



Cassiano Branco, building in the São Mamede Street, Lisbon, Portugal, 1937. © Arquivo Nacional de Fotografia

## Cassiano Branco. Modern Visions of an “Inconvenient” Architect

BY PAULO TORMENTA PINTO

Cassiano Branco (1897-1970) belonged to the pioneer generation of modern Portuguese architects, who worked during the years of the dictatorship. During the 1930s, Cassiano produced an anti-conservative and eloquent architecture, contrasting with the guidelines of the regime. The discomfort about his personality came also from his ideological opposition to the government. Among his peers he has been considered “an exception to the rule”, working, mainly for private investors, on programs for rental housing, movie theaters and tourism facilities, which were built along the boulevards of Lisbon or in the natural and intact regional areas of Portugal.

### Introduction

On 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974 there was the revolution that deposed the *Estado Novo* dictatorship regime in Portugal<sup>1</sup>. Following this political and social event, the magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* published in 1976 a thematic issue, dedicated almost completely to the country, whose heading was “Portugal an II”<sup>2</sup>. That issue was the opportunity to present a prominent group of architects in an international context that included Siza Vieira (b. 1932), Teotónio Pereira (1922-2016) and Gonçalo Byrne (b.1941), among others, who were mainly involved in social-housing programs.

The historian José-Augusto França (b. 1922) opened the issue of the French magazine with a text about the “pure and inflexible” period of the “fascist regime”. França identified a new generation of architects who emerged together with the regime on the 1930s. Cristino da Silva (1896-1976), Pardal Monteiro (1897-1957), Cottinelli Telmo (1897-1948) and Cassiano Branco (1897-1970), were some of the pioneers of a modernity that replaced the “neo romantic” revival style of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the conceptual ambiguity between modernity and tradition debated in the sphere of the regime (mainly from the early 1940s), those protagonists launched the basis for a new language of architecture, which was assumed later in the 1<sup>st</sup> Congress of Portuguese Architects' Association, held in Lisbon in 1948.

From those protagonists mentioned above, Cassiano Branco received special attention in the following article written by Fernando Gomes da Silva, who qualified him as an “exception to the rule”. The text, fully documented with pictures provided by the architect's family archive, was placed in the magazine as a mediation point between the traumatic period decrypted by França, and the presentation of the new generation of architects committed to the challenges set by the revolution. Cassiano had died 6 years before this publication, at the age of 72, being introduced as an “inconvenient” (*gênant*) architect, not only because of

his political position against the regime<sup>3</sup>, but also because of his anti-conservative architecture.

Namely in the 1930s, Cassiano Branco's architecture explored shapes and situations extracted from the artistic avant-garde universe. Cubic volumes, circular balconies and bow windows are the composition fundamentals of several buildings designed by Cassiano especially for private investors coming from the new *bourgeoisie* created by the *Estado Novo*. Those fundamentals were used to develop programs for rental housing, movie theatres and hotels, which were built along the *boulevards* of Lisbon in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Cassiano Branco integrated ideas and novelties in his projects drawn from artistic fields, following the principals of a shared education between artists and architects in the Fine Arts School of Lisbon. The avant-garde debate was intensified particularly during the WWI, when Portugal lived an effervescent cultural moment. It was relevant in that period the presence of artists, such as the Delaunay couple, who found at the western limit of Europe, a possibility for their research about *simultanéité*. Cassiano Branco would explore some of these concepts manipulating his architecture as a tool to explore these modern aesthetics namely in building elements, and in the sinuous surfaces of his façades.

Cassiano Branco and the architects of his generation were exposed to new materials and technologies, particularly concrete and its derivatives, as well as the components produced by the strong Portuguese ceramics industry<sup>4</sup>, which had a huge impact, changing building methods and demanding a new attitude from architects<sup>5</sup>.

Cassiano Branco's architecture reflected all those changes and ambiguities brought by the *Estado Novo* regime.

