

José Baganha

Vernacular Architecture in the Sotavento Region of the Algarve

La arquitectura popular en el Sotavento del Algarve

A arquitetura popular do Sotavento Algarvio

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

The circumstance of a recent commission for work on a tourist/residential development in the area of Castro Marim in Portugal's Algarve province led me to discover the singularity of the region known as "Sotavento". This is the southernmost part of Portugal, with the Atlantic to the south, the Baixo Algarve to the west, and with the Algarve Calcário (also known as "Barrocal") extending north of the Ria Formosa lagoon, sheltered by its islands, and stretching down to the town of Tavira, north to the Serra do Caldeirão, in its eastern range forming a boundary with the inner Baixo Alentejo, and east to the river Guadiana. This article arises from a study I made of the region. The regional singularities we find here are, as elsewhere, various manifestations of the way humans inhabit the landscape and build dwellings and shelters for animals as well as accommodating the activities (chiefly farming and fishing) plied here over the centuries.

Un encargo reciente para la construcción de una urbanización turístico-residencial en la zona de Castro Marim, en la provincia portuguesa del Algarve, me permitió descubrir la singularidad de la región conocida como "Sotavento". Esta es la parte más meridional de Portugal, con el Atlántico al sur, el Baixo Algarve al oeste, y el Algarve Calcário (también conocido como "Barrocal") que se extiende al norte de la laguna de la Ría Formosa, al abrigo de sus islas, y que llega hasta la ciudad de Tavira, al norte hasta la Serra do Caldeirão, con su extremo oriental delimitando el interior del Baixo Alentejo y el este hasta el río Guadiana. Este artículo surge de un estudio que realicé de la zona. Las singularidades regionales que encontramos allí son, como en otros lugares, diversas manifestaciones de la forma en que los seres humanos habitan el paisaje y construyen viviendas y cobertizos para los animales, además de las actividades (agricultura y pesca principalmente) ejercidas aquí a lo largo de los siglos.

Uma recente encomenda de trabalho para um empreendimento turístico/residencial na zona de Castro Marim, no Algarve, Portugal, levou-me a descobrir a singularidade da região conhecida como "Sotavento". Trata-se da zona mais a sul de Portugal, com o Atlântico a sul, o Baixo Algarve a oeste e o Calcário Algarvio (também conhecido por "Barrocal") a estender-se a norte da Ria Formosa, abrigado pelas suas ilhas, e para baixo até à cidade de Tavira, a Norte da Serra do Caldeirão, fazendo fronteira na sua faixa oriental com o Baixo Alentejo interior, e a leste com o rio Guadiana. Este artigo surge na sequência de um estudo que efetuei sobre a região. As singularidades regionais que aqui encontramos são, como noutros locais, manifestações diversas do modo como o homem habita a paisagem e constrói habitações e abrigos para os animais e para as atividades (sobretudo a agricultura e a pesca) que aqui se desenvolveram ao longo dos séculos.

The circumstance of a recent commission for work on a tourist/residential development in the area of Castro Marim in Portugal's Algarve province led me to discover the singularity of the region known as "Sotavento". This is the southernmost part of Portugal, with the Atlantic to the south, the Baixo Algarve to the west, and with the Algarve Calcário (also known as "Barrocal") extending north of the Ria Formosa lagoon, sheltered by its islands, and stretching down to the town of Tavira, north to the Serra do Caldeirão, in its eastern range forming a boundary with the inner Baixo Alentejo, and east to the river Guadiana.



Map of the Algarve

Contrary to what one might think, in a misapprehension owing much to the tourist development that the Algarve has undergone in recent decades, largely (not to say wholly) lacking in any general awareness of or respect for the character of local landscapes and culture – contrary to this “picture postcard” image, the region’s boundaries embrace natural subregions characterized by their terrain and climatic particularities as well as by their interior or coastal settings, and in the latter case, by a more Atlantic or Mediterranean influence.

In the part of the Algarve known as “Sotavento” we find highly Mediterranean particularities and the morphological features of the foothills of the Serra do Caldeirão and the slopes of the Guadiana valley, including the transition areas of the Algarve Calcário or Barrocal, here in a condensed expression.

