Eduardo Nery's Urban Oeuvre

by Ana Filipa Candeias

Over the last four decades, Eduardo Nery, who was born in Figueira da Foz in 1938, has undertaken a vast amount of art work, investing in a wide diversity of media. His personal path has been considered exemplary, thanks to his ongoing, coherent interest in research in the field of "public art" and urban design and the renewal of the art of making glazed tiles. Creativity and rational control are indissociable from Nery's work. He is also known for his reflection, which is groundbreaking in Portugal, on optic art and kinetism.

In this article, we will focus on some aspects of this artist’s work that will enable us to reflect on the civic and social function of urban art that interacts in public places with the informal movements of city populations marked by the cosmopolitanism of the social players and by demographic concentration.

Before we go any further in our analysis of Nery's urban vocation, we will focus on a unique life project dating back to 1957, when the artist exhibited his art for the first time. Since then, Nery’s work has been preparing to transcend the diversity of practices and techniques (tiles, painting, tapestry, stained glass and photography) to return to the theme of space, as a metaphor or a physical extension experienced through rational construction processes, as we see above all in his public work, i.e. "inserted" in the city’s space to use the artist’s own words.

Nery studied Painting at Lisbon’s Escola de Belas Artes, having spent a brief period in the architecture course at the same school. His stay at Jean Lurçat’s atelier in France in the early 1960s seems to have been decisive in his orientation towards a social objective for art. Lurçat was a master who had been advocating a renewal of tapestry along more modern lines since the Second World War.

This time can be considered the diversion of Nery’s vocation for the plastic arts towards a functional, interdisciplinary orientation, which was consolidated along with his experiences in the field of painting and engraving.

Tapestry and, shortly after, tiles were fields that enabled him to investigate fundamental problems like public/private function, location and fruition of art. The interaction of this art with the location, the viewer’s eye, the possibilities of multiplying species and the framing of these in series are qualities that have emerged since then from his personal research into plastic form.

One of the first experiences that enabled the artist to test the inclusion of “form-colour” in architecture and urban spaces was in 1966-1967, when he was invited to design a monumental ceramic and tile panel for the Sociedade Central de Cervejas brewery in Vialonga, Vila Franca de Xira.

Used to cover a large blank wall over the brewery’s main entrance, the composition emphasised all the potential of tiles when used in elementary colour combinations contrasting in thickness, luminosity and saturation (from dark blue to lilac, from ochre to brown). The planned multiplication of colour surfaces based on contrast or tonal harmony enlivened a static, functionless wall with virtual kinetic effects controlled only by the geometric order applied to forms and colours, using ceramic squares as a basis.

Reflection on the colours involves prior knowledge of the effects of reversal, retraction and expansion that colours can have on each other in human perception, a study of the behaviour of coloured fields when affected by external variables such as time and speed of perception.

Control over colour and light resources, studied on the basis of the place and its physical and topographic characteristics, made it possible to achieve highly suggestive optical effects in which the colours vibrate and appear to move. Nery had been developing the same effect at the time in tapestry and painting (see the series Progressões de Cor or Harmonia de Quadrados).

Another noteworthy experiment that Nery undertook with tiles as a technique associated with Portuguese architecture and urban design was pavements in two-coloured stones. The 1968 project for the pavement around Praça da República in the Alentejo town of Redondo, showed how the problem of art for social public areas could be solved dynamically and creatively by renewing a traditional Portuguese technique (stone parallelepiped paving) with geometric design.
The idea for decorating the surface of the square suggested by Nery was implemented in partnership with the architect Formosinho Sanches († 2004), who was responsible for the urban renovation study. In this programme, Nery returns to Portuguese paving with its contrast between black and white and simple geometric forms, using variations in scale and size of the squares and lozenges, including in the design the axes defined by the surrounding buildings (Redondo Town Hall and Courthouse). These perpendicular or oblique axes give the pavement powerful lines, dynamising the horizontal plane of the square, which seems to undulate and break rhythmically with the movement of the eye.

