



# LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS  
MODOS DE HABITAR

**ABADA EDITORES**

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## ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD  
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**La “casa medieval” de Coimbra:  
arqueología de la arquitectura en la  
desmitificación de arquetipos**  
*The “Medieval House” of Coimbra:  
Archeology of Architecture in the  
Demystification of Archetypes*

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**Resumen**

En el antiguo arrabal medieval de Coimbra, un edificio residencial ha asumido tradicionalmente la denominación de "casa medieval". A este calificativo contribuye su arquitectura, consistente con lo que estaba en boga en las ciudades portuguesas del período medieval tardío. No obstante, la apertura de sondeos arqueológicos parietales puso al descubierto técnicas, materiales y sistemas constructivos cuya utilización se prolonga hasta el siglo XVIII. La interpretación arqueológica y el análisis histórico-artístico de la arquitectura de la "casa medieval" de Coimbra ofrecen una singular oportunidad para reflexionar sobre algunos paradigmas arquitectónicos. Comparándola con otros edificios y con fuentes iconográficas, se analiza su cronotipología y se demuestra la diacronía de los modelos constructivos adoptados en esta casa. Discutiendo su epíteto cronológico, se reflexiona sobre la persistencia temporal de arquetipos constructivos y sobre la tensión entre espacios privados y públicos, potenciada por la complementariedad entre habitar y trabajar en el mismo espacio.

**Palabras clave:** Coimbra, casa medieval, vivencias, arquetipos, diacronías

**Bloque temático:** La casa: mitos, arquetipos, modos de habitar

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**Abstract**

*Located in the old medieval outskirts of Coimbra, a residential building has traditionally been named "medieval house", due to its architecture, consistent with what was in vogue in Portuguese cities of the late medieval period. However, the opening of parietal archaeological surveys in the building revealed techniques, materials and construction systems which were used right until the eighteenth century. The archaeological interpretation and the art-historical analysis of the architecture of the "medieval house" of Coimbra offer a unique opportunity to reflect on some architectural paradigms. Comparing it with other buildings and with iconographic sources, its chronotypology will be analyzed and the diachrony of the constructive models adopted in this house will be demonstrated. Questioning its chronological epithet, the persistence of certain habits and constructive archetypes will be explored, as well as the tension between private and public spaces, deepened by living and working in the same place.*

**Keywords:** Coimbra, medieval house, inhabiting ways, archetypes, diachronys

**Topic:** The house: myths, archetypes, forms of inhabitation

## Introduction

In downtown Coimbra, the city's old medieval quarter, is the charismatic building of number 4-6, Rua Sargento-Mor. With its singular architecture and unusual floor plan, it holds a cherished place in local cultural imagery. It is known as one of the oldest vernacular houses in the city and is frequently given the epithet of the "medieval house", as, indeed, it is designated in the Portuguese Government database of heritage, SIPA.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, to date, no study has truly addressed the chronology of its construction nor has any been able to construct an argument to prove that it is indeed medieval.

In August 2017, archaeological surveys were made by removing the outer layers of mortar of the walls of the building,<sup>2</sup> which enabled an unprecedented reading of its sequence of construction. The construction techniques and the materials used in the "medieval house" finally came to light. But the data collected showed a wider timeframe higher than had initially been assumed, and new challenges in how to interpret it were laid down.

### 1. Coimbra's "medieval house"

Although documented since 1613, information about the street of Rua Sargento-Mor, the home of Coimbra's so-called "medieval house", is scarce. In 1778, it was stated that the street stretched «from the quay to [the church of] São Bartolomeu»,<sup>3</sup> and the building is still in close proximity to this monument. In the year 957, a letter of donation mentioned «houses with vegetable gardens» next to this medieval Christian temple,<sup>4</sup> suggesting that there was already a nucleus of housing in this area in the 10th century.

