Dear Manon Mollard

I am writing to you about an article published in the latest May issue of the Architectural Review, titled “Airbnb Machine: Fala Atelier and the holiday rental phenomenon” by the Atelier Fala, which I believe demonstrates a problem in the editorial standards of an often excellent publication.

I don’t want to convey the impression that what I am objecting to are the evident political leanings of the article, to which I am definitely averse. I admit to find profoundly objectionable how the piece shrouds in the by now generally discredited argument of “apoliticality” its active support for the neo-liberal gentrifying trends that have been impoverishing millions of people in big Western cities for the past few decades, and which has done incredible damage to the working-class populations of Lisbon and Porto in the past five years. But it is not this opposition to the political content of the article that motivates this letter, especially given that an issue on “tourism”, precisely at a moment in history when the fragilities and deficiencies of the sector are most exposed, would naturally give rise to a diversity of views. Rather, it is its systematic historical ignorance and counter-factuality, which reaches levels that simply could not have gotten past any editor who had a most basic knowledge of the Portuguese condition and its history in the past century. That there is a connection between such blatant ignorance and the political leanings of the article is unavoidable, but I want to reinforce my objection to its publication is not on the basis of the latter, but of the former. While the core historical narrative of the piece may seem innocuous to an uninformed central-north European mostly liberal audience, to a Portuguese audience, or any readership otherwise informed on Portuguese history, it reaches fake-news levels of disinformation and gaslighting.

The opening paragraph of the article should immediately have served as clue to the depth of ignorance that permeates the piece. The introduction of a notion that in this country nothing happened between the Republican Revolution in 1910 and the recent beginning of the 5-year tourism-sector boom is simply wrong, and underlined by a plethora of explicit historical falsehoods. It is there claimed that Portugal “took part in no world war, no natural disaster ever ‘graced’ its shore and modern architecture was denied by a soft dictatorship.” Of these, only the middle claim is correct. In fact, Portugal took part in World War I, and it subsequently went through a period of more or less continuous civil war until 1926, which was terminated by the establishment of the second European fascist regime, the “Estado Novo”, which became the longest lasting fascist regime in World history, lasting 48 years until 1974. This is reflected in the article with the “soft” dictatorship formula, which has absolutely no historical foundation (even if it is an ideological line the Portuguese far right has been advancing for the past decade) – Portuguese fascism was a perfectly “normal” fascism, no less extreme than Franco’s or Mussolini’s in Spain and Italy, and categorising it as “soft” plays into the unfortunate de-historicisation and cartoonification of fascism - where anything short of Nazi Germany doesn’t really “count” - that has become unfortunately normalised among both the far right and liberals in the Anglo-world, but which is still, fortunately, rejected both by the historical profession and by mainstream political thinking in Portugal. The Portuguese Estado Novo was a brutal regime which tortured and murdered its working-class and revolutionary opposition with impunity for almost five decades, and opposition there was to be murdered (I personally know dozens of torture victims and have a history of
political murders in my own family, as many militant Portuguese leftists, trade-unionists and communists do). It was also a long regime and thus went through its own internal transformations over time, which included a significant amount of tolerance and even active promotion of modern architecture, especially after the 1950s. In this, Portuguese architecture was not a particularly exceptional case – modern architecture began to be adopted by both private and, most importantly, state clients in large scales in Portugal at roughly the same time it was in post-WWII Europe, and for the same type of programmes, namely, municipal housing (mostly in Porto, which makes this article, coming from a Porto-based office, all the more egregious).

The article also completely ignores the large-scale colonial war that the Portuguese regime forced on its African colonies, which lasted the entirety of the 1960s till the 74 revolution, and which eliminated a generation of Portuguese youth and slaughtered the African peoples in the tens of thousands, leaving a profound historical trauma, and resulting in the forced return of the majority of the white Portuguese populations from the colonies in the post-revolutionary period, which contributed to the difficult economic condition the country found itself at that time. And similarly, it overlooks the social-economic miracle that the period started in 74 began, during which (leaving aside the radical and even violent political struggle between moderate democrats and various sectors of the revolutionary left of the first years) one of the poorest countries in Europe, which youth was ravaged by war, which political power structures and investment mechanisms had just been overturned, managed to construct one of the most complete Welfare-states in Europe, eliminate illiteracy, all but eliminate poverty and unemployment, guarantee universal free access to healthcare, housing, and higher-education, and generally vastly increase the material conditions of its people, in little more than a decade.

The complete historical ignorance, of both general and specifically architectural history, on display early in the article is the foundation on which it then interprets the contemporary period of the tourist-sector boom, itself that last big manifestation of the neo-liberal policy that has been destroying the Portuguese economy and Welfare-state since the mid-late 1980s, just like it has been doing to every other country in the collective “West”. The authors see this tourist bubble as a moment when finally something was happening in the country, for they have no understanding of the historical continuum from whence such bubble emerged. They correctly trace it back to what they deem the first real efforts in modernising the country, around the year 2000 mark, precisely the public initiatives that are most associated with state responses to the already, at the time, noticeable degradation of the neo-liberal service-sector based economy and its core financial sector, functioning as an early version of public funding to private finance, going through the construction industry as its intermediary, but always around projects that had no infrastructural or productive effects, but mere speculative effects on land value. Again, the authors ignore the incredibly vast amount of built works, with massive effects on the architectural profession, that were associated with the construction of the Welfare-state until the start of the 1990s.

Such ignorance establishes a base on which is built the ideological blindness that leads one to associate progress with neo-liberal globalisation, the tourist sector, “Ryanair, Airbnb, Starbucks”, as the article says. And even as the piece goes on to describe the emergence of the tourism boom in the country, it eliminates the debates
that have been surrounding it, both inside and outside the discipline. The policy of keeping the facades the same but renovating the interior appears placidly in the article with no mention of its diverse contestations (and they are diverse). There is no reference at all to the ongoing and increasingly radicalised political struggle for the right of working-class people in the city centre to keep their home, against the massive concentration of property in a few finance-sector hands created by raised land values. The authors play the “ambiguity” game in such a way as to indicate a certain ironic detachment, in typical post-modern gesture, but the message really is that all these potentially polemic issues are just bumps in the road of progress that architects, in their glorious self-centred depoliticised state, and, as is evident by this very article, profoundly historically ignorant state, would do well to embark.

While the Architectural Review should not be in the business of censoring political interpretations, even when they are far-right, neo-liberal, fascism-washing interpretations, it should be in the business of not publishing outright disinformation. An article such as this, presented as a fairly innocuous practice-focused view of things, is effectively carrying out a general simultaneously neo-liberal and fascist whitewashing of history, even if unintentionally, on account of its systematic ignorance and counter-factuality. By all means architects should talk about their apolitical practices, for even if all practices are conditioned by and reproduce certain political-economic conditions, architects as practitioners can only engage with the clients that exist, and can be apolitical as technical agents. But publishing a text such as this puts that apoliticality to an end, it is in fact a militant political act. And when a publication such as the Architectural Review publishes such acts, it should, not ideologically censor them, but require that they obey at least a modicum of historical accuracy, lest misrepresentation, ignorance and falsehood become themselves a political tool.

Best regards,
Ricardo Ruivo
Architect, researcher, teacher
Architectural Association School of Architecture