

# AESTHETICS, UTILITY AND VALUES: A SYSTEMATIZATION OF GLAZED CERAMICS IN THE FAÇADES OF MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE

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## ABSTRACT

Several books have presented and discussed the use of azulejos in the Portuguese modernist architecture. However, these tend to ignore the full use of glazed ceramics in the same context. This is probably because in many cases the azulejos are plain and undecorated, or due to the fact that the glazed elements are not actual azulejos, or that their importance in terms of percent of area is low. The authors believe that all cases are worth mentioning and thus present, for the first time, a systematization of all sorts of use of decorative glazed ceramics in Portuguese modernist architecture. This systematization offers a grid of classification in order to make a future enumeration as complete as possible. The authors have also included in this presentation the use of glass mosaics (*Evinel*), which often complement azulejos and other glazed ceramics in modernist buildings. Values are assigned to the cases identified in terms of utility, aesthetics and touristic appeal. All results are summarized in a conclusive table.

Keywords: Azulejos / Values / Modernist architecture / Portugal

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Several books have presented and discussed the use of azulejos in the modernist architecture in Portugal [1, 2]. However, these tend to ignore the full use of glazed ceramics in the same context, probably because the azulejos are often plain and undecorated, or due to the fact that some glazed elements are not actual azulejos, or else because their importance in terms of percent of area is low. The authors believe that all cases are worth mentioning and thus present, for the first time, a systematization aimed to encompass all sorts of use of decorative glazed ceramics in Portuguese modernist architecture. This systematization offers a grid of classification in order to make a future enumeration as complete as possible.

Even though it is out of the main line of discussion, the authors have also included in this paper a small section on the use of glass mosaics, known in Portugal by the name of the earliest diffused brand: *Evinel*. Glass mosaics often complement azulejos and other glazed ceramics in modernist buildings, sometimes even replacing them entirely while aiming at the same protective and decorative purposes.

For each of the cases systematized the authors discuss their values in terms of utility, aesthetics and touristic appeal. All cases are considered from the point of view of a street walker and thus applications that are not decorative in nature, or are not seen from the street or that represent areas too small (e.g. panels with protective saints or names of streets) or designs too inconspicuous are not considered relevant for the present systematization, even though most are actually possible to be encompassed. All results are summarized in a final table.

## **2. MAIN TYPES CONSIDERED**

The discussion considered all use of glazed ceramics architecturally integrated with a decorative content. The systematization considers three main types: i) relevant lining of walls; ii) lining at shop / street level and iii) decorative detailing of walls.

Walls are considered relevantly lined when the whole façade is finished for a significant percent of area (usually more than 50%) intended for aesthetic impact on passers-by.

Lining at street level includes cases in which the lining at the ground floor is either the only one, or significantly different from the rest of the building. The use of glazed ceramics at ground level is often connected with a commercial purpose and is particularly important aesthetically speaking because it is easily perceived, even in narrow streets, where the upper levels will go unnoticed. When buildings are totally lined with the same pattern, including at street level, they belong in the first category. If the linings at street level and in the upper floors are different, they should be classified in the second category when the lining at the upper levels is not considered particularly relevant, or else in both at the same time, because the building is relevant both for its global lining, although only present in the upper floors, and for its (different) use of glazed ceramics at street level.

Finally, decorative detailing of walls includes those cases considered important but not possible to list in any of the previous categories, such as the use of single decorative panels (at street level or otherwise), or small areas at upper level lined with tiles with an aesthetic intention. As often in such cases, the classification in one of the three types may be subjective, as well as the decision to consider a case worth including, or not.