Despite the proven antiquity of this area of Coimbra, there is no documentary data that can tell us the origin of the "medieval house". The building is its own true archaeological document, and contains the only features which are available to help discern the chronology and nature of its construction. Built with a rather intricate system of construction, the house occupied a corner plot and was erected on a triangular area. This arrangement, unusual but not unheard of, resulted, together with a later building, in a wedge-shaped urban space. The singular means by which this plot is occupied lends precious help in dating the building, as it is clearly visible in the early cartography of Coimbra, as in the *Mappa Topografico* from 1772.<sup>5</sup> Going back to the period before the third quarter of the 18th century, therefore, it seems that as such there is no reason not to be consigned, on first analysis, to the medieval or late medieval period. Hampered by the scarcity of space and the subsequent cost of land on the street, vernacular houses of late medieval Portuguese cities were constructed on narrow and elongated plots.

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<sup>1</sup> Margarida Silva, "Casa Medieval na Rua Sargento-Mor, n.º 4 a 6", *Sistema de Informação para o Património Arquitectónico (web site)*, 2005, accessed September 21st, 2018, [http://www.monumentos.gov.pt/Site/APP\\_PagesUser/SIPA.aspx?id=23038](http://www.monumentos.gov.pt/Site/APP_PagesUser/SIPA.aspx?id=23038).

<sup>2</sup> Sixteen archaeological surveys were made in the walls, under the scope of the author's ongoing doctoral project, *Para uma Arqueologia crítica da Arquitetura* (Towards a Critical Archaeology of Architecture). The work, with the collaboration of members of the collective Há Baixa, were carried out with the author's directions.

<sup>3</sup> José Loureiro, *Toponímia de Coimbra* (Coimbra: Câmara Municipal de Coimbra, 1964), 270-77.

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Alarcão, *Coimbra: a Montagem do Cenário Urbano* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2008), 271-72.

<sup>5</sup> There are also panoramic views of Coimbra, such as that by Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg, circa 1598, Lorenzo Magalotti, 1668-69, or James Murphy, 1798. None, however, clearly represents the area where the "medieval house" is placed, and as such they are of little use to this study.

They consisted of one or more floors – ground floor and storeys – and relied mostly on local materials such as stone, wood, clay and straw. Windows and doors were reduced to the bare minimum, and stairways, usually made of wood, could be moveable or fixed.<sup>6</sup> In addition to being a dwelling, the house was often also allocated for work and commercial activity. Small family businesses, mostly in the ground floors, spilled onto the street, selling from stalls. The storeys were often extended with a balcony – *jetty* – which in the middle of the 15th century could occupy as much as a third of the width of the street. Expanding on the area of the plot, staircases, stalls and jetties extended onto and over the street, restricting public space and causing constant tension between individuals and public authorities.<sup>7</sup>

Late medieval Portuguese cities were deeply ruralised and accommodated for the demographic growth of the 12th and 13th centuries. They were not infrequently limited by walled ramparts and their growth was compressed and essentially outdoor.<sup>8</sup> The street was a natural extension of life and trade, and was both the antechamber of the house and the extension of work.



Figure 1: Coimbra’s “medieval house”  
Source: A. Ginja (2017)

<sup>6</sup> On vernacular late medieval houses, see, for example, Manuel Conde, *Construir, Habitar: A Casa Medieval* (Braga: CITCEM, 2011); Luísa Trindade, *A Casa Corrente em Coimbra, dos Finais da Idade Média aos Inícios da Época Modern* (Coimbra: Câmara Municipal de Coimbra, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> On the regulations on the occupancy of public space in medieval Portuguese cities, see Luísa Trindade, *Urbanismo na Composição de Portugal* (Coimbra: Universidade de Coimbra, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> On life in late medieval cities in Europe and Portugal, see, for example, José Mattoso: *História da Vida Privada em Portugal, A Idade Média* (Lisbon: Temas e Debates, 2016); Nelson Mota, *A Arquitectura do Quotidiano* (Coimbra: DAFCT, 2010); Jacques le Goff, *Por Amor das Cidades: Conversas com Jean Lebrun*, trans. Reginaldo Moraes (São Paulo: UNESP, 1998). On demography during the Middle Age, see Simone Roux, *Le Monde des Villes au Moyen Age: XIe-XVe Siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1994).

