https://www.portugalresident.com/the-portuguese-world-exhibition-o-mundo-portugues/

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The Portuguese World Exhibition (O Mundo Português)

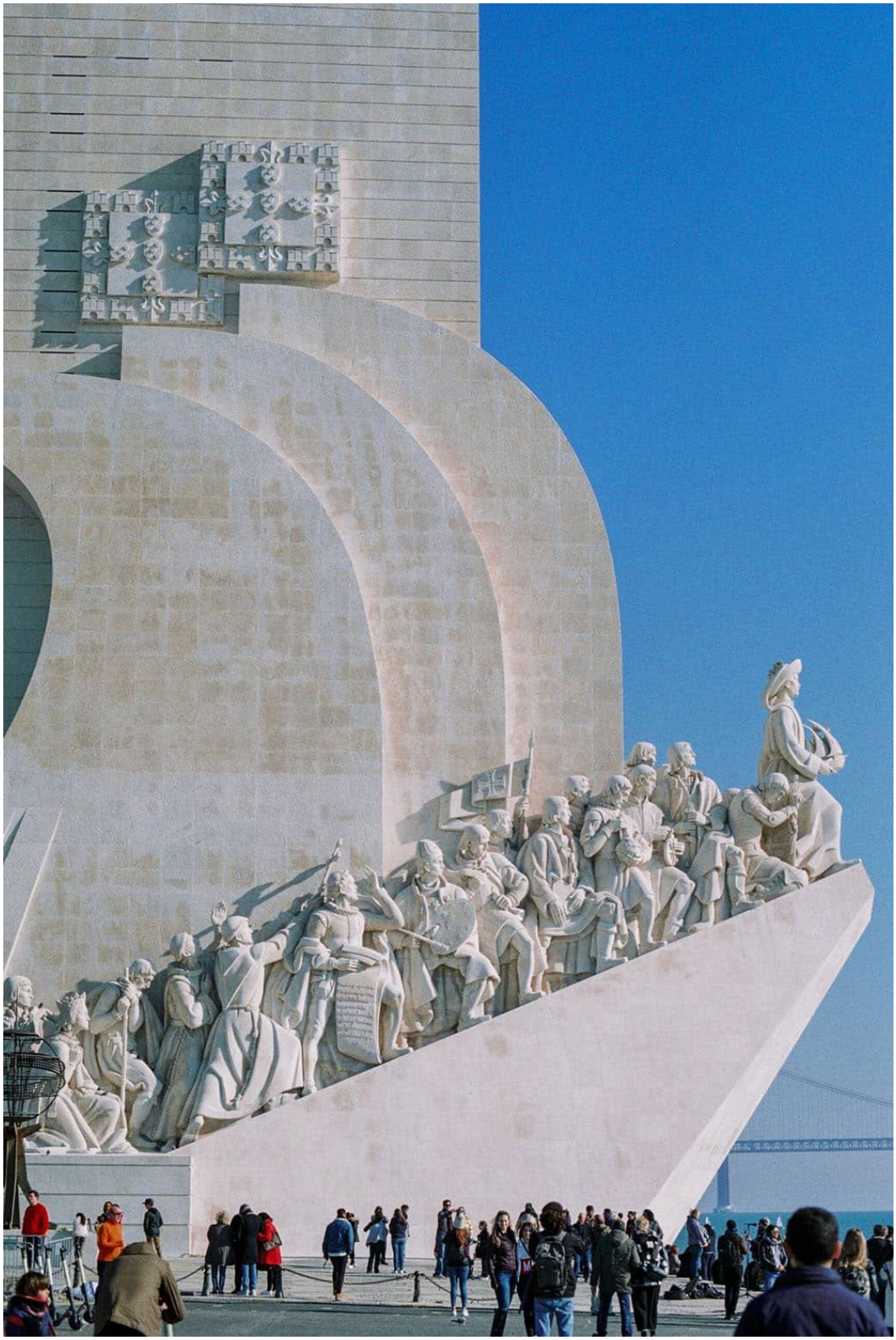
Portugal had a pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris in 1937. A participant in the decoration of the Portuguese pavilion with azulejos was the Algarvian Maria Keil. She went on to design theazulejo decoration for the Lisbon Metro in the 1950s and 60s.



