

Forming the Spatial Planning Division at the Department of Civil Engineering, University of Porto

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Abstract

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Before 1972, all students of civil engineering, at the Porto Faculty of Engineering, had almost the same curriculum of a six years long program. They had a choice between two subjects – Elasticity and Plasticity, and Railways – in the 6th year. And that was all.

Then, it took place the introduction of a beginning of specialization, limited to the last year of the program, in the following subjects: structures; civil construction; hydraulics; road and railways, and spatial (urban and regional) planning.

When the curriculum was the same for all students, there were two courses – Architecture and Urban Planning - which were taught during one semester each.

However, along the two precedent decades, the development of the country took place within the framework of plans (Planos de Fomento) regarding public investment, and urban plans became current. These were not compulsory but strongly advised, because some of the towns showed a visible growth and required orientation on land occupation.

The most popular of the five specializations was civil construction and the most ambitious students used to choose structures. Planning students knew that their most probable employment would be public: state agencies or municipalities. Nevertheless, those with a market interest in social matters connected with physical action opted for the planning specialization as well.

Decision was then taken to launch a Planning Division which would provide an annual course on Regional and Urban Planning, a practical Seminar on the same matter and a semester course on Transportation Planning. At the same time, the Division was in charge of the two traditional courses common to all civil engineering students: Architecture and Urban Planning.

I was then approached in order to be in charge of the new Division. I used to be responsible for practical classes on Structures, namely Strength of Materials but it was known that I had a particular interest in the field of Planning. I accepted under the condition that I would first attend an adequate qualification program, which was immediately granted. I started by a post-graduation program on Regional Development Planning at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, followed by a Masters' Degree on Transport Planning at Imperial College, London. That one was the first program to be provided by the Institute; the staff, either the permanent and

the external, was known to be excellent. On the other hand, Imperial College was, on that occasion, probably the best British institution on Engineering.

After my return I presented my Ph.D. thesis at the Faculty. At that time, there was not yet the possibility of equivalence of degrees given by foreign universities.

After that I became responsible for all the courses offered by the Division.

I must say that we have been lucky with the first students of the Planning Option, as it was known. They were enthusiastic and very participative. I associated them in the field work of applied research in themes which were relevant either for a deeper knowledge of Porto and the Northern Region or for the solution of public problems they knew.

We have arranged some means to publish the results and that was important regarding the reputation of the Division and the self-esteem of the students.

We also had the support of the then academic responsible, Prof. Barbosa de Abreu, and of an illustrious predecessor, Prof. Antão de Almeida Garrett. Both followed our work with attention and, we can say, with pride. This was the result of seeing their field of interest gaining relevance within the framework of the Faculty.

The Division diversified both its staff and the origin of its students. Today, we see numerous foreign students and members of the staff publishing and being consulted on matters of national and local relevance.

We can say that the Planning Division – Secção de Planeamento – has been a winning bet made 50 years ago.