Generally speaking, the whole of Coimbra's "medieval house" is only supported by three walls, which define the ground floor: the west wall, belonging in fact to the neighbouring building, which the façade and rear wall abut. A series of beams was applied on the façade and the rear wall in a fan shape, covering the triangular area of the ground floor. On these beams, three storeys were erected, successively jettied over the street. Protruding out from the load-bearing frontage rim joists, the beams extended over the street, increasing the area of each new storey. A new rear wall was erected and a new gable opposite the wall of the neighbouring building, in tandem with the three new floors. Neither the rear wall nor the gable were jettied, the jetties being applied exclusively to the frontages which faced the street, encroaching on public space but not on the area of the neighbouring plots.

The ground floor was built with more durable materials. Stone masonry was chosen for the façade and the rear wall, the door jambs were single stone blocks and there was a robust wooden lintel, resting on corbels. In the upper storeys, however, a lighter and more flexible arrangement was chosen for the structure of the frontages, gable and rear wall, built in wood, 'fishtail' bricks and lime mortar. Nevertheless, they were all different. The frontages were erected with props and struts, and filled out with pieces of bricks secured by braces. The rear wall was built with props into which the bricks slotted horizontally. The gable was made with props and struts, into which the bricks slotted diagonally, in a herringbone pattern.

Notwithstanding what could be seen of the building arrangements via the archaeological surveys, it was not possible to fully examine the architectural complexity of Coimbra's "medieval house". The advanced state of degradation and inaccessibility to certain areas,<sup>9</sup> in addition to the changes brought about by recent renovations, limited the potential interpretation of the archaeological data. A proper archaeological analysis was thus required for an adequate architectural assessment, encompassing the building, materials and construction systems in their appropriate historical-artistic context.



Figure 2: Coimbra's "medieval house" (survey 1)  
Source: A. Ginja (2017)

<sup>9</sup> The effects of at least one fire and years of structural erosion due to xylophagous agents were evident in the building. The ground floor and the top floor were still occupied, which also restricted the archaeological work.

## 2. Demystifying architectural archetypes

In addition to increasing the internal area by appropriating public space, the jetties also helped compensate for and prevent any bending of the beams of each new floor.<sup>10</sup> This technique can still be seen today in medieval buildings in various European historical centres, such as Lavenham in England, Tours in France or Covarrubias in Spain. In Portugal, however, this technique fell into disuse from the 16th century onwards, especially after 1502, when D. Manuel I forbade structural features from extending over the streets of Lisbon.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, by the mid-16th century, several other European and American cities, such as Madrid, Seville, Palermo, Siena, Rome and Mexico City, already had regulations for standardising their urban environments.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Coimbra's "medieval house" conforms to the parameters of late medieval construction which were common in the main cities of the southern European kingdoms until the middle of the 16th century, not only from a structural point of view but also in its urban setting.

The Great Earthquake, which took place in Portugal in 1755, put this secular form of construction to the test, especially in Lisbon, where it was particularly calamitous. Although there is no record of the types of construction that resisted the earthquake best, it is likely that wooden buildings, such as those in the square of Chafariz de Dentro,<sup>13</sup> which were lighter and more flexible, may have withstood the impact better than those that were built of stone and lime and were heavier and more rigid. The *Pombaline cage* – a sophisticated mesh of wooden props and crossbars, decreed for the reconstruction of the whole of downtown Lisbon by the Marquis of Pombal, minister of the realm –, may thus have been the result, according to Enlightenment criteria, of rationalised, systematised and industrialised appropriation of models of construction which preceded the 1755 catastrophe.<sup>14</sup>

Since the prohibition, ordained by D. Manuel I, of building projections over the street, it has tended to be the case in historiography concerned with such cases that all old buildings with jetties on the façade are consigned to the Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup> But the systematic adoption of the Pombaline cage in Lisbon buildings, documented between the second half of the 18th century and 1930,<sup>16</sup> unequivocally demonstrates that the use of wooden frontages persevered well beyond the chronological limits of the medieval. In this case, can the construction technique based on wooden frontages, with the addition of jetties over the street, have also survived beyond the medieval period?

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<sup>10</sup> Helder Carita, *Bairro Alto, Tipologias e Modos Arquitectónicos* (Lisbon: Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, 1994), 105.

<sup>11</sup> Trindade, *A casa corrente...*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Laura Fernández-González, "O Modelo Digital da Pintura Rua Nova: Recreando a Arquitetura Quinhentista de Lisboa," in *A Cidade Global: Lisboa no Renascimento*, coord. Andrea Cardoso (Lisbon: MNAA, 2017), 83.

