

RETHINKING FRAMES IN CONTEMPORARY AZULEJO

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ABSTRACT

This essay's primary objective is to rethink the use of frames in contemporary *azulejo* by presenting how artists have been approaching this subject, whether to rescind of frames or to use them. In order to achieve this goal we present six case studies, three of which focus on no framing as way to blend *azulejo* coverings in its urban environment, whereas the others demonstrate how the artists use frames in order to contemporarily reinterpret *azulejo* traditions.

KEYWORDS

Contemporary Azulejo | Frames | No-Frames | Public Art | Reinterpretation

RESUMO

O presente artigo tem como principal objectivo repensar a utilização de emolduramentos na azulejaria contemporânea, propondo uma perspectiva de análise sobre a forma como os artistas têm interpretado esta questão, optando quer pela sua presença, quer pela sua ausência. Para tal, apresentam-se seis casos de estudo, três dos quais reflectem a forma como os artistas concebem os seus revestimentos azulejares sem aplicarem emolduramentos, com o objectivo de integrar a obra na própria paisagem urbana. Os restantes demonstram a maneira como alguns dos artistas compreendem as soluções de remate, através de uma reinterpretação contemporânea da tradição azulejar.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Azulejo Contemporâneo | Emolduramentos | Não-Emolduramentos | Arte Pública | Reinterpretação

INTRODUCTION

Frames have been used on *azulejo* (tile) coverings throughout the centuries with the intent of delimiting, organizing, integrating and articulating the ceramic compositions with the architectural support in which they were applied. However, after the second half of the 20th century¹, the use of frames was gradually abandoned due to different reasons. On the one hand, the affirmation of the ceramics authorship in Portugal gave the artists more creative freedom, allowing them to reinterpret the *azulejo* tradition within their contemporary productions. On the other hand, the appearance of new urban equipments (Henriques, 2011: 27-28), such as public transport stations, viaducts and walls, also provided new aspects for the abandonment process, since they are known for their flat and long areas, contrary to churches and palaces. It is worth mentioning the arrival of this new architecture, shaped by the *Movimento Moderno Internacional em Arquitectura* (International Modern Architectural Movement)², which ignored bordering solutions, such as single and half *azulejo* frames (Tostões, 2002: 217-218).

Even though the artists had started to discontinue framing since the 1950's, its total abandonment in the 1970's is also related with their pursuit of breaking the boundaries between the ceramic coverings and its surroundings. This desire is associated with how public art started being seen as a means of urban rehabilitation, having sometimes been used as a way to construct the place³. In order to pursue its objective of requalifying public spaces, "constructing a place" uses artistic interventions which blend into the urban landscape with the purpose of respecting local lore and memories, making that place a part of the community.

Although the majority of contemporary artists who work with *azulejo* choose not to use frames, some still include them in their work but with a different interpretation. On the one hand, and following a more traditional view, framing is seen as a means to merge *azulejo* with its fitting area, to fragment or delimit it, in multiple sections, regarding the places or spaces where it is applied. On the other hand, framing may also be seen as a way to explore *azulejo* tradition, albeit subverting its function.

In order to examine these two approaches to bordering solutions, we shall consider six case studies referring to public art:

1. The *azulejo* covering on the embankment wall (1972-1982) in Calouste Gulbenkian Avenue in Lisbon's, by João Abel Manta;
2. The "Cota Zero" project (2011), by Catarina Almada Negreiros and Rita Almada Negreiros, in the new ticket hall of the South and Southeast river station, in Terreiro do Paço;
3. One of the main façades of Oceanário de Lisboa (1996-1998), by Ivan Chermayeff;
4. The *azulejo* covering made by Françoise Schein in Lisbon's Parque Underground station (1994);
5. Helena Almeida's work in Lisbon's Rossio Underground station (1998);
6. The frames of Add Fuel as part of his "Devolver o *azulejo* à rua" project (since 2012).

1. As stated by João Manuel Mimoso (see the contributions to this issue), many 19th century main façades, albeit smaller, had rescinded the usual bordering solutions due to the exiguity of the wall surface.

2. This movement had Athens Charter (1993) as its guideline.

3. The term construction of place is related to the idea of a specific place as a part of everyday life, associated to people's memories and experiences. It is connected to the idea of heterotopia, presented by Michael Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau (Foucault, 1994: 754-755; Lefebvre, 1991: 26-33; Certeau, 1990: 159-163).