Padrão dos Descobrimentos - portuguese-gravity-unsplash

The year 1939 opened with the promise of the New York World's Fair at Flushing Meadows, which was inaugurated on April 30, before it was properly ready. The display by the United States Navy at the opening had been cancelled. Since there was fear of a war in the Pacific, the fleet had been transferred through the Panama Canal to the western coast of the United States. When the war finally broke out in September of 1939, it had a depressing effect on the fair, particularly on the pavilions of those countries which were occupied by the Axis powers.

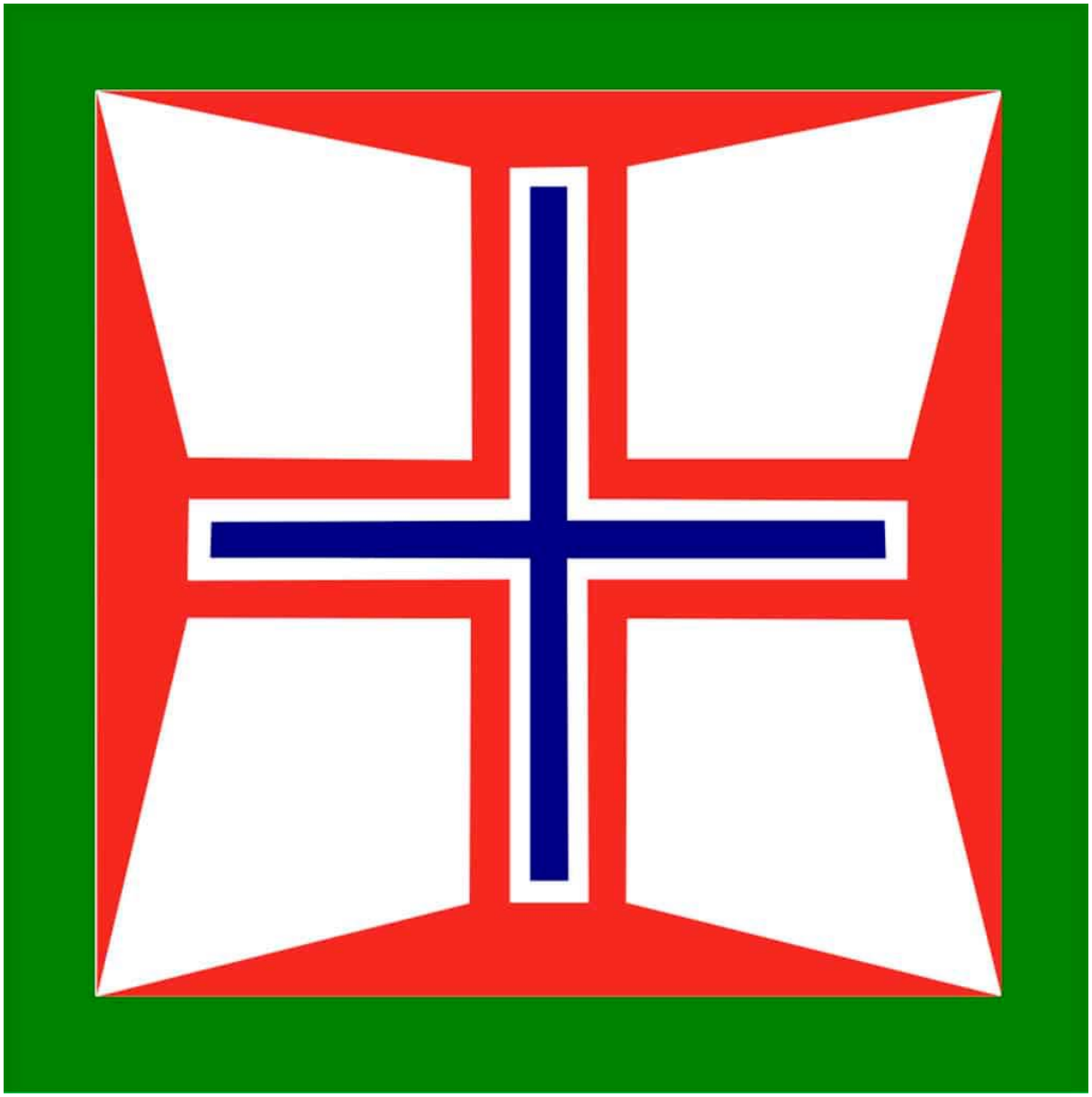
Even though Portugal had a pavilion at the New York international fair, Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar was planning a domestic exhibition which would open in 1940. The idea of an exhibition about Portugal in world history first arose in 1929.