### **Liberdade Avenue as the main stage for Cassiano's modernity**

Cassiano Viriato Branco was born in 1897 in Lisbon, in a house close to *Liberdade Avenue*<sup>6</sup>. This axis was the most



important *boulevard* opened 15 years before his birth in accordance to Ressano Garcia's (1847–1911) plan. Cassiano could observe and feel all the implementation process of this positivist desire, which would later become the main stage for expressing his own visions of modernity.

A photo by Domingos Alvão (1872–1946), taken in 1937, from the balcony of the famous Victoria Hotel, designed by Cassiano Branco, depicted this overlapping. Alvão presented the long *boulevard* almost intact, with its palm trees, flowerbeds and ornamented sidewalks, while the round balcony of the hotel intersected the left side of the composition, framing the image. This balcony coated in rosy marble and bright stainless steel elements, was proposed by Domingos Alvão as a tribune from which to observe the city and its changes.

Victoria Hotel was projected between 1934 and 1935. The building, featured as an asymmetric composition with horizontal cantilevers finished at the extremes by round balconies, such as the one in the photo taken by Alvão. Those circular shapes embodied the spirit of Delaunay's *simultanéité*, reacting to the intensity of sunlight as a cadence of orphic circles.

The first project designed by Cassiano Branco on *Liberdade* Avenue dated from 1928, two years after finishing his degree in architecture. At that time Cassiano developed a 2-floor concrete building garage program (now demolished) to store and sell automobiles. Two striated pilasters emerged in its façade extremes evoking flaming torches, while above the entrance door; a glass composition filtered the light, creating an Art Deco atmosphere in the interior. The *Paris International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts*, which Cassiano Branco visited in 1925, was a fundamental reference followed by him mainly in the 1930s.

The same materials and architectonic vocabulary were used in the terrace kiosk of the Palladio Coffee (also demolished), built in 1933. A centralized concrete structure, based on one main column, supported an intermediated floor over the bar, and from that point was possible to have a reserved and panoramic view of *Liberdade* Avenue. On the top, a modern neon sign advertised the drink brand “Martini Vermouth”, under a comic image of a pig.

The atmosphere produced by urban lights and advertisements was a novelty at that time. Theatres and cinemas contributed to this new environment with their announcements and crowds, since *Liberdade* Avenue was the most important spot in the capital. Cassiano Branco had the opportunity to work on those new urban programs, being involved since 1930 in the renovation of the eclectic Eden Theatre. Cassiano Branco's challenge was increasing the audience capacity, transforming the former hall into a movie-theatre with the capacity for showing the new movies with sound. The last proposal made by Cassiano for the Eden Theatre consisted of 5 vertical bow windows on the façade above the ground floor, while at the top 2 steel framed boxes of light, similar to lanterns, were deployed, punctuating the building height. The new hall was inaugurated in 1937, although without Cassiano Branco's responsibility, since his contract with the building owner, *Companhia União Fabril*,

had been terminated, and it was the architect Carlos Dias who finished the project.

Remaining from Cassiano Branco's design is the main architectural structure, and the entrance lobby below the projection room, where several stairs conducted people to different sectors of the cinema. This particular lobby with restricted dimensions was designed as a kind of a movie set, composed by overlapped stairs, creating a dynamic and delirious atmosphere, which worked as a preparation for the cinema experience.

### Dwelling buildings for the new bourgeoisie

The cinema apogee in Lisbon was during the 1930s, matched with an economic and political stability achieved by the regime through a tight control of public finances that allowed it to overcome the negative impact of the 1929 American depression<sup>7</sup>. For Cassiano Branco this was the opportunity to design several rental buildings for private investors, filling and consolidating available plots all over Lisbon.

Cassiano worked with common typologies, leaving his mark mainly in façades, which were designed by him as a kind of scenario to be understood in movement, just as in the cinema experience. As mentioned before, the new possibilities of concrete were determinant for his architectonic exploitation. Cassiano's façades used to be designed in a systematic game between the plan of vertical structure, tangent to the deployment perimeter of buildings, and the plan of cantilevered volumes that advanced on the first one.