BREAKING BOUNDARIES: THE “DELIBERATED IGNORANCE” OF FRAMING

Ever since the second half of the 20th century, *azulejo* in Portugal has been seen as an element of urban rehabilitation. It was only during the 70's, however, that this ceramic material started being worked in public places considering a habitability angle. This concept derives from the idea as a part of constructing

the place, which foresees an examination of the attributes and dynamics of the place where the *azulejo* will be implemented so as to blend it in the urban landscape. With such an idea in mind, some artists choose not to include the traditional bordering *azulejo* solutions in their work.

THE EMBANKMENT WALL IN CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN AVENUE (1972-1982)

In 1970, Lisbon's City Council commissioned João Abel Manta (1928) to create an art intervention for the embankment wall in Calouste Gulbenkian Avenue⁴ [fig.1]. In order to blend his *azulejo* work, the artist designed a mural, which took into account the specifics, the chromatic and identity of the area

where it would be implemented, an expressway with an accentuated slope near the Águas Livres Aqueduct. Through an abstract and rhythmic game of forms and colours chromatically changing between cold and warm shades, João Abel Manta created a covering, which gives the drivers a sense of movement (Henriques, 2000: 85-87). As the architect Luís Fernandes Pinto points out: “the «decorative treatment» goes beyond embellishing an embankment wall, it is now an integral part of the landscape”⁵ (Pinto, 1994: 50).



Fig.1 · Embankment wall, 1972-1982, João Abel Manta (1928), Calouste Gulbenkian Avenue, Lisbon (photo by Ana Almeida)

4. João Abel Manta created this covering in 1972 but it was only placed 10 years later (Henriques, 2000: 85). At first, this project was meant to be a part of a landscape treatment initiative, with architect Gonçalo Ribeiro Telles (1992), but it was never concluded (Henriques, 2000: 85).

5. Translation by the author of this text, Inês Leitão.

THE “COTA ZERO” PROJECT, SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST RIVER STATION, TERREIRO DO PAÇO (2011)

The “Cota Zero” Project, by Catarina Almada Negreiros (1972) and Rita Almada Negreiros (1970), seen on the new ticket hall on the south and southeast river station in Terreiro do Paço, is part of a plan to expand and restore the station’s building⁶ [fig.2]. The remodelling plan accounted not only for its rehabilitation but also the conversion of the old river station into an interface which would connect it to Terreiro do Paço’s Underground station.

Considering the distinctive features of the place, the transition from a subway station (underground,

negative coordinate) into a river station (above ground, zero coordinate) Catarina and Rita Almada Negreiros designed an art intervention emulating the water’s surface and giving passersby an idea of emersion. In order to achieve such an effect, the ceiling and columns of the new river station’s ticket hall were covered with several blue, white and black *azulejos*. As Catarina Almada Negreiros stated, “It’s as if it floats. The project was related with the cross section cut between the underground passageways and those on the surface. It is connected to diving, to the flow of travellers coming and going on a daily basis (...). It reflects, it doesn’t. Are we up or down? (...)”⁷ (Quintela, 2012: 2). This emersion feeling only happens due to the optic illusion given by the *azulejo* covering, which seems to expand itself beyond the ceiling due to the absence of framing.