### **2.1 RELEVANT LININGS OF WALLS**

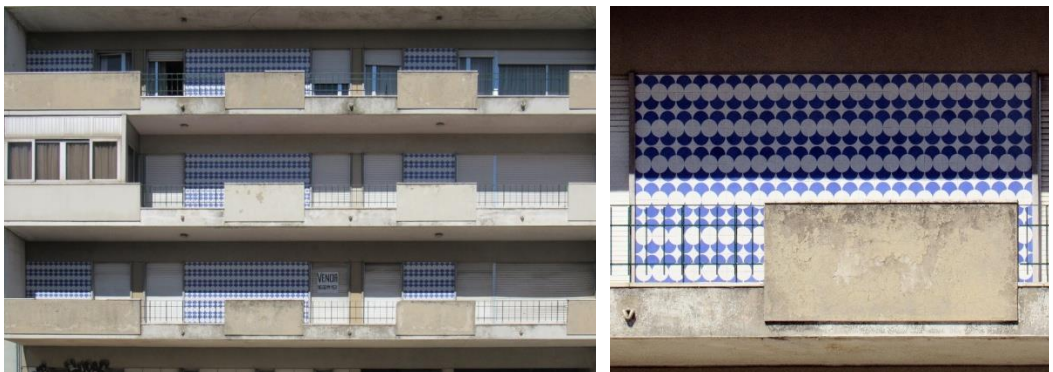
Four types of linings of walls considered relevant according to the definition above were defined: those made up of a single repetitive pattern; those made up of several patterns or else mostly of a single pattern but with designs or applications interrupting the continuity (which were called “not wholly repetitive pattern linings”); ceramics (bricks or tiles) glazed in different hues of a single colour; and monochromatic ceramics (flat or textured).

The modernistic linings in figures 1 and 2 denote a significant aesthetic value but while the first is certainly relevant when a street viewer is considered, the second is clearly intended solely for the apartment owners: the linings are mostly hidden by the verandas and were thus considered as a detail (third case). In the case seen in figure 1 the entire ensemble

gains aesthetic value and without the lining the building would certainly lack the touch that makes it stand out in the street and the perception would not be the same.



**Figure 1:** Same repetitive pattern applied in two different buildings in Lisbon. Left, *Avenida Rainha Dona Amélia Nº 50*; right: *Praça de Alvalade* (all images taken by the authors)



**Figure 2:** Repetitive pattern mostly hidden from a street view. *Avenida Rainha Dona Amélia Nº 52*, Lisbon

However, it is necessary to realize that this value is decreased or even lost when the decorative glazings are decayed (figure 3), once the impression is modified both by the alteration of colours and shapes and by the perception of neglect. Therefore, for a consideration of glazed ceramics as a heritage asset, conservation is essential.



**Figure 3:** Detail of decay at *Av. Rainha Dona Amélia Nº 50*, Lisbon.

Another sort of glazed architectural finishing is made of glazed tiles or bricks in hues of the same colour. Because the decoration is not graphic, the aesthetic value attributed is lower, although it must be remarked that the use of glazed ceramics in shades of the same colour allows to create texture, variety and interest on façade areas that would otherwise be simple and uninteresting. Also it seems to have been primarily or even exclusively used in Portugal at this time [3]. For those reasons it is also important to preserve this type of lining, since their aesthetic perception and the functionality are lower when they present degradation, as can be seen in figure 4.



**Figure 4:** *Casa da Moeda*, Lisbon. Left: preserved as originally; right: decayed at bottom.



A slightly different case often with still less aesthetic value is that of monochromatic (flat or textured) glazed ceramics. In figure 5 two different examples can be seen in which the façade has monochromatic flat azulejos integrated. One of the examples is the building of *Ministério do Trabalho* in *Praça de Londres* (Lisbon), while the second example is one of a group of modernistic buildings in *Avenida do Brasil* (also in Lisbon) by architect Jorge Segurado considered important in the context of Portuguese modernist architecture. The latter specifically denotes an utilitarian intention by the architect but also an aesthetic purpose, albeit derived from plain tiles in two different colours. Built in 1957 the habitational blocks may be considered as early examples of the association of the utility of azulejos with aesthetic value without compromising too much Le Corbusier's premise that "Modern decorative art has no decoration".



**Figure 5:** Two buildings with monochromatic flat azulejos in Lisbon. Left: *Ministério do Trabalho* in *Praça de Londres*; right: building at *Avenida do Brasil*.

In this context, the value of utility can be attributed equally to all types of glazed lining since they all safeguard and protect the walls e.g. from the rain. Not only in significant buildings, such as Casa da Moeda in Lisbon, but also in common buildings in towns.