Common to the whole Algarve region is an acute scarcity of water, except for a small part of the Serra de Monchique and the legacy of centuries of tenure by the peoples of North Africa and Middle East that persists to the present in agriculture and in some forms of vernacular architecture, chiefly confined to villages such as Olhão and Fuzeta, with evident similarities in their patterns of settlement and flat-roofed dwellings with villages of some areas of the Maghreb. A closeness to the sea – to the Atlantic Ocean – is also common to the whole region, notwithstanding the difference between the more Atlantic western parts, “where the wind comes from”, i.e. *Barlavento*, and the area “where the wind goes to”, i.e. *Sotavento* (our subject here), in which a more Mediterranean climate prevails. Fishing activity and the insecurity resulting from centuries of raids from the sea are also common factors throughout the region.

The regional singularities we find here are, as elsewhere, various manifestations of the way humans inhabit the landscape and build dwellings and shelters for animals as well as accommodating the activities (chiefly farming and fishing) plied here over the centuries. These are the more vernacular manifestations of the way a landscape may be inhabited, although some singularities are also to be seen in religious edifices and in the more “academic” secular architecture, whether public or private, in stately or palatial buildings, with a clear reciprocal influence.

In the Algarve, “a long history of insecurity and perhaps the scarcity of water led to a concentration of settlement” (Orlando Ribeiro 1991). This is one of the region’s notable common features. In the villages of the interior, the well or wells have a prominent place in the urban fabric, located in the



Houses forming the village of Alte

middle of squares at which streets converge and in which there is often a communal bakehouse (in smaller villages).

Houses are arranged along these streets in single-family dwellings with one or two floors facing the public domain, with no intermediate spaces in more populous settlements such as small towns, or

1: Center of Alte

2: Streetscape in the center of Tavira



1



2



1: A well as the centerpiece of small settlements

2: House with front yard and grapevine

with a small courtyard attached for “arrivals”, almost always with a pergola or arbor along with a climbing grapevine or sometimes a bougainvillea, making it a cool place on hot days.

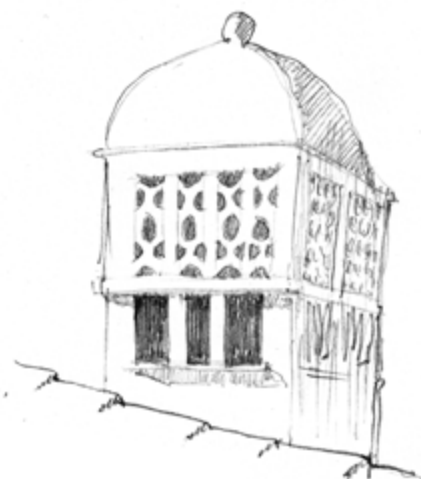
In small villages or *monte* farmsteads, the houses are more spread out, and in the latter the courtyard is a near-constant presence. This courtyard is delimited by buildings – dwellings or shelters for animals and farm equipment – or by low walls, again with a grapevine and perhaps the odd tree along with the indispensable well (or wells), oven, and stone benches.