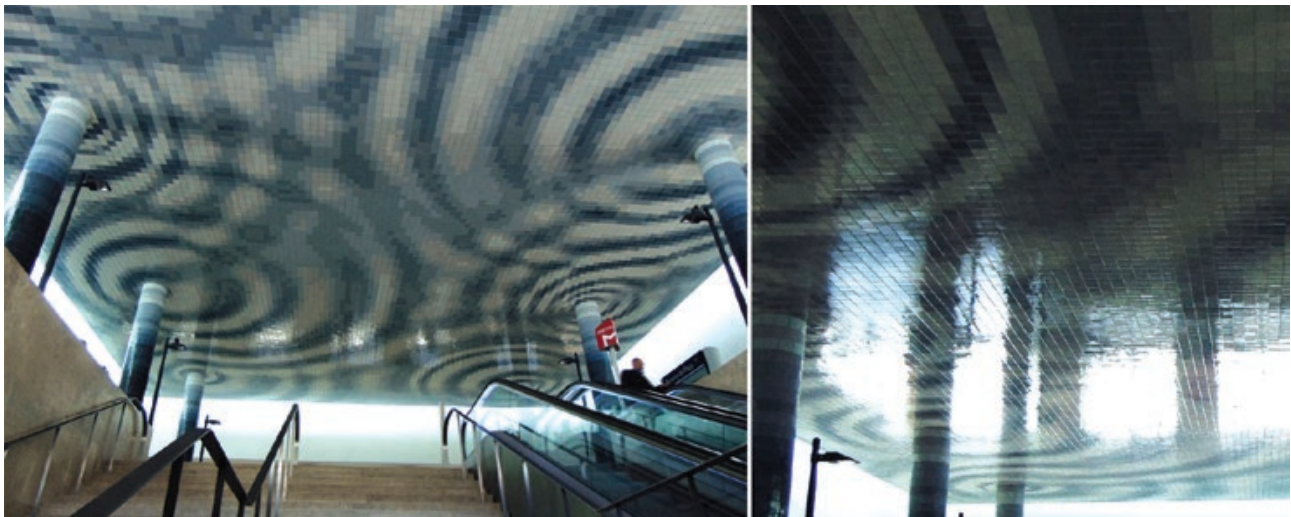


Fig.2 · “Cota Zero”, New ticket hall, 2011, Catarina Almada Negreiros (1972) and Rita Almada Negreiros (1970), South and Southeast river station, Terreiro do Paço (Lisbon) (photo by Inês Leitão)

OCEANÁRIO DE LISBOA (1996-1998)

The Oceanário de Lisboa (Lisbon Aquarium) was one of the main pavilions built for the international Expo '98. Under the theme “The Oceans – heritage for the future”, its goal was to (re)create a new link

between the Tejo River and the Lisbon’s community. One of the main façades of the Oceanário⁸ has been covered with *azulejo* work [fig.3] by the designer Ivan Chermayeff (1932)⁹, who got his inspiration from the blue and white ceramic coverings from the first half of the 18th century (Chermayeff et al., 1997: 6).

6. The original plan was conceived by architect Cottinelli Telmo (1897-1948) in 1932.

7. Translation by the author of this text, Inês Leitão.

8. In 2011, Oceanário de Lisboa was remodelled and a new construction on the south façade, by Pedro Campos Costa, was made. Much like the old façade, this new one has ceramic covering by Toni Cumelle Vandrell.

9. Oceanário de Lisboa’s main façade by Ivan Chermayeff, dates from 1996 even though it was only inaugurated in 1998.

Despite this reference to *azulejo* tradition, the designer went against the usual practice of framing and decided to blend them in the building's areas, such as doors and windows.

Ivan Chermayeff expanded the walls covering and created patterns with Information Technology (IT) symbols, only

perceptible at short distance, which change considerably when looked at from afar, where they appear to be elements of the sea's fauna and flora (Chermayeff et al., 1997: 2-3; Oliveira, 2000: 181). These sea creatures appear to be moving (from left to right, right to left and forward), enhancing this main façade's dynamics and enhancing its duality: proximity *versus* distance.