The project for 3 *Almeida Brandão* Street in Lisbon, designed in 1932, corresponds to one of the first programs for multi-family buildings done by Cassiano Branco. This was a 4-storey building with 2 dwellings on each level. The internal organization followed the common typologies of that period, featuring a central axis that housed the stair, storage rooms and bedrooms for employees and kitchen; living or office rooms were related to the main façade; facing the side façade, a row of bedrooms was placed together with the bathroom. Finishing this sequence, the dining room was placed in articulation with the kitchen. The symmetry of the main façade followed the Art Deco research done by Cassiano, being the composition depicted by horizontal strips underlined by masonry string courses. At the centre of the elevation, rotated cubic volumes integrated oblique windows, while at the last level, a composition of plans is projected to the sky.

Cassiano's projects of rental housing buildings would increase in the middle of the 1930s, after the implementation of the Concrete Code (1935). This was a period of huge production with great investment in residential programs. Cassiano Branco designed several buildings over these years, some of which were certified for approval to the municipality by the civil engineers with whom he used to work. Cassiano's interventions in 46 *Álvares Cabral* Avenue and 7 *Nova de São Mamede* Street are examples of this intense activity, shared with those engineers<sup>8</sup>.

In 1937 Cassiano Branco designed his masterpiece in terms of residential buildings at 27 *Defensores de Chaves* Avenue. This building also followed the right/left symmet-

01 Cassiano Branco, *Victoria Hotel on Liberdade Avenue*, Lisbon, Portugal, 1939.  
 © Domingos Alvão, 1939, Alvão Photography Found, *Centro Português de Fotografia* DGLAB/SEC-PT/CPF/ALV/006172.