He worked with Portuguese paving in other projects, such as Praça do Município in Lisbon (1997). Here, Nery took advantage of the existing spatial characteristics, a central pillory and the fact that the square was surrounded by perpendicular buildings to create a dynamic geometric pattern with optical effects reinforced by a combination of triangles, diamonds and squares. In the centre around the base of the pillory, which is a symbol of the city's historical identity, Nery chose circular lines structuring a mesh of triangles along radial axes converging on the centre formed by the pillory. The slightly raised central area of the square was also surrounded by a black circle, a symbolic shield protecting the small monument, representing a transformation of effects. Here, the triangles are arranged not in a circle but in an orthogonal shape in a contrast of black and white drawn by the crossing of straight, oblique lines.

The combined effect, favoured by looking from a distance, from the windows and balconies of the surrounding buildings for example, results not only in a virtual relief produced by the contrast between black and white but also in a general contrast between two complementary effects: the virtual rotational movement surrounding the pillory, which in turn is incrusteted in a mesh in permanent virtual vibration around the outside.

In other parts of Lisbon, Nery has been able to develop a highly personal concept of adorning urban spaces using a similar syntax of light and colour around apparent movement with combinations of geometric forms and coloured planes. Calling on space as a structural theme, Nery's urban art is based on a coherent concept of articulating different, virtual, imaginary areas qualified by the wealth and multiplicity of sensory effects on passers-by.

Using art to enhance the urban environment from Nery's point of view involved the construction of a “hypertext” from the text making up the city, with its traffic and incessant crossing of paths of people, cultures, images, buildings, facilities, streets and avenues. It is therefore integrated art and it is this integration, in situ, among the buildings, that lends it its greatest significance and civic and social wealth, in contrast to the idea of a monument (an isolated mark or object).

His first studies for the tiles at the Campo Grande Metro Station in Lisbon date back to 1983. The programme, which involved the artistic decoration of the interior and exterior of the station and its accesses, was completed in 1992 and that same year won the Jorge Colaço Municipal Prize for Tile Work. It took the form of abstract "colour-forms" (bars or small squares in contrasting colours on rows of white tiles) on the exterior and access stairs. In the main concourse, on the other hand, the artist opted for a surprise effect and included figures wearing 18th century dress, the so-called Figuras de Convite that Nery found in 18th-century Portuguese tiles, transposing them to a modern metro station and putting them to work as signs to guide passengers.

The figures appear dismembered, fragmented or inverted. The idea of movement is enhanced by the distortion of the surrounding design, which seems to emerge and hide on the uniform surface formed by the rows of plain tiles. These vibrant bodies mark rhythms, pauses and inclinations and define movements and routes that provide an entertaining backdrop for the passages and corridors in the gallery.

Once again, the tiles benefit passengers by working with the spatial syntax required to help people circulate underground. This remarkable work, a combination of economic and serial possibilities in geometric abstract form with an entertaining and even irreverent reference to traditional Portuguese tiles, shows a Dadaistic humour, which is the continuation of pictorial and photographic experiments since the 1960s and 70s. They
were taken up again, for example, in the covering of the pillars supporting the 2ª Circular viaduct (1998) in Lisbon, with superimposed or inverted figures and objects.

Nery experimented again with optical, geometric, abstract effects in combination with figurative images in the 1980s and 90s in several places in Portugal and abroad, such as the Health Centre and Nursing School (1986) in Angra do Heroísmo, Azores and the Employment and Vocational Training Centre (1987-1988) in Coimbra. In the latter he adopted a formula closer to traditional decorative tiles, twisted by the unusual layout of the figures and the suggested dismemberment of the rows of tiles. In a monumental panel (some 200 metres long) in the concourse at Macao International Airport (1995), the artist mixed cultural and historical references from east and west in an iconographic work celebrating friendship and cooperation between peoples.

He returned to the singularity of superimposed, sometimes inverted figures on a coloured grid in later projects like the tiles at Campolide Railway Station (1998) in Lisbon or the park on the bank of the River Trancão (1998) in Sacavém, where aquatic creatures and the river’s flow are suggested by coloured bands that blend into each other.

In other cases, we find humour in polychrome drawing on tiles that, when freely interpreted, can result in curious inversions in the forms of objects and structures, in the panels in the central concourse of Contumil Station (1992-94) in Oporto, contrasting with the abstract weaves and movements of the geometric patterns on the platforms.

