopting architectural languages co-exist: one model of a more historical or monumental nature, which was present, in particular, in public works produced in Portugal for its overseas territories, and the predominance of a formal modern vocabulary, of an international nature, mainly associated with private initiative. The role of private initiative orders in fostering freedom and as a catalyst for the modern project was of the essence. In the case of single houses, for instance, this allowed for testing multiple expressions of the modern vocabulary.

On the other hand, one must consider that the urban design currently still predominating in the most important African cities of the Portuguese colonisation is the model established by the GUC<sup>6</sup>, which, on the basis of the Garden-City model, favoured a city divided into sectors, in a radial and axial composition, with ample avenues and extensive single-house areas. Here and there, particularly in Luanda and Maputo, one can see a few detail plans that fall within the conceptual or formal framework of some models issued from the *Charte d'Athènes*.

Residential areas were parcelled out into plots of land in various sizes that were apt for building single houses and intentionally establishing a town-country continuum. In Luanda or Maputo, both largest size capitals, this model is concentrated in specific residential areas. In Mozambique, the city of Beira is, perhaps, where one can best identify an overall design applying the Garden-City model and a predominance of extensive areas composed by plots of land intended for single housing. Beira's Urban Plan proposed a clear zoning, not only distinguishing residential and shopping, administrative and industrial areas, but also «segregating its dwellers according to their habits».<sup>7</sup> Such plan clarifies the way the «different

<sup>6</sup> Gabinete de Urbanização do Ultramar – Overseas Urban Office.

<sup>7</sup> Residential areas are divided according to the following criterion: a neighbourhood for the population having European customs, a neighbourhood for the population having Asian customs and an indigenous neighbourhood (the latter being the last in the zoning hierarchy). Câmara Municipal da Beira, *Cidade da Beira – projecto de Urbanização – memória justificativa* (Beira: Empresa Moderna, 1951), 95.

kinds of dwellers» should be distributed and specifies the location of areas intended for the “European customs population”.

In this way, colonial urban planning is the context within which different single-house projects will emerge. An idea of “Portuguese house”, more traditional and historicist, is the most common architectural expression in bourgeois, private order single houses. But, all along the 50s and 60s, the dwelling neighbourhoods in Angolan and Mozambican cities become, gradually and growingly, dotted with single houses based on a modern expression model in an international meaning. Regardless of its architectural expression and language, the programme and organisation of the house adapts to the colonial contingencies.

Within the framework of a society becoming more modern, and in the context of the private order single house a few more interesting projects emerge, because, although their design is assuredly modern, in the international meaning, such houses are inevitably and paradoxically built up in the context of the colonial paradigm.



Figure 1: English House (1965), Luanda; V.Vieira da Costa  
Source: A. Magalhães (2011)

We would like to highlight, in Luanda, Vasco Vieira da Costa and Fernão Simões de Carvalho, both Le Corbusier’s disciples, whose works reflect the languages of the master. Vieira da Costa designs, in 1965, the *English House*, located in Luanda, at the top of a hill and enjoying a panoramic view of the Atlantic Ocean. The house, oriented towards the dominant winds, is composed of two volumes: a large foothold grabbing the hill and solving the topography, and another one above the ground by means of *pilotis*. At ground level, a large platform is formed leaning over the hill. In the upper suspended body, the house main spaces are organised: a private bedroom area facing West, and two large living rooms extended to the outdoors by two suspended terraces. One should highlight the ingenious shading solution of the West façade, «which consists in a series of wooden mobile blinds hanging down from the roof slab that swings over the façade plane».<sup>8</sup> In addition to a constant reference to Le Corbusier, notably his “Five points” and an allusion to Villa Savoye, in Vieira da Costa’s work, it is important to stress here the relationship between his work and the site, as well as to establish a possible relationship with Richard Neutra’s work; particularly the Lovell house (1927-1929). Similarly to the Neutra project, in the English House, the relationship with nature is the grounds for the conception of the work, either in the topography reading or in the contemplation of the

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<sup>8</sup> Maria Margarida Gonçalves Quinta, “Arquitetura e Clima, Geografia de um Lugar: Luanda e a obra de Vasco Vieira da Costa” (prova de licenciatura, Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto, 2007), 94.

landscape or else in the response to the climate. However, it is in the volume design itself, in the composition of the façades, in the relationship between internal and external space that one may find greater similarities with Neutra's work.



Figure 2: 4 Terraces Houses in Prenda (1966-71), Luanda; F. Simões de Carvalho  
Source: Simões de Carvalho Collection

Fernão Simões de Carvalho designed a group of 4 terrace houses (1966-1971), incorporated in his Prenda Neighbourhood Unit in Luanda, one of which for his own family. This is a building of a compact nature, in which the protruding “box” grids protecting the bedroom area stand out, further stressed by the expression of the concrete [betão aparente]. In these terrace houses in the Prenda Neighbourhood, the most obvious architectural reference is undoubtedly a house by André Wogenscky, a Le Corbusier co-worker with whom Simões de Carvalho worked. This atelier house in Saint Rémy-Lès-Chevreuse (1952) is, just like Simões de Carvalho's, characterised by a monolithic compact volume, where a protruding “box” veranda stands out.

In spite of the feeling of wholeness of the ensemble, the northernmost house, the architect's home, is the exception model, with a different treatment marking out the street corner. The organisation of the domestic space is structured in three levels, distinguishing the living, private and service areas and ensuring, at the same time, a few space continuum elements, such as a double height hall interconnecting public and private areas, or the open kitchen over the dining room, all spaces that refer to the space design of Wogenscky's house as well.