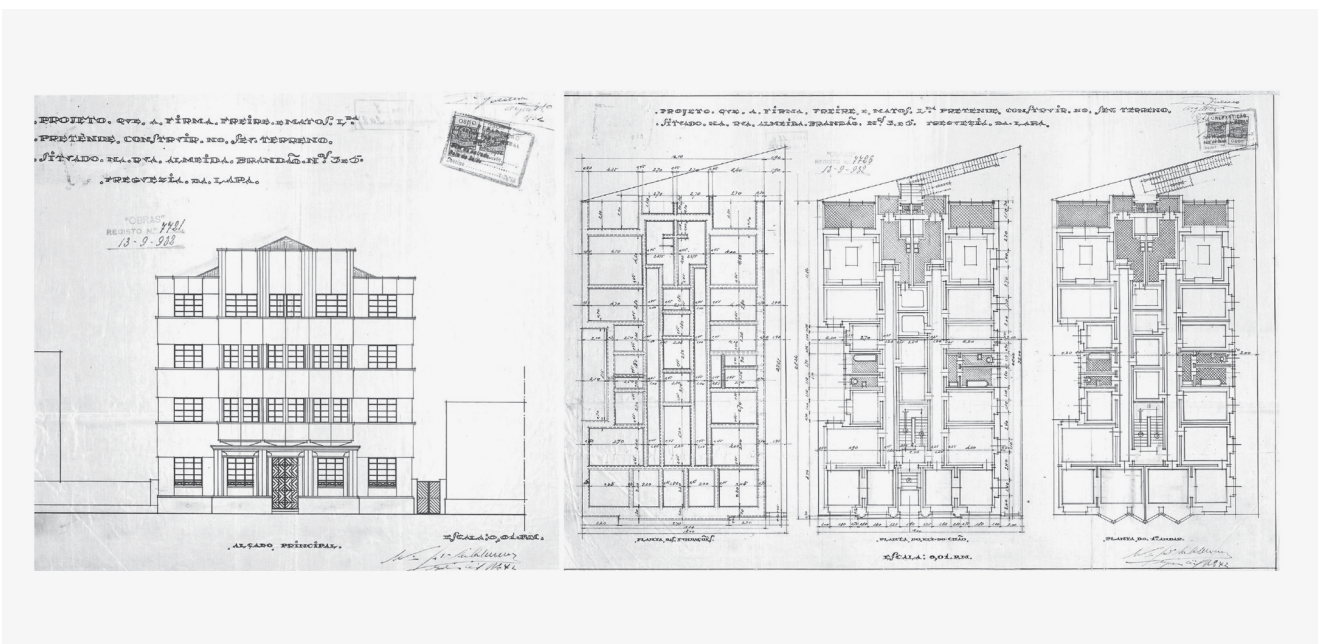


02 Cassiano Branco, *Victoria Hotel on Liberdade Avenue*, Lisbon, Portugal, 1939.  
 © Domingos Alvão, 1939, Alvão Photography Found, *Centro Português de Fotografia* DGLAB/SEC-PT/CPF/ALV/005064.



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Essays



03 Cassiano Branco, building on *Almeida Brandão Street*, Lisbon, Portugal, 1932, elevation and plans. © AML/Building 978/Proc.2087/DAG/PG/1932.





ric typology and was a synthesis of his projects done in the 1930s displaying an undulating Art Déco façade. The composition's symmetry was reinforced by a striated plan, which intersected the sequence of organic cantilevered volumes that featured on the elevation.

Cassiano's dwelling buildings were addressed to a new urban society that was, at the time, concentrated in Lisbon. The dimension of the dwellings and their facilities, such as bathroom, kitchen and ventilation, contrasted with the general living conditions of ordinary people. Cassiano Branco acting at the beginning of the period understood the demands of this new social milieu that had emerged during the *Estado Novo* regime.

### Tourism and the conciliation challenge between tradition and modernity

A healthy conscience of urbanism allied with policies providing the natural marvels and the epic history of the country, created the perfect scenario for introducing tourism as a fundamental subject in that period. A special sensibility for recreation programs was depicted at the base of Cassiano's work. The urban proposal in 1930 for *Costa da Caparica* in the south of Lisbon followed this principle, foreseeing a huge change along that stretch of Atlantic coast. New hotels, casinos, cinemas, theatres and sport facilities would be provided for the new bourgeoisie, which would use this broad city to exhibit a new way of life contrasting with the reality of that place, which at the time remained as a small village of fishermen with precarious conditions.

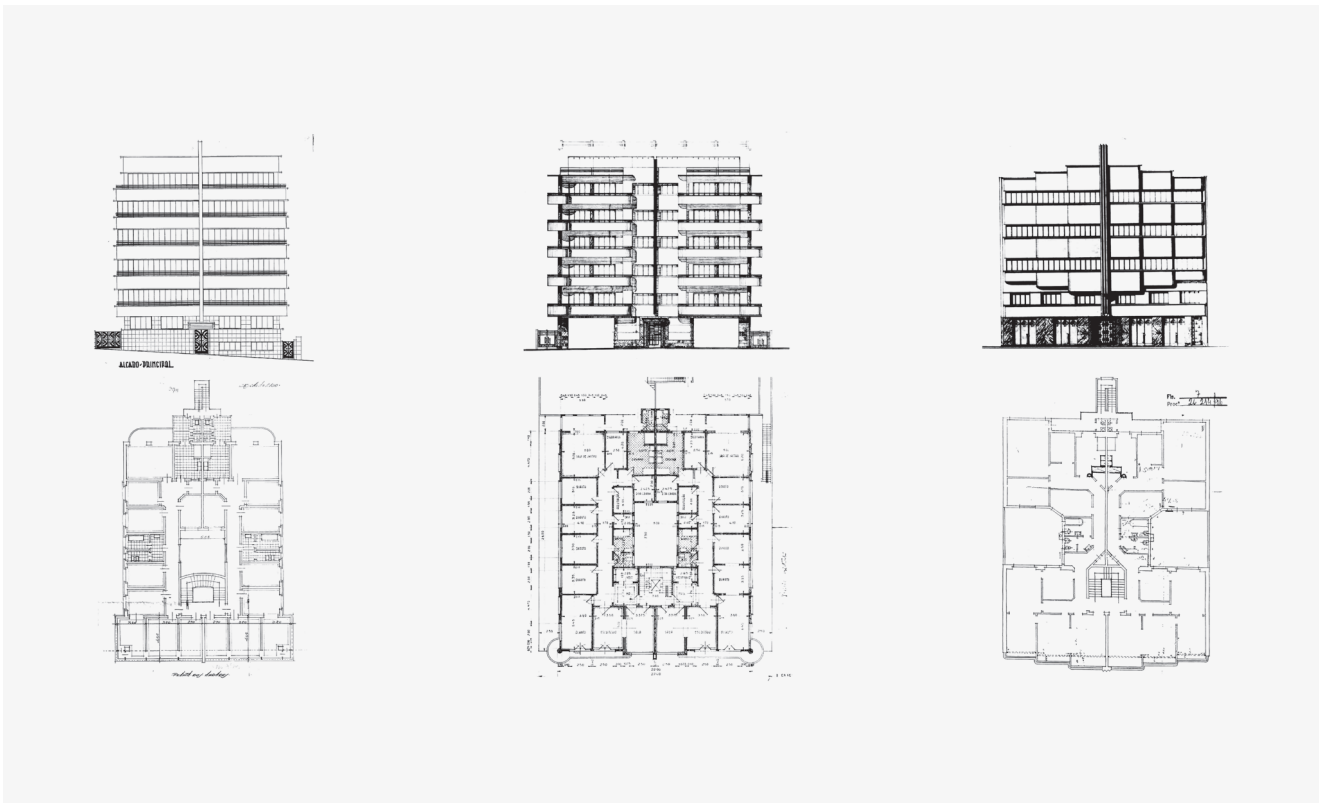
The development of tourism would be a strategy of the

