

Modern Theatres – Casa de Música, Porto

Maria Arnaut introduces Remi Koolhaas' "House of Music"



"Maybe I shouldn't finish it; maybe it is much more beautiful unfinished". Rem Koolhaas

*"The lusitanian wind
Is the Universal human breath
That swells the anxiety of the Portuguese
It is this fury of soft madness
That conquers everything"*
Miguel Torga, writer and poet (1907-1995)

"Porto is not really a city: it is a family. When some evil strikes, everyone feels it with the same intensity; when they desire something, they all desire it at the same time."
João Pinheiro Chagas, journalist and politician (1863-1925)

It was in Portugal, pioneer of globalisation, in its second largest city, Porto, that the most iconic artistic and architectural project was born, resonating throughout the world: Casa da Música. The building and its artistic vision are inseparable. The building itself is breathtaking – bringing into question the aesthetic sense of the "normal" – the artistic vision giving it life, elevating it. It is its soul.

A building with a polyhedron shape that brought a tremendous change to a city, and naturally became an atypical ambassador of its own country.

A building that evokes the role of the arts centre within a metropolis. It forces us to rethink the definition of "viewer", since each

observer is considered audience from any perspective. As itself, it is a piece of public art democratically contemplated by each person who encounters it.

Considered by the New York Times to be Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas' most seductive work, Casa da Música has catalysed a discussion about the relationship between a building, an artistic project and its reason for being: the public.

The reason why Casa da Música was created is the essence of its success: to welcome people and bring them closer to Art. It is a human project.

In 2007, Casa da Música was awarded the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) prize and the jury classified it as an "intriguing, disturbing and dynamic" building.

"Rather than struggle with the inescapable acoustic superiority of this traditional shape, the Casa da Música attempts to reinvigorate the traditional concert hall in another way: by redefining the relationship between the hollowed interior and the general public outside." Rem Koolhaas. Casa da Música only exists if others exist.

When Porto became a candidate for European Capital of Culture in 2001, the possibility arose to create a building dedicated entirely to music, which would build on Porto's

innate appetite for music.

The Portuguese Government and Porto City Hall formed Porto 2001, to head a series of renovations of the city's cultural monuments and to develop the project that would become Casa da Música.

This led to reflection about the artistic project at hand: to build a structure to welcome and inspire the main institutions dedicated to music in the region, and also able to independently program a wide range of music. The building hosts all the city's notable musical projects.

Currently, Casa da Música hosts the following five institutions:

- Porto Symphony Orchestra;
- Remix Ensemble (a project dedicated to contemporary music creation);
- Baroque Orchestra;
- Casa da Música's Chorus;
- Children's Chorus.

With the exception of the last one, all of these institutions have great national and international recognition, with a particular focus on investment in Remix Ensemble, since this is Casa da Música's most distinctive project, "our star" according to Paulo Sarmento e Cunha, Casa da Música's current General Director.

There is a very strong investment in the programming and its concept. Every year, at the invitation of the artistic director, audiences are challenged to take a journey of engagement deepening their relationship to the Casa. Each programming year also features a guest country, which inspires the programming choices. 2018 is dedicated to Austria.

Given such an ambitious artistic project, combining the will to host and inspire artistic structures together with an emphasis on building a stronger connection with audiences, it was essential to construct an iconic building which could support the execution of the project's mission and could reinforce its potential on an international level.

In this context, Porto 2001 issued a set of invitations to prestigious Portuguese and international architects. In the first phase, 26 participated, 15 of whom were international.

After several stages of the process, the three finalists were: Dominique Perrault (Uruguay), Rafael Viñoly (France) and Rem Koolhaas (Netherlands).

In July 1999, Porto 2001 – based on the opinion of a jury composed of a variety of public



figures from Porto (including the renowned Portuguese architects Eduardo Souto Moura and Álvaro Siza Vieira) – awarded the project to OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture), headed by Rem Koolhaas, in partnership with the British consultants, ARUP.

OMA's proposal made real the most challenging part of Casa da Música's mission: to strengthen the relationship between the Casa and its internal and external audiences, along with a remarkable adaptation to its surroundings: "On the outside it has no color; all the color is provided by the context. This is a very fragile position. It needs these other buildings around it", stated Koolhaas.

It was necessary to invest time and work in the development of a complex polyhedron: a





challenge that caused several people involved in the project to question its feasibility.

The team noticed that some exterior parts of the polyhedron were not freestanding. Consequently, it was necessary to build special centres, similar to those used in bridge construction, while the building was being completed. The teams held countless meetings between national and international architects in order to create a complementary structure that would “hold” Casa da Música together while its top was under construction, says Paulo Sarmento e Cunha.

The work was planned in 83 sequential steps that depended on the amount of time it took for the concrete to dry, which caused an extension and expansion of the deadline and budget, something that often occurs with such a complex and ambitious project. Casa da Música ultimately opened in April of 2005.