The cases of José Pinto da Cunha (1921-2006), in Luanda, or Paulo Melo Sampaio and João Garizo do Carmo (1917-1974), in the city of Beira, should be stressed. In this set of works, tests are common, both in the space structures of the housing typology and in the formal nature, as well as in the way of effectively responding to climate conditions. Having as their common basis the Corbusian proposition of the “Five Points”,<sup>9</sup> those architects sought other references, such as the plasticity of the Brazilian modern architecture, in the case of Beira's architects, or the imagery of “Californian” houses, such as those proposed by the “Case Study House Program”,<sup>10</sup> in the case of Pinto da Cunha.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Roth (ed.), *Zwei Wohnhäuser von Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: Fünf Punkte zu einer neuen Architektur* (Stuttgart: Akadem Verlag Dr. Fr. Wedekind and Co., 1927) and *L'Architecture Vivante* 17 (1927).

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth A.T. Smith, *Case Study Houses – The Complete CSH Program, 1945-1966*, (Colonia: Taschen, 2009).



Figure 3: Pinto da Cunha House (1965), Luanda; J. Pinto da Cunha  
Source: Private Colection



Figure 4: Pinto da Cunha House (1965), Luanda; J. Pinto da Cunha  
Source: Private Colection

The house that the architect Pinto da Cunha designed for his family in 1965 is a large parallelepiped volume partially elevated on *pilotis*. The volumetric clarity of the suspended parallelepiped, the strong interrelationship between interior and exterior, emphasized in the transition spaces that can be seen in the internal courtyard and the balcony that extends the living room or in the space continuity ensured by the transparency obtained from extensive glass panes, the construction details in the drawing of the staircase, furniture or water mirror, all these are a combination of constituents occurring frequently on the designs of Californian houses.

João Garizo do Carmo also designed for himself, in 1958, two twin houses in Beira, Mozambique. These houses form a two-floor building, composed of four modules that organize the inside of both homes (one of which incorporates his atelier). The roof is composed of four vaults, each corresponding to one of the modules, and a longitudinal vault, transversal to the other ones, closing the back of the building. The front four-vault ensemble forms a double roof that is unstuck from the slab in order to achieve a proper ventilation of the volume, and slightly sloped backwards for rainwater draining. Both houses are organised in two levels, in a modular, symmetric way. The lower level is drawn back as compared to the upper level, in this way

stressing a protected, shaded entrance area. This project consolidates the special vocabulary of its author, which is based on a formal prescription that takes heed of the Brazilian modern architecture productions. By watching the transversal section or the side face of the work, for instance, one might see a correspondence with the synthetic design of the Oswald de Andrade house (1938) by Oscar Niemeyer. Garizo do Carmo's lexicon stands between the aesthetic choice as it resorts to the Brazilian architecture grammar and the effective response of the building to climate characteristics. In this project, for instance, the façades are drawn back and reinforced by protruding frames (combining the plastic effect with shading function) or by vertical *brise-soleil*.



Figure 5: Garizo do Carmo House (1958), Beira; J. Garizo do Carmo  
Source: A. Magalhães (2010)

In a more heterodox sense, Pancho Guedes' extensive work in single-family houses in Maputo reveals a reinterpretation of the Corbusian thinking and work, but in this case with irony and eclecticism. This is the case, for instance, of the Matos Ribeiro Twin Houses (1952), where a rationalized space organization contrasts with the insertion of a combination of figurative elements that point to Art Nouveau language or Gaudi's work. Although the articulation of the different floors in the house is made by staircases and ramps reminding Le Corbusier's "promenade architecturale", the important point to be stressed is the multiple conjunction of models in the same project, between the functional simplicity that shows that the lessons of the Modern Movement were learnt and the complexity generated by the overlapping (or *collage*) of more subjective, personal images from multiple origins and times.



Figure 6: Matos Ribeiro House (1952), Maputo; Pancho Miranda Guedes  
Source: A. Magalhães (2008)

#### 4. Modern houses – memory, identity and future

Today, the group of houses studied in this paper maintains the same function – housing. A few are in decay or were deeply changed, as in the case of the Pinto da Cunha House in Luanda, where the Palestinian Embassy is currently located.

The study of these single-family houses in Angola and Mozambique in this specific colonial period raises relevant issues, in a post-colonial context. In addition to the survey and review of the works and their authors, it is essential to consider the value and place of this legacy in the architecture of the XX century. If, on the one hand, it is possible to establish a clear relationship between these projects and the Modern Movement of the second post-war, it should be noted as well that their housing programme is the answer to a colonial society. Not only were those houses located in neighbourhoods exclusively intended for an European population, but the way in which the house was organised or inserted on the urban plot states the separation of colonizers and servants.

In spite of the ideological contradictions between the assumptions of democracy and the colonial condition, the identity assertion of these works with the aesthetic and construction values of the Modern Movement architecture is undeniable.

More than forty years after the independences of Angola and Mozambique, identity and heritage issues are still a sensible topic. Only an in-depth knowledge of the cultural and scientific value of this heritage may overcome other priorities, whether of a political or a social or an economic nature.

#### 5. Acknowledgments

This work is financed by national funds by FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology under the Project UID /AUR/4026/2013 and also by CITAD - Research Centre for Territory, Architecture and Design.

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