The aesthetic value is not altered by the location of the building, however if we consider the value of glazed linings as a touristic attractions (tourism value) it must be associated with something that has appeal, because it is unusual, but also that is easily accessible. Excluding exceptional cases worth a dedicated detour, glazed linings must lie in a town area visited by tourists for other reasons. The applications shown in figures 6 and 7 would be interesting touristic-wise, if they were located in *Baixa*, the old centre of Lisbon, which tourists never fail to visit. However, the first is in a far-away location in town with little else to offer, and the second is in a different town little visited by tourists. In this sense, the tourist value would be nil in the first case and small in the second.

## 2.2 LINING AT SHOP / STREET LEVEL

The decorative lining of walls at street level is particularly relevant because it lies where the public easily sees the azulejos at the level of their eyes. Eight types were tentatively identified: artistic azulejo panels signed / unsigned; same made of ceramic plaques; publicity designs [4]; repetitive patterns; not wholly repetitive patterns; single figure tiles; monochromatic in hues; and fully monochromatic (flat or textured).

A significant aesthetic value can be assigned to most of them, being often a creation that projects or reflects the intention of an artist or a designer. In contrast to the types described before there is an intention to transmit appreciative emotion without being necessary to observe the whole architectural ensemble.

Figure 6 illustrates a case of lining only at street level with a not wholly repetitive pattern in Lisbon. The glazed lining does not cover the entire façade but bears an important aesthetic value, since there was a clear intention to decorate the surface appealingly, maybe not much for the sake of the condominium owners (as can be seen by the tiles used for the entrance hall of the building), but more for the appreciation of passers-by. This is a very interesting example, because although unsigned, the executions bear witness to a remarkable technique: the main pattern is made of azulejos with a contoured surface glazed in hues of green and the design is interrupted by sets of two azulejos with a totally different protruding design, in another shade of green. The striking contrast between this artistic panel and the areas that make the access to the interiors, lined with a rather common and uninteresting pattern inspired in a traditional design, establishes a sharp difference between the promoter's opinion on what the condominium owners would likely appreciate in terms of the more secluded areas of the building and the image the architect wants to establish in terms of the street viewers.



**Figure 6:** Lining at street level only, with not wholly repetitive pattern. *R.Luís Pastor Macedo Nº 32, Lisbon*

Figure 7 illustrates a case of an artistic tile panel decorating a shop front, signed “Daciano” and dated “1950”. The panel does not stand alone because it integrates into the full design of the shop at street level and its aesthetic value must be considered on that basis: if it was removed and exhibited in a museum, some of its value would remain but that part afforded by the integration into a whole would be lost.



**Figure 7:** Casa Primavera shop front, R.Miguel Bombarda, Torres Vedras (signed “Daciano”)

For this type of coatings, it is difficult to define or assign a utility value, since, generally, their integration is for artistic or aesthetic reasons, that is, they are designed to embellish and decorate a specific façade. On another level they introduce a significant aspect to the more conceptual purpose of the use of the building and are certainly easier to clean and maintain.

It is possible to attribute touristic value to all these coatings: their integration at street level allows an easy admiration but access is the factor that will most enhance or diminish that value, as previously mentioned. Figures 8 and 9 present interesting examples tourist-wise of a shop in *Baixa* and a rare example of single figure tiles from the 1940-50s that due to its smaller dimension (one fourth of the normal size of an azulejo) are called in Portuguese *lambrilhas*. The first example has high value given by accessibility, increased by the fact that Fernando Pessoa worked in the opposite building and here existed a tobacco shop called *Havaneza dos Retroseiros* that presumably inspired his great poem *Tabacaria* written as *Álvaro de Campos*.

The curious shop front in figure 9 would certainly be fully appreciated if it was in *Baixa* as well, but in this case, it is located in a little-visited town.

The conservation of all these types is particularly important because the examples are often unique and, as pointed before, since their recognition is related with aesthetics, when they show degradation the appeal may be lost or even turned into a negative appreciation of the subjacent neglect.