Padrão dos Descobrimentos – Photo: Portuguese Gravity/Unsplash

Alberto de Oliveira, the Ambassador for Portugal in Belgium, suggested a double centenary celebration concerning both the foundation of the kingdom (in 1140) and the restoration of independence (in 1640).

The idea lay dormant for nine years until Prime Minister Salazar, in March 1938, issued an official note authorising the preparation of the exhibition in some detail, and he nominated Alberto de Oliveira as president of the organising committee. The secretary was the experienced António Ferro, Director of the Bureau for National Propaganda (SPN), who had directed construction of the Portuguese pavilions at both Paris and New York.



Flag of Portuguese World Exhibition

National pride required a grand occasion, a great family party which would emphasize the capacity of Portugal for great achievements, and, for the first time, Salazar would overlook his sacred principles of saving money, since there would also be continuing benefits.

Integrated in the great spectacle of the exhibition were desirable public projects around Lisbon, such as the Marginal Road to Cascais, the airport at Portela, the National Stadium and Monsanto Park, all of which were useful in the long-term, and the imposing Jardim do Império in front of the Jerónimos.

Additionally, at the time when the Estado Novo was still establishing itself with its new constitution, the exhibition would take on a new dimension in terms of people and material. It would transform the nature of the regime and public perception of it.

One of Salazar's first moves in May of 1938 was to bring back Duarte Pacheco into government as Minister of Public Works and Communications and, as he retained his post as President of the Lisbon Câmara, Salazar gave him full powers to transform the city into the imperial capital as idealised by the government of the Estado Novo.

Pacheco began a series of authorised expropriations, giving proprietors no alternative. In two years, he had expropriated properties with an area of 1,300 hectares, a sixth of the total area of the capital. Within this total were 560,000m2 in Belém between the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos and the river, where old housing was demolished to make way for the Exposição Histórica do Mundo Português.



Museu de Arte Popular

Over 18 months, the works establishing the exhibition involved 5,000 workmen, 17 architects, 43 painter-decorators and more than 1,000 supporting workers. Against the advice of traditionalists, António Ferro followed the plans of the modernists who had made a success of the Portuguese pavilions at Paris and New York.

For Ferro, this new exhibition gave the opportunity to invent and institute a style of architecture, called *Português Suave*, which would be identified with the Estado Novo regime.

The 17 architects in the team which designed the exhibition were led by Cottinelli Telmo. The main pavilions of the exhibition were the Discoveries, the Portuguese in the World;

Honour and Lisbon; Colonisation; Folk Life; Portuguese Villages; and three concerning Portuguese History, Foundation, Formation and Conquest, and Independence.

The exhibition itself was located on the right bank of the Tejo and in front of the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos, occupying nearly 600,000m2. The organisers also had to deal with the renovation of this area of Lisbon, and were able to create a monumental Praça do Império in front of the Mosteiro, sided by two great pavilions ('Pavilhão de Honra e de Lisboa' on the eastern side; and 'Pavilhão dos Portugueses no Mundo' to the west)