In other works by Nery it is the simplicity and economy of surfaces and bars of colour that attract our attention. Among the most interesting, in Lisbon, are the tiles (completed in 2002) covering the viaducts between Avenida 24 de Julho and Avenida Infante Santo and Avenida de Cintura do Porto de Lisboa down by the river, as part of a vast urban recovery programme. Here Nery chose a refined vocabulary of coloured vertical bars of varying width in which shades of bright blue, yellow, orange and red contrast with paler, intermediate shades of pink and green, resulting in virtual, rhythmic perspective on the large walls.

Another remarkable experiment was the one that Nery designed for the interior walls of the Massamá tunnel (2001) in Queluz, on the outskirts of Lisbon. Here, the range of colours was restricted to a variation on two dominant shades, blue and yellow. The effect of the virtual movement is enhanced by horizontal bars of varying width, acting as guides of oblique strips in alternating directions. With this optical device, the static, vertical surface of the wall is decorated with an effect of geometric crests created only by the calculated interaction of the “colour-forms”.

As mentioned above, the genesis of these experiments in the transformation of flat surfaces into virtual volumes, animated by equally virtual movements can be traced to some gouaches and tapestries in the 1960s. From works like Estrutura Ambígua (1968) or Desenvolvimento Rítmico (1970), one of Nery’s most beautiful and original creations was born in ceramics for wall coverings: the prismatic module, the aesthetic possibilities of which, although less economical, were clearly illustrated in the magnificent, golden façade of the Barcelos Pottery Museum (1993-98), the inclination of the ceramic surface in smooth, metallic wedges, attracting light to a narrow, sunless street.

One of his first attempts at recreating ceramic squares in a three-dimensional module was in 1979, in a decorative panel designed for Varig Airline’s office in Lisbon, which included mirrors. The artist showed how the use of prisms with differently oriented oblique faces could produce effects suggesting the oscillation of light and shadow and the diaphanous inclusion of the movement, of people and objects in the work itself. During Lisbon ’94, European Capital of Culture, Nery was able to delve further into the possibilities of this type of ceramics, when he covered one of the stairways leading to the blocks in Avenida Infante Santo, for which he created three modules in three shades of orange (1993-94).

As we look back at Nery’s work, we can see how he plays with the pleasure and surprise that are born from a meeting between traditional techniques – tiles and ceramics, and the dynamics of geometric forms, which constitutes the greatest legacy of 20th-century art in the city. Leaving his mark in places where people pass, wait and move, he takes advantage of this ephemeral rhythmic but chaotic dimension of urban traffic.
Incorporated in places of transit, Marc Auge’s “non-places” (1992), his works do not break the spatial and cultural dynamic inherent to these places of passage and movement, places where people also wait (for an arrival or departure) – railway stations, tunnels or platforms.

Peopled by to-and-fro movements but not inhabited, with little cultural or historic memory, these places need friendly facilities and configurations, where the created form, although decorative, offers a structural harmony, not only with the buildings and their intrinsic functions but also with the ways of seeing and behaviours of passers-by with the tempos of passage, pauses and crossings.

Experiments with reversible perspectives, the modular repetition of simple geometric forms, bars and combinations of small coloured squares, the diversity of contrasts (light and dark, concave and convex, oblique and perpendicular, etc.), the play between visible and hidden form (in Figuras de Convite, as mentioned earlier) and the superimposition and disarticulation of organic forms by geometric forms are renewed means of dynamic, inclusive integration between structures, coverings, exterior areas and the possibilities of human perception.

Without denying its civic function, Nery’s work does not contradict the common experience lived in urban places as a discontinuum, movement, concentration. His way of offering himself to the anonymous eye does not break away from the fragmented, heterogeneous forms of common human perception when subjected to the tension of the body in movement in space and time.

Nery’s work, with its great formal coherence, evokes and updates that of the great pioneer of kinetic art in human spaces, Victor Vasarely (1908-1997). In Manifesto Amarelo, published in 1955, Vasarely clearly expressed the idea that the democratisation of art should be done through the joint presence of its forms in the city’s spaces. It should involve the abolition of the elitist conception of a “single piece”, of “artisanal”, and its replacement by multiple, multipliable, entertaining, dynamic art based on economy of the geometric form and virtual movement that can be born from its infinite combinations.

Nery’s urban tiles show us how this modern conception of art and design is not only not exhausted but also completely up-to-the-minute.