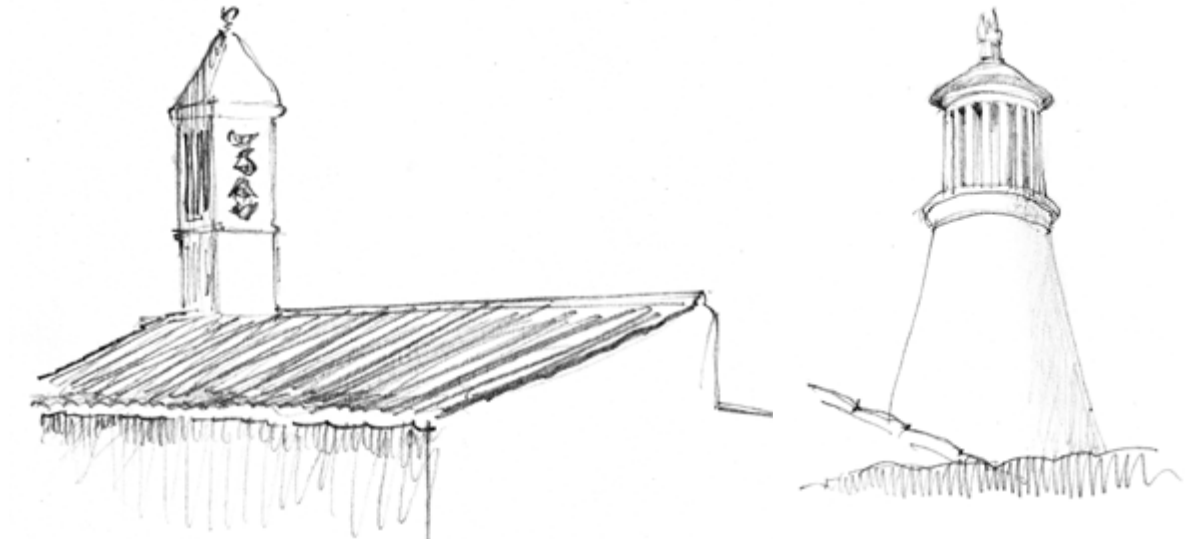
One of the peculiar features of these ensembles is precisely that of a courtyard containing an exterior oven – the *fornalha*, in a freestanding or lean-to shelter. The low walls often have benches or planters, also called *alegrete*s, and, together with the grapevine, form a pleasant living or domestic work space on summer days.

We may note that in the Alentejo, immediately to the north, where the vernacular architecture has so much in common with that of the Algarve, there are few such courtyards and the oven is always in a lean-to or else fully integrated into the buildings.

The great hearth and chimney, the focal point of the composition of volumes and facades at the heart of the inner layout of vernacular houses in the Alentejo, as a locus of cooking, heating, and

Sketch of chimneys in Mértola, São Brás de Alportel and Tavira





Sketch of chimneys in São João da Venda and Silves

gatherings, all but disappear in the vernacular houses of Algarve villages and farmsteads, being replaced by smaller ones. Yet this constructional or architectural element remains prominent in the make-up of these houses, with unique ventilation grilles taking on highly characteristic forms, with openwork readily identifiable as the Algarve “skirted” chimney.

Another peculiar component of the facades of houses in the Algarve, unmissable and one of a kind, is the *platibanda* parapet, not uncommonly found as a border to roof terraces and verandas. This is another vernacular form of architecture (or construction) resulting from the need to make the most of rainwater, so scarce in these parts, harvested on these terraces that are also used for drying fruit, cereals, beans, pumpkins, etc. These parapets secure the edges of the terraces still often to be seen in settlements near Ria Formosa (Olhão, Fuzeta, etc.) and elsewhere in this region of Sotavento.



Parapet of a building in Tavira



1



2



3



4

1: Parapet of a building in Tavira

2, 3, 4: Parapets in Alte

But Algarvians, living up to one of their distinguishing traits, cannot build a parapet without adding highly peculiar decorative details, in low-relief lime mortar painted in bright colors – reds, blues, ochres – with diverse, normally geometric designs, though also at times with figurative motifs or including ceramics or stonework.

A taste for ornament is an Algarvian characteristic, inseparable from a concern for socializing, receiving, and *fazer figura* – attract attention, to use a popular expression for this feature widely present in the region's culture, extending even to such aspects as its traditional confectionery.



Tavira market

This “taste” also appears in aspects such as the trim around facade openings, executed in colored lime mortar or even in stone, along with ironwork and joinery such as the characteristic *reixa* grilles, allowing houses to be ventilated while preserving privacy.

But the interior layouts of houses also almost always include a “receiving room”, directly accessible from outside through the front door, followed by a smaller room, perhaps linked to a small kitchen, and another room or bedrooms behind. This kitchen, as explained about the hearth and chimney, does not show a prominent role within the layout of the houses, as found in the kitchens of the Alentejo region.