<sup>13</sup> Carita, *Bairro Alto...*, 81.

<sup>14</sup> José França, *Lisboa Pombalina e o Iluminismo* (Lisbon: Bertrand, 1987), 178; Carita, *Bairro Alto...*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> João Fagulha, *Reabilitação e Conservação do Património Arquitectónico*, n.º 4, Cadernos Técnicos (Lisbon: OASRS, 2016), 27.

<sup>16</sup> França, *Lisboa Pombalina...*, 167.

In Porto, on the east side of Praça da Ribeira, some buildings with jettied frontages would have been built already into the 16th century.<sup>17</sup> In Lisbon, buildings of this type, still preserved in Rua dos Cegos and Rua de Benfornoso, date back to the 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>18</sup> Several of these buildings, dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, could also be seen in London until 1901, for example on Wych Street.<sup>19</sup> In Germany, the World Heritage city of Quedlinburg is home to a vast array of jettied buildings constructed between the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century.<sup>20</sup> And in Spain, the towns of La Alberca and Morragaz in the region of Salamanca also have large collections of these buildings, which as it seems were erected until the mid-19th century.<sup>21</sup>

The above-mentioned cases unequivocally show that jettied frontages over the street indeed persisted far beyond the Medieval Period, in Portugal as well as in other places. Moreover, one does not need to leave Coimbra to discover an example of a vernacular house with a wooden frontage and jetty over public space, built in the 18th century. Once part of the medieval quarter of the city, Terreiro da Erva was home to the church of Santa Justa, since disappeared. The church hosted religious services until 1708, the year it was abandoned,<sup>22</sup> and then fell into ruin, with little more than a few arches remaining today. At an unknown date, residential buildings were erected around its ruins. A house was set up on the old nave of the church with a wooden frontage and jetty, expanding the area of the dwelling into the public space north of the church. Although the exact chronology of the construction of this house is not known, it could not have been built before the church was abandoned and, thus, not before the first decade of the 18th century.

### 3. Towards a critical archaeology of Coimbra's "medieval house"

Given the wide possible timespan in which vernacular houses with wooden frontages and jetties were built, in Portugal and other European countries, doubt still remains. To which chronological period then does Coimbra's "medieval house" date from?

In architectural cases of this nature, cloaked in chronological ambiguity, any analysis that allows absolute dating is usually indispensable. Yet it is not always possible to perform laboratory tests or, given the advanced state of degradation of the structures, even to collect the necessary samples. In these circumstances, as is the case of Coimbra's "medieval house", the materials used often lead to the date of the construction in question. The archaeological surveys in the walls of the "medieval house" revealed, however, that not all materials utilized dated back to specific construction periods. Stone, lime and wood, documented over a vast chronological

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<sup>17</sup> Isabel Sereno and Paulo Dordio, "Praça da Ribeira e área envolvente", *Sistema de Informação para o Património Arquitectónico*, (sitio web), 1995, accessed October 3rd, 2018, [http://www.monumentos.gov.pt/Site/APP\\_PagesUser/SIPA.aspx?id=6145](http://www.monumentos.gov.pt/Site/APP_PagesUser/SIPA.aspx?id=6145).

<sup>18</sup> Carita, *Bairro Alto...*, 105-106.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Thornbury, "The Strand (Northern Tributaries): Clement's Inn, New Inn, Lyon's Inn etc.," in *Old and New London*, vol. 3 (London: Cassel Petter & Galpin, 1878), 32-35.

<sup>20</sup> "Collegiate Church, Castle and Old Town of Quedlinburg," *UNESCO, World Heritage List (web site)*, n.d., accessed October 4th, 2018, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/535>.

<sup>21</sup> Information gathered orally from Ayuntamiento de La Alberca, Ayuntamiento de Mogarraz and Museo de Mogarraz, 11 October 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Loureiro, *Toponímia de Coimbra*, 19.



range, are typologically difficult to date, while 'fishtail' brick, in turn, has been neglected in specialised studies.