Nau Portugal

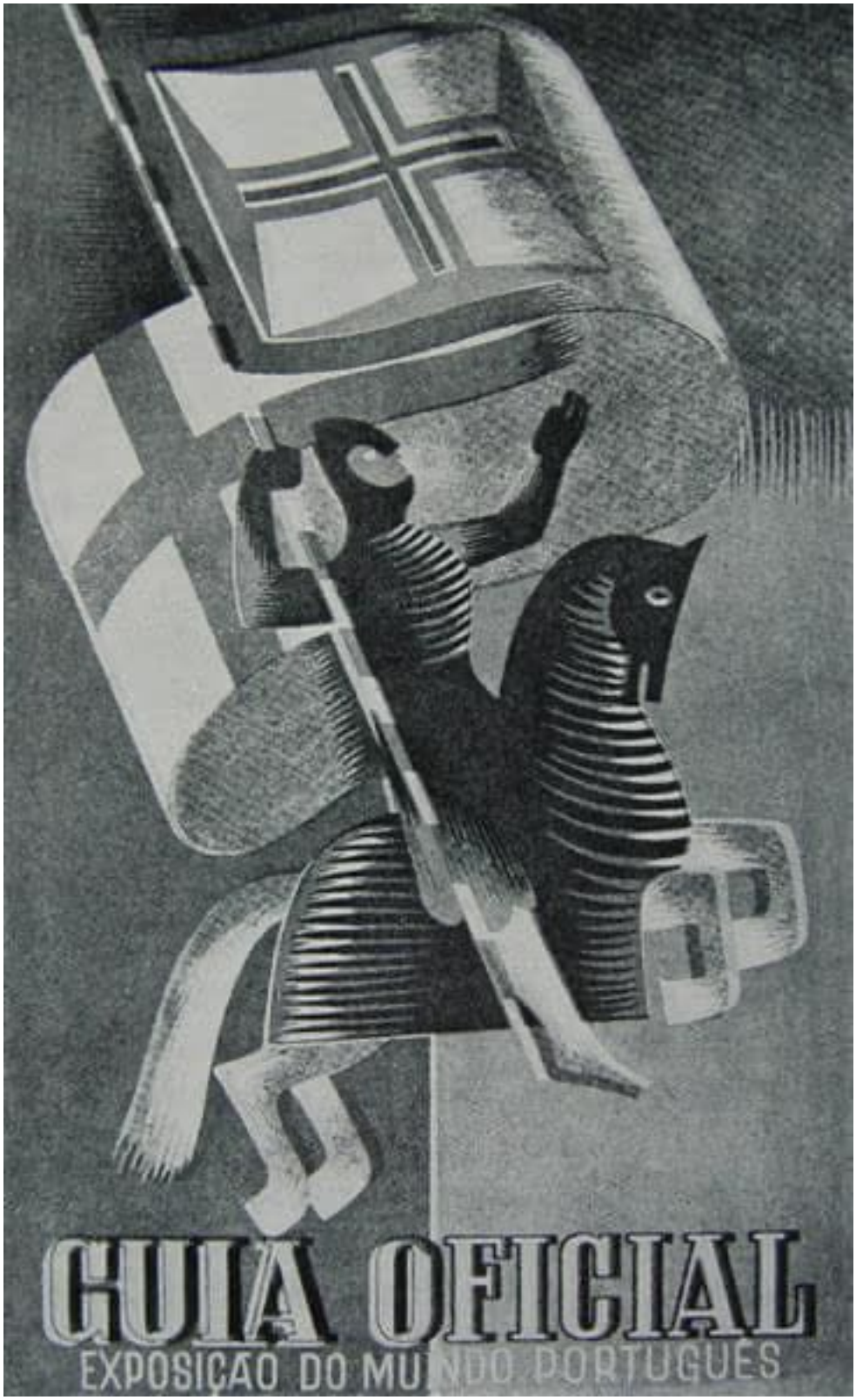
Different from the universal exhibitions in other countries, the exhibition at Belém concentrated principally on Portugal. The only other country invited to participate was Brazil, with its Portuguese background.

It was clear to the organisers that showing the past gave understanding of the present and a guide for the future, and there was a good connection with the Estado Novo. 1940 as the year of renewal was joined with the date of the birth of Portugal (1140) and of the year of rebirth (1640).

Salazar wanted to tone down the historical connexions and he admonished, "I think this is too much. We have to reduce. We cannot suggest that we intend to compare the work of the Roads Authority with the discovery of the sea-route to India".

The centenary parties celebrated through the whole of the country commenced at the beginning of June 1940 in Lisbon Cathedral with a *Te Deum* celebrated by Cardinal Cerejeira,

at which he called out *Arraial, Arraial, Por Portugal!* (Party, Party for Portugal!). There was another inaugural ceremony in the Castle at Guimarães, the notional birthplace of Portugal as an independent country.



Official guide to Portuguese World Exhibition

Preparations were not yet finished at Belém, but it was decided to go ahead with the opening ceremony on June 23, 1940, coincidentally the day after the capitulation of France. The exhibition was opened by the President of Portugal, Marshal Carmona, together with the President of the Council, Dr Salazar and the Minister of Public Works, Duarte Pacheco.

The various pavilions and attractions were opened one by one in the following days as they were completed.