regime that would promote a set of policies to improve both historical built heritage, as well as a healthier quality of life, a fundamental issue to build a "new state"<sup>9</sup>. Cassiano Branco understood the importance of the tourism sector, proposing ideas and projects for areas with potential growth.

The Thermal Grand Hotel of Luso was Cassiano's first experience in terms of regional hotels, designed in 1938. This project was also the opportunity he had to work with Bissaya Barreto (1886-1974), a philanthropist doctor, administrator of the Luso Water Company. The medicinal properties of water in that region of the *Beira Litoral* (in the centre-west of the country), was the main argument for building a facility with good conditions to host people on health vacations, providing, at the same time, the possibility of enjoying the natural environment of that place. The building was planned as an L, framing the huge swimming pool that joined the water from the Luso spring. Nevertheless the hotel's traditional image was considered a "building with modern lines featuring a refined elegance combined with ornate sobriety"<sup>10</sup>.

Bissaya Barreto's conservative beliefs would demand from Cassiano Branco a complex exercise for combining tradition and modernity. Those convictions would be promoted with more visibility during the centenary commemorations of the Portuguese nation, which had been prepared to take place in 1940<sup>11</sup>. The centenary program foresaw initiatives in several historic cities, the *Portuguese World Exhibition* to be held in Lisbon, being the most relevant. Cassiano Branco worked for the *Exhibition* designing the surrounding areas of the Colonial Garden. Despite his participation in the main

05 Cassiano Branco, building on *Álvares Cabral* Street, Lisbon, Portugal, 1933, elevation and plan signed by Teixeira Rego. © AML/Building 50194/Proc.6436/DAG/PG/1936; *Idem.*, building on *Nova São Mamede* Street, Lisbon, elevation and plan signed by Jacinto Betencourt. © AML/Building 51011/Proc.868/SEC/PG/1937; *Idem.*, building on *Defensores de Chaves* Avenue, 1937, elevation and plan. © Cassiano Branco's Assets PT/AMLSB/CB/05/34, and AML Building 51324/Proc.26214/DAG/PG/1996.



event in the capital, his attention would be much more devoted to the challenge launched by Bissaya Barreto for designing a thematic park for children in Coimbra.

Barreto imagined a pedagogical place where monuments and traditional Portuguese houses from north to south, including one from the colonies, could be deployed at a scale adjusted for children. *Portugal for the Little Ones* would be the name of the enclosure, which included three sections, each one built in different stages, gathering the architect and the philanthropist doctor for a long period of 28 years<sup>12</sup>.