1



2



3



4



5



6

1, 2, 3: Doors and windows in Faro

4, 5, 6: Doors in Tavira

The upper floors, where present, include bedrooms and are accessible by a single flight of stairs, which in single-story houses is exterior, giving access to the terrace. A second floor is often the product of a later extension or addition.

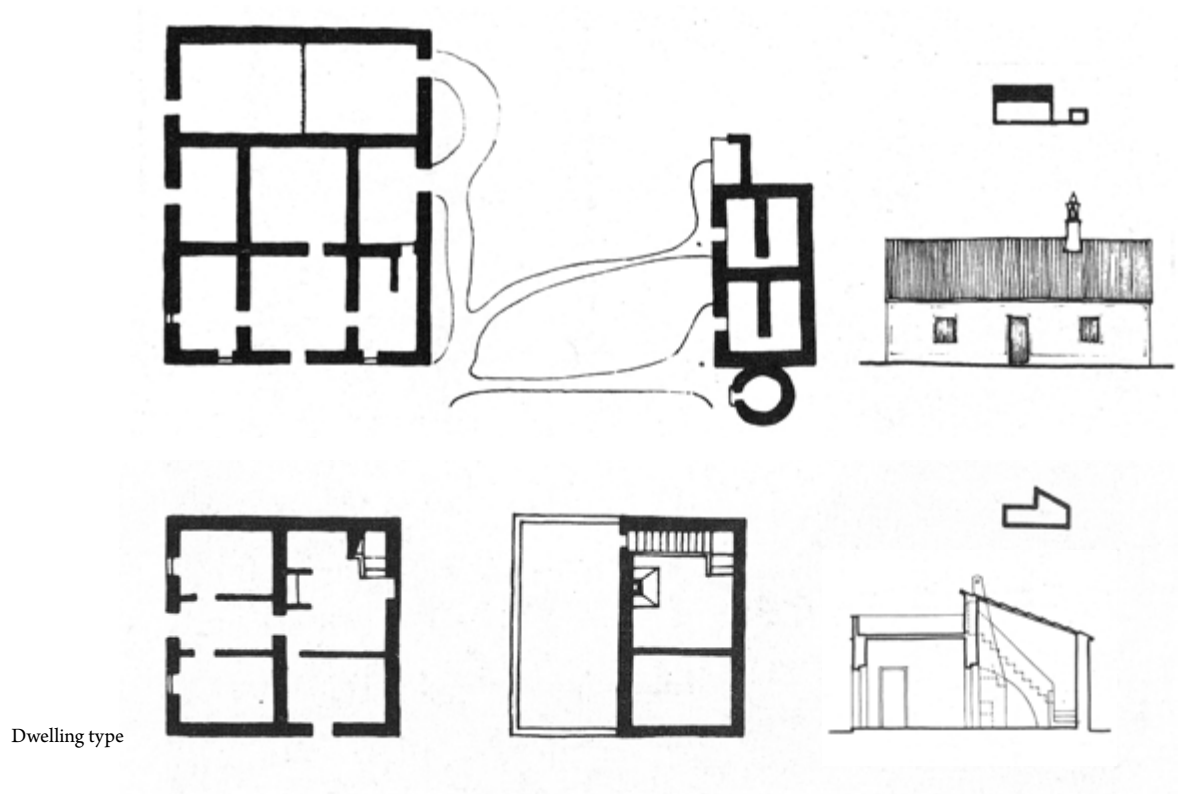
As stated in *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal* (1980: 684): “it is worth noting that Algarvians have a great sense for managing and organizing space. Their courtyards are undeniably testimony to this”.

To the particularities briefly described here I cannot omit to add the characteristic truss roofs that we find in Algarve houses, mainly in towns (such as in particular Tavira), with hip roofs of mortared tiles in successive volumes which, according to most authors who have considered the subject,

correspond to the divisions to be found immediately below. One can supposedly “guess” how a building is partitioned from the number and form of its hip roofs.