With their extremities cut into triangles, 'fishtail' bricks make a perfect joint with wooden props, producing practical, lightweight and flexible walls. Their appearance in Portuguese construction has therefore been informally associated with the Pombaline reforms in downtown Lisbon, although in actual fact there are no studies that confirm or deny this. In Coimbra, where this material frequently appears in demolitions for urban restoration, few attempts have been made to attribute a chronology to it. Nonetheless, during the restoration of the Colégio da Santíssima Trindade, in the upper part of the city, a structure with this type of brick was discovered which was dated between the end of the 16th century and the middle of the 18th century.<sup>23</sup> In building work on Rua Fernandes Tomás, partitions with 'fishtail' bricks were found, built between the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>24</sup> While downtown, in Rua Direita, the gable of a demolished building, probably dated to between the 18th and 19th centuries, was built entirely with these bricks.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 3: Coimbra's "medieval house" (survey 12)  
Source: A. Ginja (2017)

Although data from new archaeological interventions may possibly contribute to a better chronological demarcation of 'fishtail' bricks, it can be inferred from the examples given that they were used over a fairly extensive period of time. Used in Coimbra since at least the middle of the 18th century to the 19th century, buildings with these bricks cannot, in view of the currently known data, date back to beyond the early modern period. Since 'fishtail' bricks constitute the predominant material in the storeys of the "medieval house", evidence of their use in a pre-modern period must be awaited in order for this building to be unequivocally consigned to the Medieval Period.

The system and the materials used in the construction of Coimbra's "medieval house" are chronologically ambiguous and neither in isolation can make a claim to date it beyond any

<sup>23</sup> António Ginja and Sónia Filipe, "Intervenção Arqueológica no Âmbito das Obras de Requalificação do Colégio da Trindade," Report for DGPC (Portugal), Reference: 2002/1 (280), 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Preliminary results. Ongoing intervention by Coimbra City Council under the direction of Raquel Santos, who kindly granted this information.

<sup>25</sup> Mónica Ginja, "Levantamento Fotográfico das Parcelas da Segunda Fase dos Trabalhos no Âmbito do Projecto de Inserção do MLM," Report for IPPAR (Portugal), Reference: c.s: 321921, July 15, 2005.

doubt. But archaeological analysis does not come to a close in the chrono-typological interpretation of built structures. Relative chronologies deriving from the relationships established between different structures that make up a building can reveal data as essential as the sequence of construction that produced it.<sup>26</sup> It was obvious, for example, how the rear wall, the gable and the frontages were each the result of a single stage of construction.<sup>27</sup> On the third storey, the frontage and gable were braced together by short pieces of wood – *collar beams* – that suggested, albeit feebly, coevality of construction. In all other respects, however, any perception of the relationship previously established between structures was impossible due to the advanced state of degradation of the building.<sup>28</sup> When construction methods and materials prove inconclusive, documentation is non-existent, absolute dating is impracticable and any archaeological reading is hindered, the chronological definition of a building may never be fully brought to light. But the prevalence of construction systems and materials, to which the "medieval house" does in fact bear witness, reflects cultural inclinations that persist and endure across time. The heritage value of this building, therefore, does not depend only on its antiquity but rather on the testimony of cultural continuity that it conveys.

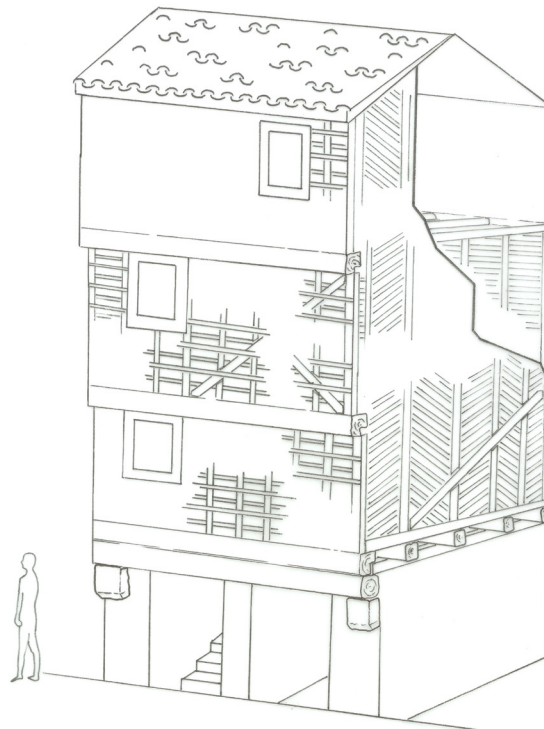


Figure 4: Structural model of Coimbra's "medieval house" (as revealed by surveys)  
Source: A. Ginja (2018)

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<sup>26</sup> The relative chronologies of posteriority, coevality or anteriority can be deduced by the way the structures are built against, hold up, or abut other adjacent structures.