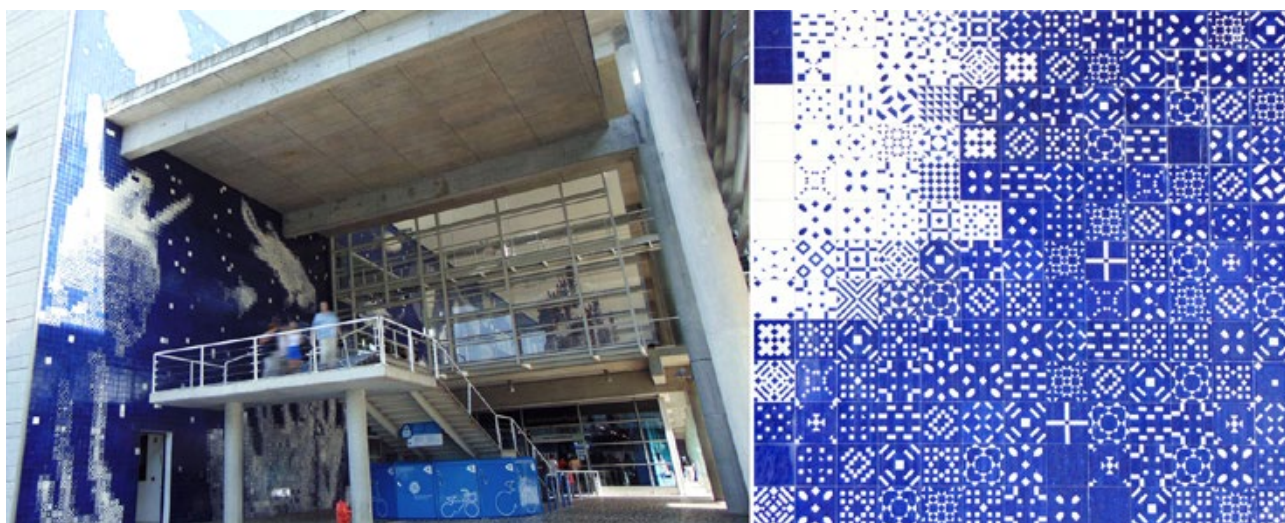


Fig.3 · Main façades, 1996-1998, Ivan Chermayeff (1932), Oceanário de Lisboa (Lisbon Aquarium), Lisbon (photo by Inês Leitão)

THE REINTERPRETATION OF AZULEJO TRADITION: THE USE OF FRAMING

If most contemporary ceramic coverings do not use framing, some artists propose different plastic artistic solutions and perspectives using bordering of *azulejo*.

PARQUE'S UNDERGROUND STATION (1994)

Parque's Underground station is part of Francisco Keil do Amaral's (1910-1975) first phase of the first stage in Lisbon's underground subway construction. Maria Keil (1914- 2012) was the artist commissioned to cover

the ticket halls, corridors and platforms with *azulejo* (Henriques, 2007: 17). In 1993 as a part of a policy for the rehabilitation of existing underground stations (Henriques, 2001: 140), Parque received new *azulejo* coverings by Françoise Schein (1953). The artist from Belgium kept the original architecture of the station as well as the *azulejo* covering by Maria Keil but suggested a new covering under the Human Rights¹⁰ and The Portuguese Discoveries theme for the boarding platform area, as well as the corridors and staircases entrances [fig.4].

10. Françoise Schein's work for Parque's station is a personal project by the artist and intended to register Human Rights in public spaces worldwide (Henriques and Mântua, 2007: 8).

Françoise Schein's project considered the use of wide *azulejo* bands, placed lengthwise and sideways, which highlight the vaulted ceilings, wainscots and the various written and illustrated designs of the ceramic covering (Henriques, 2001: 147-148).

By creating a framework using monotone *azulejo* lines to delimit several sections and by choosing not to make them blend with the architectural structure of the area, the artist has, thus, managed to incorporate both contemporary and traditional elements of the *azulejo* covering. Bordering solutions were most commonly used on windows, doors and other elements of the architectural support. In this case, the surface of the

station's walls have no such elements, meaning they are autonomous from the specificities of the support and highlighted due to their plastic composition which thrives to bring different rhythms of reading. The artist divided the ceramic covering into two levels (walls and roofs) with several sections. The gap between the walls and the ceiling were covered with three grey bands, with a light green and a dark blue frame around them, where one can see the underground station's name "PARQUE". The different sections, illustrating heaven's cartography, maps and texts related to Portuguese Discoveries and Human Rights (Henriques, 2001: 147-148) are framed by two lines of dark blue *azulejo*.