The last attraction to open was the Nau Portugal (a replica of a 16th century Indiaman), which arrived at the beginning of September 1940. This replica of a galleon was built at the shipyard of Mestre Manuel Maria Bolais Mónica at Gafanha da Nazaré. It was constructed after a close study of the design of 16th century ships. Forty-two metres long, it had three masts and 48 cannons and was launched on June 7, 1940.

Thousands of people attended the launching but, as it entered the water, the ship immediately sank to the sad amazement of the watchers. By great efforts, it was refloated and, on August 2, made its way to Belém, suitably ballasted and under tow, guided by British seamen. There it formed a part of the Maritime Discoveries Pavilion at the exhibition.

On February 15, 1941, the date when the whole of Portugal was afflicted by a powerful cyclone, the ship suffered a second disaster as it grounded against one of the piers in the dock. It was refloated and sold, the masts were removed, and it served as a coastal barge, until it was dismantled for scrap in 1952.



Portugal pavilion at the New York World's Fair 1939

About three million people visited the exhibition. They admired the glory of Portugal made real by plasterwork and paint, and they also walked, visited the restaurants, or enjoyed the attractions at the neighbouring amusement park. Any foreigners who visited were also fleeing from imminent wartime danger as they sought to escape for distant destinations. In the midst of war, Lisbon was both partying and defying Europe.

Although many Portuguese attended an exhibition about Portuguese history, 1940 was the very worst time for an exhibition aimed at the peoples of Europe. This factor was naturally unforeseeable when the work was commissioned, and Salazar was uncertain about proceeding when the war broke out in September 1939.

He was persuaded that it would be more expensive to stop, or to destroy the completed part of the exhibition, than to continue to build and finish the work. Ferro went further: the exhibition would show our friends and enemies that we continue united and proud of our history.

The exhibition was due to close in October but was prolonged until December 2, 1940.

Two exhibits from this exhibition may still be visited. The Monument to the Discoveries was originally built in wood and plaster, and it lasted until 1958. Because it was so popular, it was then rebuilt in its present position as a permanent structure and has become one of the major landmarks in Lisbon, as well as a tourist destination.

The temporary Monument to the Discoveries of Portugal, the Padrão da Descoberta was designed by Cottinelli Telmo and the sculptures were executed by Leopoldo de Almeida. The original idea was to offer homage to Infante D. Henrique and they designed and built it in the space of eight months. The monument was inspired by the practice of medieval seafarers. At various points on their discoveries, the explorers used to erect stone pillars carved with the royal arms, with the aim of claiming Portuguese sovereignty over those locations.



Wind rose, near Padrão dos Descobrimentos

The temporary structure was replaced in 1958 by a concrete and stone structure which was inaugurated in 1960 to honour the 500th anniversary of the death of Prince Henry the Navigator. Its name changed slightly – it became the Padrão dos Descobrimentos.

Besides the main statue of Henry the Navigator, who is shown holding a scale model of a caravel and a map, he is supported by 32 smaller statues of other Portuguese specifically linked with the era of the Discoveries. The whole structure is 56m high, 20m wide and 46m long, and it is supported by foundations which are 20m deep.

On the ground on northern front of the monument, there is a wind-rose of a diameter of 50 metres, a gift from the nation of South Africa in 1960. The design is in white grey and rose stone and the 14-metre diameter centre shows a planisphere decorated with a mermaid, a fantastic fish and Neptune mounted on a man of the sea.

The pavilion of the Folk Life Section was refurbished and reopened in 1948 as the Museu de Arte Popular (Folk Art Museum). This museum was conceived according to the programme developed in 1946 by António Ferro, was organised according to the administrative divisions of the national territory in the Portuguese Constitution of 1933, and its projected name was "The People's Museum". Ferro was also instrumental in reviving and popularising Portuguese folk dancing.

The second exhibition on Portuguese soil would be the triumphant international Expo 98 on the outskirts of Lisbon, held from May to September in 1998. This Expo, not limited by a concurrent World War, attracted over 10 million visitors. It was on a different site but also on the bank of the river on the northern edge of Lisbon. Using the same public works rationale, Expo 98 was devised accommodating the new Vasco da Gama Bridge, a new line on the Lisbon Metro and the important new railway station Gare do Oriente.

Read more from **Peter Booker** about **Buildings that commemorate power in Portugal** or **Lisztomania – Liszt in Lisbon**.

Peter Booker

Peter Booker co-founded with his wife Lynne the Algarve History Association.
www.algarvehistoryassociation.com