<sup>27</sup> Some of the props used in the rear wall and the gable extended through all three storeys. It is also suggested that the frontages of the three storeys were constructed at the same time, due to the similarity of technique and the materials used.

<sup>28</sup> Several points of contact between structures, formerly in wood, had disappeared or been replaced by cement.

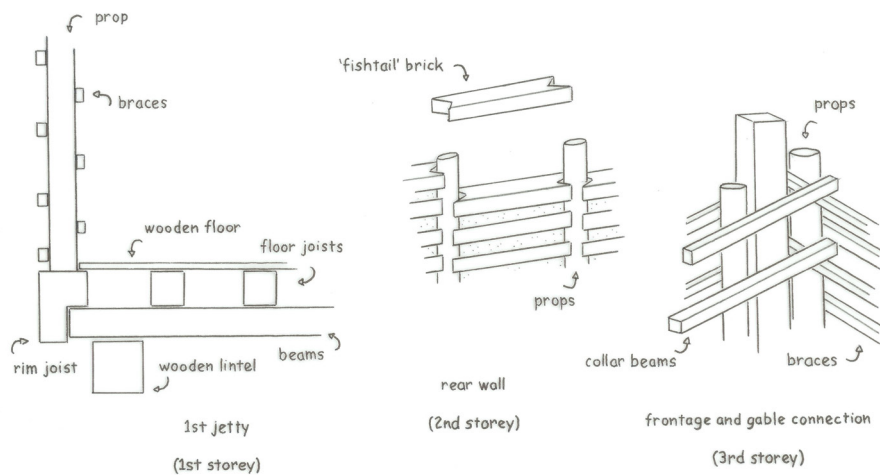


Figure 5: Constructive systems adopted in Coimbra's "medieval house"

Source: A. Ginja (2018)

#### 4. Final appraisal

At the time of discussion about the future that will befall Coimbra's "medieval house", an architectural interpretation of its cultural testimony must be fully understood. If it is to house an interpretive centre on vernacular architecture in Portuguese cities, knowledge of the construction techniques, systems and materials with which it was built is indispensable. In this sense, archaeology of architecture plays a role that goes beyond the mere chrono-typological definition of the building. When faced with long-vanished techniques of which there is no living memory, knowledge can only be revealed by archaeological analysis, not only of the time in which they arose or of how they relate to adjacent structures, but of the way in which this very building was erected. The structure of the props, struts, braces and filling, for example, results in a wall that would be completely different if the order of application of any one of these variables was changed. Many years later, the complexity of construction of such structure can only be understood or replicated if therefore it is itself considered as a result of a specific sequence of several stages of construction.

Paradoxically, this architectural specificity seems to contradict the diachronic range during which the detectable structures were adopted in Coimbra's "medieval house". From the wooden jettied frontage to the 'fishtail' brick, there are various signs of the persistence over time of the types of techniques used in this house, far beyond the periods which we generally associate with their archetypical construction. It is thus time to question the paradigm of the unique place in time of certain architectural features.

As a mirror or reflection of ways of inhabiting and experiencing the urban space in which it is inserted, the diachrony of the architectural model of the "medieval house" can best be understood in light of social behaviours that also persist. In point of fact, and despite the structural frailty of the building, the top floor is still inhabited and until recently there was a commercial establishment on the ground floor with a small showcase stall in the street. This close relationship between dwelling, work and public space, far from being exclusively medieval, continues to multiply today in the most varied urban spaces, wherever houses, shops

and businesses invade the streets with racks, stalls, posters or outdoor tables, for example. In Coimbra's "medieval house", therefore, today as in times past, construction, life and work persist, reinvent themselves, survive and demand to be conveyed by all those who built it and who have made it both home and place of trade.

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