

# EÇA DE QUEIROZ BUILDING- SQUARE (CIVIC CENTER) 2003-2012, Leiria – Portugal

**Client** Municipality of Leiria

**Engineering** Betar (structures), Multitec (electricity, security, health), José Galvão Teles Engenheiros (HVAC), GR - Estudos, Projectos e Consultoria (water and waste), A. Teixeira, Gás-Engenharia (gas), CERTIPROJECTO, Arquitectos e Engenheiros Consultores (acoustics)

**Contractor** Comporto, S.A.

**Photography** Paulo Catrica

In the urban fabric of medieval origin and characteristics, narrow streets and scarce empty spaces, an abandoned typography collapses creating a vacant lot at the heart of the city of Leiria. During the years of economic and financial crisis, most of the historical centres in Portugal remained in a permanent state of ruin, decay and abandonment. The project for a civic centre in the recent vacant plot was outlined exactly in this context, in an effort of renewing the city centre and to fight its abandonment by bringing together younger and older populations in a new public space.

Instead of densifying again the city centre, the design maintains the rediscovered emptiness creating a public square to allow the city's centre breathe, to let the sun penetrate in the shadowy streets and to create different visual links with the surrounding buildings, historical landmarks and, finally, with the iconic castle at the distance.

Two volumes were placed at the lot's extremities, creating an intermediate space in between, a sloped and open-air square that also functions as an extension of the cafeteria located in the volume at the top of the square. In this volume are also located several multipurpose spaces for the activities of a senior academy whose members run the cafeteria as well. On the opposite volume, functions an activity hall for younger people, accessible by a ramp inverse to the one of the square, which nevertheless extends and embraces it, creating multiple points of view upon the square, the surrounding buildings and the city. Moreover, the two buildings create different relations to the adjacent streets through a play between compositional elements: a small stairway that links the street to one of the buildings or a continuous window projecting the interior of the building into the street. From whatever side one reaches the civic centre, there is this continuity between the different public spaces of the historical fabric recapturing other contemporary spaces and reinforcing the lost and now rediscovered or re-created porosities.

The dialogue between the past and the present is done without confusing image with reality, trying to escape to contemporary consumerist and mercantile idolatries. The "screen-façade" of the cafeteria volume fulfils the vocation of expanding the limits of the narrow lot, through a magical reflection of the city and its Castle above. The reflected image changes according to the variation of the exterior and interior luminosities, or with the aperture of the sliding glass panels of the cafeteria, and it reacts to day light and night, when the castle is lit. It mediates the visual perception of reality, distorting, emphasizing, and promoting its interpretation. But to unveil the reality, it will be enough to walk through the square to the cafeteria and, there, to contemplate the city and the castle in all its fullness.