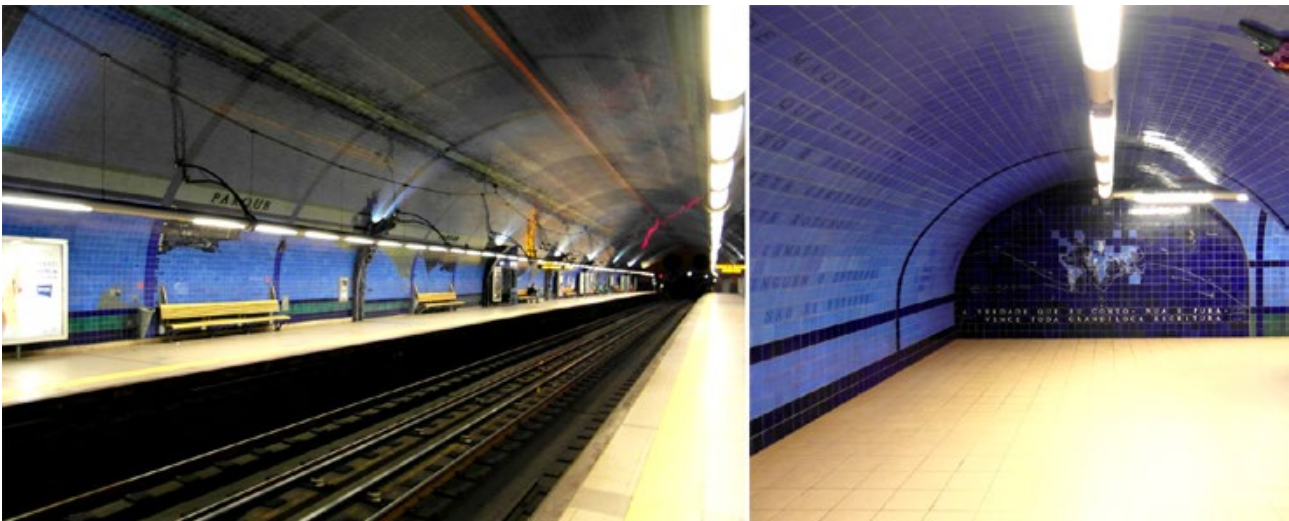


Fig.4 - Platforms, 1994, Françoise Schein (1953), Parque Underground station, Lisbon (photo by IngolfBLN [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons)

ROSSIO'S UNDERGROUND STATION (1998)

Much like Parque, Rossio's Underground station was also in the first phase of the first stage in Lisbon's underground subway construction and was remodelled in 1998¹¹. The main architect, Leopoldo Rosa, brought together two old ticket halls into one single gallery and Artur Rosa (1926), alongside Helena Almeida (1934), were the artists responsible for conceiving two metallic structures and a long frieze [fig.5]. The frieze of *azulejos*, which can be seen throughout the new underground station's ticket hall, is composed of a white and blue moving female form, simulating a photographic frame, with a yellow and blue limit¹².

Helena Almeida reinterprets the half *azulejo* frames idea with a more contemporary way. The artist sees this framing as a decorative element meant to guide the travellers as they journey within the station, placing it at eye-level, and not as a way to frame or limit anything. Her view of single *azulejo* frames is very horizontal, contrary to the traditional one in which such architectural elements can be placed in many different ways. One can say that Helena Almeida seems to take inspiration from friezes, seen on many early 20th century buildings, which present the same horizontal view. As seen on António Cota Ferevereiro's contribution to this issue, these friezes can be considered the framework of the building itself.

11. Despite the stations requalification, Maria Keil's ticket hall and passageway *azulejo* coverings were reused and are still applied in some parts of its original locations.