Barreto would involve and support Cassiano's wide research into the fundamentals of Portuguese architecture; this influence would be determinant on the architect's path. The reports done by Cassiano Branco as a base for the Coimbra Park reproductions, gave him knowledge about the heritage identity of the country, contributing to a changing thought process about a possible way that Portuguese architecture could take.

The first section of the Park, named *Village Nest*, was concluded in 1940, and integrated a taxonomic panoramic of typical Portuguese houses. The *Ethnographic and Colonial sector* was the second section, finished in 1951, and included pavilions from the former Portuguese Colonies<sup>13</sup>, Brazil and the islands of Madeira and Azores also took part in this section, together with a complex pavilion dedicated to Coimbra featuring a reproduction of the main architectural references of the city<sup>14</sup>, all of which were gathered together in the same building. The *Metropolitan section*, finished in 1961, represented the last phase of the Park that was built, and included pavilions dedicated to Portugal's regions. As

Cassiano had already explored in the Coimbra Pavilion, all the buildings, which comprised the *Metropolitan* area, were designed as a *collage* of reproduced fragments of each region's monuments. In this context, the park would be for Cassiano Branco a kind of a laboratory for disposing and manipulating all the collected elements, rehearsing improbable conciliations among them all.

This process was seen as a base from where it would be possible to rebuild a kind of continuity between the past and the future which, according to common sense, would be interrupted by modernity. Cassiano's research passed from the scientific process of collecting and reproducing at an appropriate scale, to a kind of taxonomy inversion, which originated new, uncanny architectonic entities.

### Porto Coliseum and the international approach

Cassiano Branco was also involved in Porto Coliseum project, at the time of the Centenary Commemorations. This concert hall, planned for *Passos Manuel* Street, corresponds to a mature project, reflecting his sensibility about international culture<sup>15</sup>.

Special attention was paid to the Amsterdam City Theatre, designed by the Dutch Architect Jan Wils (1891-1972), who has been also involved in the long process the Coliseum in 1938<sup>16</sup>.

The Porto Coliseum was deployed on a site within the interior of a block upon the former *Passos Manuel* garden, where music and theatre performances used to be carried outdoors. Cassiano Branco proposed a wide, round shape to host the concert hall, which would be deployed in the centre of the block's core.



06 Cassiano Branco, *Rios d'Oliveira Garage*, Lisbon, Portugal, 1928. © 1933, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation CFT003.010288 ic.



07 Cassiano Branco, Kiosk in *Liberdade Avenue*, Lisbon, Portugal. © Cassiano Branco's Assets PT/AMLSB/CB/04/06/02.



08 Cassiano Branco, *Costa da Caparica Plan*, Almada, Portugal, 1930. © Cassiano Branco's Assets, Municipal Archive of Lisbon/ PT/AMLSB/CB/09/02/08.

Cassiano's façade for the Porto Coliseum was designed by following the Passos Manuel alignment, which had resulted from the division between two different programmatic morphologies. One of them was a blank wall with the Porto coat-of-arms and a vertical plan announcing the presence of the building, corresponding to the concert hall; the other corresponded to a commercial building with horizontal ripped windows that complement the set. This functional separation was the strength of Cassiano's proposal, distinguishing it from Wils' Amsterdam project, which foresaw a glass building occupying the entire street frontage.

During the building process, Cassiano's contract was terminated. This disagreement prevented him from completing the façade with the neon lights he had proposed. Despite this event, the Coliseum maintained the essence of the design which is visible in the sequence of spaces that were designed to channel crowds to different seating sectors in the concert hall.

As in Lisbon's Eden Theatre, the Porto Coliseum was also designed to involve people in a dynamic experience that started in the porch of the main entrance, which enlarged Passos Manuel Street, creating an external foyer for ticket sales and continued into different halls and curved corridors before reaching the round shape of the concert hall. In a certain sense, this main hall translated into a spatial dimension, the orphic concepts used by Cassiano in the balconies and ironwork of his buildings.