Fantasy is born from space and time, from the meeting between the formal programme and relative indetermination in reception. While his work is not intended to camouflage the absence of symbolic memory of new urban facilities, it offers a multi-focal image and suppresses the single, static perspective required of a motionless body.

The images converge into a modal identity under the vague, distracted gaze of people passing through the city’s labyrinth, caught up in their thoughts and interminable chores. The integration of these art forms into the world of the city thus results in syntax with a dual function. Just like a “hypertext”, Nery’s urban art underscores a design and lends additional visibility to the urban mesh. This gives rise to other functional possibilities of the works “inserted” into the urban space. Their cognitive relevance means that they mark the space or define and may even, in many ways, regulate (centrifugal or centripetal) movements, tensions and concentrations and flows of subjects, and can be forms sui generis of urban signage.

It is this fundamental suitability that Nery’s urban works offer for reflection and study in a remarkable, exemplary fashion. By creating (virtual) spaces “within” (concrete) spaces, combining abstract or figurative signs, coloured planes and contrasts and planned movements, we have not, as would be expected, an isolated monument, but rather the filling of interstitial space between buildings and urban design.

Sometimes austere or even “difficult” on first approach; the images or perceptive events proposed are interactive pointers formed at the intersection of the global language of geometric abstraction with local traditional Portuguese techniques of tiles and stone paving.

These pointers are there at the disposal of ordinary people, local inhabitants and foreigners alike, from the supposedly cultured to the supposedly philistine.
This urban art is also important because it can be freely re-created, incorporated and interpreted by the population in its representation of the city's space. 3

Nery's visual, optical, chromatic devices are therefore converted into elements of a socially inclusive signage coherent with the city's organic heterogeneity (Pellegrino, 1994): institutional heterogeneity of social practices, objects, forms, scales, hierarchies of values, subjects and social agents.

In the same order of ideas, Nery's urban art is shown in situ, radically different from the abundance of advertising images, goods enslaved to the interests of monetary gain, extremely redundant from a formal point of view. 4 It forces an encounter with the eye, penetrating a passer-by's field of vision, even under an uncertain appearance, unstable structure.

This is why we can speak of Nery's urban art as that of a democratic “hypertext”, not reserved only for more or less specialised elites. It awakens supplementary visual information in spaces or facilities usually devoid of aesthetic or communicational qualities as they are places of transit, rapid passage and waiting.

His work thus takes on an importance that is not only aesthetic but also results from the performance of an essential cognitive function in the city, making something that is normally not (e.g. the supporting wall of a viaduct), recognising, identifying, promoting mobility, signing, differentiating, even though the conditions of perception are transfigured by acceleration and speed.

These are some of the themes that Nery's urban work invites us to reflect on, providing a range of formal solutions that humanise the urban environment, stressing its intrinsic qualities: movement, discontinuity, contraction and expansion.

Nery's art is a network of many threads and colours. Space is there in it, as I have said, as a fundamental category, not only in the urban facet emphasised here but also in pictorial, post-pictorial or photographic experiences like the perspectives, the floating architectures and even the frames without images that we find as elements of a broader artistic and ethical reflection, for example, on the status of art in the contemporary age.

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1 This article is an adaptation of an address given by Ana Candeias at the ceremony at which Eduardo Nery's personal archives were presented to the DGEMN on 25 May 2005 and an article originally published in no. 10 of the magazine Idade da Imagem (Lisbon, January–April 2004).

2 Firstly because it is not narrative or illustrative, but also because it does not fit into the normal definition of a monument, in that the subject is not related to it in the same way as we relate to an object that usually has three dimensions, verticality, limits, boundaries and textures that suggest the possibility of handling, if only virtual.

3 See P. Pellegrino: Culture Architecturale, Culture Urbaine; in Figures Architecturales/Formes Urbaines; Geneva, 1994 (pp. 395 et seq.)

4 The hypertrophy of advertising images in Lisbon's urban spaces has not been given proper attention by decision-makers involved in urban planning. As a result, it appears as a natural “excrescence”, when in fact it is not. The current proliferation of images is naturally translated into an urban visual culture funnelled and reduced to the logic of mass consumption in a process that excludes the people on the pretext that they are not competent to decide what they want for their neighbourhoods, streets, public transports, etc.