12. This idea was conceived by Paulo Henriques (Henriques, 2001: 155-256) and Ana Almeida (Almeida, 2009: 71).

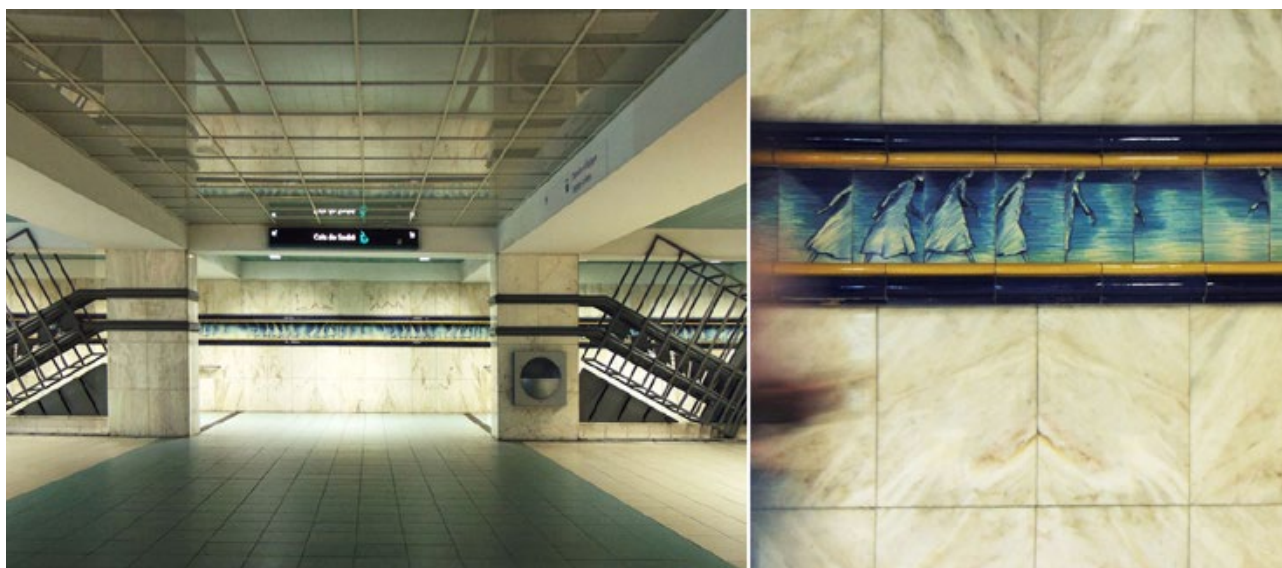


Fig.5 · Ticket hall, 1998, Helena Almeida (1934), Rossio Underground station, Lisbon (photo by Inês Leitão)

“DEVOLVER O AZULEJO À RUA” PROJECT (SINCE 2012)

Within the project “Devolver o azulejo à rua” (“Return the *azulejo* to the street”), Add Fuel (1980)¹³ has recently set himself to reinterpret the themes found in old *azulejo* patterns by inserting cultural elements, leaving behind certain “urban notes” in every city he goes through (Jornal I, 2014). Within the project, and up until now, he has used three frames.

“Street Ceramics – MTV” (2013) [fig.6] was ordered by the music television channel MTV to be integrated in a promotional video under the theme “Este é o ano em que volto às raízes” (“My wish is to return to my roots”) (Add Fuel, 2014). The music channel challenged the artist to take over a wall in Calçada de São Francisco, in Lisbon¹⁴. Considering the elements of the wall, in this case a window, Add Fuel decided on a traditional take of *azulejo* covering, using framing around the window in an attempt to leave behind that “urban note”, as the original project intends, he achieved to create an illusionary aspect between the ceramics and the viewer. When seen from afar, this urban work seems to be an average single *azulejo* frames but, at

a closer look, one sees comic book and videogame elements within the frame.

The other two framings within this project can be found in Paris and London. In “Street Ceramics – London” (2013), the artist reinterprets the use and function of framing in correlation with urban culture [fig.7]. Basing himself on *azulejo* tradition, Add Fuel framed an air vent but disregarded its structure. Instead of following the it’s edges of said element, the artist took a videogame approach and gave the *azulejo* a Tetris¹⁵ form which fits on the side of the air vent.

In “Street Ceramics – Paris’ 13” (2013), the artist once again the artist explored framing functions with yet another “urban note” [fig.8]. This time he placed *azulejo* with a pattern inspired by 19th century single *azulejo* frames on top of a wall, a pattern found in many of Lisbon’s building’s main façades.

In what frames is concerned, Add Fuel goes against tradition. Instead of trying to create an actual single *azulejo* frame around an element, he tends to leave ceramic compositions open so as to create the illusion that they can be reproduced ad infinitum.

13. Diogo Machado aka Add Fuel.

14. This framing was stolen, which is why it can no longer be seen *in situ*.

15. Popular videogame developed by the Soviet Union and launched in 1984.



Fig.6 · "Street Ceramics – MTV", 2013, Add Fuel (1980), Calçada de São Francisco, Lisbon (photo by Diogo Machado); Old patterned azulejo (photo by Diogo Machado) (to be seen from left to right)



Fig.7 · "Street Ceramics – London", 2013, Add Fuel (1980), London (photo by Diogo Machado); Tetris videogame (image by Inês Leitão) (to be seen from left to right)



Fig.8 · "Street Ceramics – Paris'13", 2013, Add Fuel (1980), Paris (photo by Diogo Machado); 19th century patterned azulejo (photo by Inês Aguiar) (to be seen from left to right)

CONCLUSION

The presented case studies show how the use of framing is directly connected with the artist's views and how they see and work with *azulejo*, particularly in contemporary public art. Throughout this essay, we meant to demonstrate how some artists decide to "deliberately ignore" (Nery, 2007: 115) bordering or framing solutions, considering them as an obstacle in the act of blending the ceramic coverings with its environment. Others include these solutions as a way to reinterpret *azulejo* tradition in

a contemporary way, sometimes changing the original function of double, single and half *azulejo* frames.

As it presents a diversity of ways to use *azulejo* in contemporary times, this essay also shows how the use or refusal to use frames can be relevant in blending this ceramic covering style to the architectonic environment. This serves to prove that this subject is cause for debate today.

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