### Cassiano Branco, the "inconvenient" architect

Although the arguments launched by Gomes da Silva in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* considering Cassiano Branco's "inconvenience", the historical expression of his architecture after the 1930s should be also considered as an "inconvenient" issue. Cassiano's unbridled talent and his sense of modernity was absorbed by a growing demand about national identity.

After the 1930s, Cassiano's architecture was depicted by an architectonic conflict perceived in the late decade. How to combine the research about tradition with modernity propelled him into a dilemma, figuring out a kind of an impossible solution to overcome this demand.

Despite all those issues, Cassiano Branco marked, with his cosmopolitan visions, the beginning of modernity in Portugal, during the traumatic period of the dictatorship.

#### Notes

- 1 The military dictatorship was implemented in Portugal in the sequence of *coup d'état* of 28<sup>th</sup> September 1926. The *Estado Novo* (New State) Constitution would be promulgated in 1933.
- 2 AAVV. *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* – "Dossier Portugal an II", May/June 1976.
- 3 Cassiano Branco would be involved twice with opposition presidential candidates. In 1949, he supported Norton de Matos (1867-1955). His involvement with Presidential elections would lead to his detention by PIDE (International Police for Estate Defense) in 1958, at which time he was supporting Humberto Delgado's (1906-1965) candidature.
- 4 The main ceramic industrial products were: bricks, roofing shingles, mosaic pavement, tiles; stoneware pipes for sewage, sanitary porcelain, among others.
- 5 Structural compression was overcome by the introduction of cantilevered slabs, allowing torn veins and volume variations. Also the integration of industrial components required a rigorous metrical

- planning, contributing to increased architectural rationality.
- 6 Cassiano Branco was born in Telhal, Street n. 51, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.
- 7 This was accomplished by among other measures, the interest rate reduction which provided easy access to credit, and public investment mainly through a huge campaign of public works. Cf., José Luís Cardoso, "Ecos da Grande Depressão em Portugal: relatos, diagnósticos e soluções", *Análise Social*, n. 203, Lisbon, 2012, assessed on May 2016, [http://www.scielo.mec.pt/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0003-25732012000200006#1](http://www.scielo.mec.pt/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0003-25732012000200006#1).
- 8 Bandeira Vaz and Teixeira Rego signed technical responsibility in the case of 46 *Álvares Cabral* Avenue; Jacinto Bettencourt signed for Nova de São Mamede Street. Both were designed between 1936 and 1937.
- 9 The first *Tourism National Congress* took place in 1936 in the Geography Society of Lisbon, being an important initiative to debate the potentialities and gaps that existed in Portugal on this matter. *Costa da Caparica* was addressed by Manuel d'Agro Ferreira referring to the demand on the beaches made by lots of people coming from the capital, spending long periods there without good conditions.
- 10 Cf. *Grande Hotel das Termas do Luso*, brochure published at the time when the hotel opened, by the Water of Luso Company, in 1940.
- 11 In the centenary commemorations of the Portuguese nation it was intended to celebrate the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Foundation and 300<sup>th</sup> of the restoration of its independence.
- 12 The first phase, named Village Nest for the Little Ones, was concluded in 1940; the second one corresponding to the Ethnographic and Colonial section, was completed in 1951; the Metropolitan section finished in 1961 was the last phase of the park.
- 13 The colonies represented were Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, São Tomé and Cape Verde.
- 14 The Coimbra pavilion integrated architectonic fragments of the Santa Cruz church, the old Cathedral, the Episcopal palace and the University turret, among others.
- 15 Cassiano Branco had been working on this project since 1937, besides his contract with Garantia Insurance Company signed two years later, in 1939.
- 16 Cassiano Branco's interest by Dutch architecture was also visible in the magazine clips he used to collect about Willem Dudok (1884-1974), namely the *Collège Hollandais* building in the *Cité Universitaire* of Paris, and the Hilversum morphologies, constituted research fundaments. Also clips in Cassiano's papers referenced the English Odeon cinemas in Crewe, York, Yeovil and Dudley, built between 1935 and 1939.

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