During the working period, there were several episodes that marked its gestation. In 2003, the decision was made to produce the initial performances in Sala Suggia – the main concert hall of Casa da Música, the name of which honors the Portuguese cellist Guilhermina Suggia (1885-1950), from Porto. These concerts occurred while the room was still showing bare beams and concrete, and the initiative transformed the construction process into a living work of art. One challenge remained: to ensure that conditions were safe enough to make this idea feasible. Part of the machinery and materials of the works were used in the performance, which then as a result became site specific. This experience was so emotionally moving that its own architect Rem Koolhaas admitted thinking: “Maybe I shouldn’t finish it; maybe it is much more beautiful

unfinished”.

Although the funds raised were mainly public, there was a huge effort to bring together private funders who would commit to supporting Casa da Música’s running costs, and participate as external consultants in the strategic decision making. This has allowed for a distance from public financing, protecting Casa da Música from the volatility of national political tendencies, preserving its robustness and impartiality.

Today, Casa da Música is an icon of the city of Porto and of Portugal, consistently making an effort to fulfill its mission. “We seduce people every day”, says Paulo Sarmento e Cunha. The Education Department is one of the most significant contributors to this achievement and is a strategic element of the organisation.

Casa da Música has the following spaces:

- Sala Suggia, main room, with 1228 seats, 756,92 m²;
- Sala 2, with 300 seats, 650 standing seats, 326,23 m²;
- 10 rehearsal rooms, some for orchestras and other for small ensembles and soloists, 910 m²;
- Ciber música, dedicated to the Education Department. This space has a window that looks onto Sala Suggia’s stage;
- Sala VIP, decorated in Portuguese motifs and covered with tiles, furnished with classical Portuguese furniture. It is used for small events, cocktails and press releases;
- VIP Terrace;
- Foyer Nascente;
- Restaurant and Café (430 m² + 250 m²);
- Parking area, 644 vehicles, 26.200 m².

As time has passed, Casa da Música, has become a provider of “new stages”: non-traditional spaces that are used to host performances. This is made possible by the continuous work of the technical team, headed by Ernesto Costa, who sees the Casa as a challenge every day, wanting to bring the best out of each and every corner. The restaurant has its own programming, as does the cafe, which offers a space and visibility for emerging creators. One example of the way how the space is used is the Jazz Summer Series that happens below the main stairs, in the entrance.

Some particular features of the building attracted unexpected users. For example, the “wave”, a prominence in the outside terrace, immediately started to be used by the

skate board community. One of the reasons for this preference is also very human: the Casa da Música’s teams’ rooms have glass walls with a direct view to the exterior. So, as soon as someone from the staff realises that one of these skaters has been injured, they are able to call the emergency services to provide assistance. Sometimes, an accident happens due to the skates ... a broken glass, a damaged door, but Casa’s team considers this community use absolutely priceless, so they don’t mind occasional repairs. And the “sliders” history does not end here ... At a certain point, the security team noticed that the lowest parking floors (-2 and -3) were invaded by another community: a group of roller skaters. Apparently, the surface of the parking area is very suitable. This fact combined with a very few number of cars being parked during the week evenings on the lowest floors, results in perfect conditions to rehearse.

When Casa da Música was near to celebrating its 13th anniversary, the General Director and the Technical Director, being asked about what they would do differently if they had the chance to create the project again from scratch, answered: “Maybe we would rethink the amount of stairs in the foyers. Maybe they push people to the outside, while we want to keep them inside”, states Paulo Sarmento e Cunha. Ernesto Costa refers to the need to pay attention to the functional side and to improve production efficiency.

In sum, according to Paulo Sarmento e Cunha, the greatest lesson from Casa da Música’s history is that “a building is crucial for fund-raising, attracting audiences, visitors and increasing corporate events”. Investing in an iconic building capitalises on the emotional relationship with all visitors: the ones who enter just to appreciate the space, the ones who attend a concert, come to enjoy a meal or merely contemplate the building from the outside. The way in which all involved with Casa da Música maintain their enthusiasm after thirteen years of its existence is strongly connected to the marriage between its artistic concept and the physical building designed by Koolhaas.

Still at a very early stage of its life, Casa da Música’s strong personality, present since its conception, has influenced other international projects in multiple ways, including aspects related to its architecture, such as the pioneering and successful usage of corrugated glass. The innovation of using this type of glass has demonstrated its good performance as regards to acoustics: it “splits the sound”. To ensure the sound is diffused rather than



reflected, several studies were made regarding the curvature of the glass.

Another example is the usage of white concrete on sloping walls. A lot of chemistry tests and adjustments were made in order to discover the perfect recipe that would make its use feasible. Their use and the fact that they would not be painted was not a very popular idea at first.

Casa da Música as a whole has influenced other new performance spaces, and has been cited as a reference in their development.

The world can’t live without Casa da Música: a Home that needs its neighbours in order to fully exist.

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All photos courtesy of Casa de Música