But the various particular aspects or singularities described above do not detract from the simplicity of this region’s built structures, from their proportion of simple volumes and modest scale, with these distinctive features being mere additions to the architectural and constructional types characterizing the southern Alentejo and which become “diluted” as we head away from the coast and the Barrocal and enter the mountains. Here the simplicity of the houses is even more striking and we find types in which exposed schist masonry is combined or contrasted with plastered and limewashed facades, with roofs of just one or at most two slopes normally supported by interior walls, with even simpler chimneys. Here there are no terrace roofs and parapets, but there are still courtyards with a well, an oven, stone benches, and a grapevine.

In constructional aspects, the vernacular buildings of this part of the Algarve, like the traditional architecture of its finer buildings – stately houses, churches, or convents – take advantage, as elsewhere, of the resources made available by nature: paving of patterned or ceramic tiles or, less



Dwelling types with terraces





Watercolor of truss roofs with mortared tiles, Tavira

often, in mountain areas, paving slabs of schist; rustic masonry (of schist or limestone) with mortar (of lime and sand), or adobe and rammed earth, depending on the area.

Sometimes we find *moirão* or *gigante* buttresses in *monte* farmsteads as a means of preventing deformation due to stresses from structural roof elements, as well as roofs of arched ceramic tiles (in monk and nun configuration), with hues that also reflect the region, often a pale sandy or beige color, along with redder clay tiles, laid over oak or chestnut timbering.

1: Construction of simple volumes, with a single-pitch roof and a very simple chimney, Almodóvar

2: Masonry stone walls, Alcoutim

3: Masonry stone walls, Faro

4: Whitewashed walls, Faro



1



2



3



4

Terraces, flat roofs, and verandas are almost always supported by ribbed or barrel vaults and paved with tiles or fine solid bricks, with mortar and a finish of ceramic or (more recently) colored hydraulic tiles, forming what is known as “mixed roofing”.

Facing walls are plastered and whitewashed, always with lime, a material inseparable from these architectures, except in the aforesaid mountain villages with their rustic masonry of exposed schist.

The facade openings normally have traditional proportions, vertically oriented and in orderly composition, framed with stonework or colored lime mortar, which mortar we may also find as sgraffito on parapets, corners, plinths, and friezes, depending on the ornateness of the streetside facade.

These openings are secured by wooden joinery almost always painted with colored enamels, mostly dark green or blue or oxblood red (i.e. garnet). The windows may be fitted with the aforesaid *reixa* grillwork or with decorative railings. Traditionally, rather than glass panes, windows had shutters or shades, also of wood, though these disappeared as glasswork became commonplace.

The exceptional richness and aesthetic value of these structures and villages should in itself be sufficient reason for their preservation.

Unfortunately, here as in so many other parts of the world, the industrialization of construction taken to nonsensical extremes and the blindness that results from greed have helped dilapidate and obliterate much of this invaluable heritage.

Today we are seeing some movements in the other direction, seeking to preserve what, despite the devastation, stubbornly remains. This study (here in abridged form) arises also from a desire to act and build within a respect for local culture and tradition, refreshing age-old know-how and trades and thereby asserting a new approach – intelligent, attractive, and profoundly eco-friendly.

Let us hope.

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Biography | Biografía | Biografia

José Baganha

Born in Coimbra in 1960, he graduated in Architecture at Lisbon University and took a PhD at the University of the Basque Country. He is managing partner of José Baganha & Arquitectos Associados, Lda., and from 2002 to 2012 he lectured at the Architecture School of the Portuguese Catholic University in Viseu and Lisbon. José chairs the board of INTBAU Portugal and is a founding member of the Architectural Heritage Section of the Portuguese Institute of Architects, which he also chaired for three terms following its creation. He has authored various articles and books on architecture and urbanism. Over his architect's career he has received distinctions notably including the “Prix européen pour la reconstruction de la ville” awarded by Fondation Philippe Rotthier in Brussels in 2011, and the Rafael Manzano Prize for New Traditional Architecture in 2017. He is also a trustee and vice president of the Traditional Building Cultures Foundation.