

# Dead Palms

Ursa

## PRIMARY ELEMENTS AND THE CONCEPT OF AREA Processes of Transformation



*“A distinctive characteristic of all cities, and thus also of the urban aesthetic, is the tension that has been, and still is, created between areas and primary elements and between one sector of the city and another. This tension arises from the differences between urban artifacts existing in the same place and must be measured not only in terms of space but also of time.”*

Aldo Rossi. *Processes of Transformation in The Architecture of the City* (1966)

If it is true that the palm trees of Porto constitute a distinctive characteristic of the city, and therefore of its urban aesthetic, then, following Rossi's hypothesis, one is in a good position to look into the history of tensions and processes of transformation that they convey.

The relation between palm trees and Portuguese culture can be traced as far back as 1808, when John VI, then Prince of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves, relocated the court to Brazil fleeing from Napoleonic wars. That same year John VI established the “Royal Nursery” garden – later to become the Botanic Garden of Rio de Janeiro –, where in 1809 he himself planted the first seeds of imperial palm in Brazilian soil, smuggled from Mauritius by Portuguese merchant Luís Vieira e Silva when in transit from the

Portuguese State of India, at that point part of the Portuguese Empire.

The dissemination of the imperial palm in Brazil expressed the tensions of class structure in the then overseas colony, just as it later would upon its arrival in mainland Portugal. Own by the royal family and a symbol of Portuguese aristocracy, the first seeds of this “Palma Mater” were seldom offered to selected noblemen for their services to the crown, but mostly burnt to preserve the exclusiveness and the status symbol associated to this species.

Naturally such restriction only made the imperial palm more desirable to the eyes of the emerging Brazilian bourgeoisie, which soon gave rise to a black market of the seeds fed by the gardeners of the Royal Nursery. By the mid-nineteenth century the imperial palm was not any longer an exclusive symbol of the aristocracy, but also a symbol of economic power, like a trademark for the coffee barons properties of the Paraíba Valley. Portuguese cities and, quite notably, Porto, were impacted by the strong wave of Brazilian immigration following the return of John VI and its court to Portugal in 1821 and the subsequent independence process of Brazil.

Wealthy Brazilian return migrants settled in the oriental part of the city, away from the center, and undertook the urban expansion towards the east. Their



unusually large mansions broke with the standard metric of the Porto plot and defined a new standard of luxury and status in the city.

The imperial palms were one of the recognizable symbols of these properties, and just like decades before in Brazil they expressed a new urban and social tension – one related to the upsurge of a new bourgeoisie with a craving for visibility, which would reconfigure urban form and local class structure. Of course that in time, as palm trees spread across the urban territory and social structure of Porto, the original tension that they carried gave place to that of a collective symbol.

Palm trees in Porto traveled across monarchic, republican, autocratic and democratic times. They spread into public space and institutional grounds, were objects of propaganda in the First Colonial Exhibition, and as they were liberalized they were to be found in households of every socioeconomic class, in every neighborhood of the city. Pervasive as they became, standing out and above the cityscape, exotic among the local temperate flora, Porto palm trees shaped the collective memory of the city in the past two hundred years, and in so doing they have acquired historical importance and the unofficial status of monuments.

The arrival of the red palm weevil in Porto circa 2010 has marked the beginning of a notorious process of urban transformation. The pest has attacked a great number of the city palms, and with it disfigured a distinctive attribute of the urban landscape. But as the corruption of these symbols anticipates its disappearance, the very process of putrefaction itself is elevating the monumental character of these elements.

The lifeless bodies of dried fibers stand out in their spatial settings like they never did in their lush past, producing a powerful tension of decay that is breaking down the physical evidence of a culture and thus questioning the identity of the city.

Ursa is an art and architecture studio that creates buildings, objects, images, films and texts. Based in Porto, Portugal, ursa was founded in 2011 out of the shared interests of Alexandre Delmar and Luís Ribeiro da Silva, and is currently led together with Margarida Quintã.

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