**Figure 8:** Shop in the *Baixa* of Lisbon. *Pelaria Pampas*, Rua da Conceição Nº 65

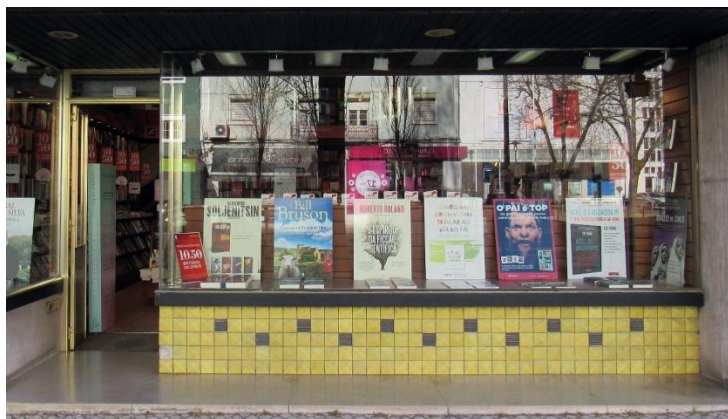


**Figure 9:** Travel agency in the centre of the town of *Torres Novas*

### 2.3 DECORATIVE DETAILING OF WALLS

The remaining cases not classifiable in the two main categories above must be classified as decorative detailing of walls. An example was already offered in figure 2. It is difficult to assign the three values mentioned before in this case, because often there is not a clear utility intention and their integration has only a decorative intention that does not quite reach the viewer. Figure 10 further exemplifies one such case.





**Figure 10:** *Livraria Bertrand* in *Avenida de Roma*, Lisbon

### 3. GLASS MOSAICS

Glass mosaics often complement azulejos and other glazed ceramics in modernist buildings, sometimes even replacing them entirely while aiming at the same protective and decorative purposes as the follow images denote. They are not part of the subject addressed by this paper but because of their complementarity the authors chose to point out this (until now neglected by researchers) sort of lining. Figures 11 and 12 exemplify the use of glass mosaics.



**Figure 11:** *Hotel Roma* in *Avenida de Roma*, Lisbon



**Figure 12:** Decorative mosaic panel at *R.Silva e Albuquerque Nº 1*, Lisbon

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper the authors offer for the first time, a systematization of the glazed ceramics integrated in the exterior of the modernist architecture in Portugal. The discussion considered glazed ceramics with a decorative content and consequently e.g. the use of brick glazed with transparent glass was not included since the glazing has mostly a protective purpose and does not modify significantly the appearance of natural brick.

The article also pointed to the use of glass mosaic as a particular case in modernist architecture decoration worthy of future study, albeit for now excluded of the systematization offered.

Within our presentation of types, were discussed three sorts of values: an artistic/ aesthetic value (related with a decorative intention that may be perceived and assessed by a street viewer); an utility value (merely utilitarian and unrelated to aesthetics); and what were called a “touristic value” related not only with aesthetics but also with singularity. This last value does not depend solely of the ceramics but also on the accessibility of the sites in relation to the usual tourist spots.

Table 1 resumes the systematization of types offering also a tentative appraisal of the three values mentioned. In some cases a whole range of possibilities is stated.

In all cases with aesthetic and particularly with touristic appeal, decay lowers the value and tourist-wise may even turn an intended appreciation into a negative feeling of neglect. Such cases are thus prime subjects for adequate conservation and, if needed, restoration interventions, so that the modernist heritage is preserved for future appreciation.

**Table 1:** Synopsis of types and values in the systematization of modernist glazed ceramics

Values → Type ↓	Artistic / aesthetic	Utility	Touristic appeal
<b>1. Relevant lining of walls</b>			
repetitive pattern	++/+	++++	+
not wholly repetitive pattern	+++/+	++++	++/+
bricks in hues of the same colour	++	++++	+
monochromatic flat or textured	-	++++	-
<b>2. Lining at shop / street level</b>			
artistic tile panel signed/ unsigned	++++	-	++++/+
same of ceramic plaques	++++	-	++++/+
publicity design	+++/+	-	++++/+
repetitive pattern	+	-	+
not wholly repetitive pattern	++/+	-	++/+
figure single tiles	++	-	+++
monochromatic in hues	++/-	-	++/-
monochromatic flat or textured	-	-	-
<b>3. Decorative detailing of walls</b>	-	-	-

Note: ++++ higher value; +++ high value; ++ medium value; + low value; - not relevant

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