



THE ATHENS INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Abstract Book

**15th Annual International Conference on
Architecture
7-10 July 2025, Athens, Greece**

**Edited by
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2025

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The Legacy of Asbestos in Public Buildings in Portugal

Due to its numerous properties, asbestos was used in many industrial sectors during the 20th century. Asbestos fibers have been incorporated into many building materials in the construction sector to enhance fire resistance, improve mechanical strength, or even optimize acoustic and energy performance in structures. The increasing awareness of the health risks associated with inhalation of asbestos fibers has led to successive regulatory changes in Portugal, beginning in the 1980s. These regulations progressively tightened the conditions for using this mineral, gradually restricting its application until its complete ban in 2005.

Although the extraction, manufacture, and processing of asbestos are banned, the EU continues to face challenges due to the so-called "asbestos legacy". This ongoing issue threatens public health and worker safety, as asbestos remains present in many older buildings, which are likely to be renovated, adapted, or demolished in the coming years.

In recent years, Portugal has enacted legislation on asbestos removal in public buildings, facilities, and equipment (Law No. 2/2011) and in company-owned buildings, facilities, and equipment (Law No. 63/2018).

Legislation was also enacted to protect workers from the risks of asbestos exposure in the workplace (Decree-law No. 266/2007) and to establish standards for the safe removal of asbestos-containing materials (ACM), as well as for the packaging, transportation, and management of related construction and demolition waste, aiming to protect both the environment and human health (Ordinance No. 40/2014).

This paper examines the Portuguese strategy for screening and registering asbestos in public buildings, as outlined in Law No. 2/2011. A survey of 12,944 public buildings was conducted in 2014, revealing that in 84% of cases, no materials suspected of containing asbestos were detected. The Working Conditions Authority (ACT) and the Directorate-General of the Treasury and Finance (DGTF) coordinated and oversaw the survey. A standard questionnaire was developed to support visual inspections of buildings, and an asbestos module was implemented in the State Property Information System on the DGTF electronic platform. The list of inspected buildings and their results were publicly posted on the government website. Despite these efforts, certain actions outlined in Law No. 2/2011 still need to be implemented, including an asbestos management program that establishes hierarchies and action priorities

to prevent the release of asbestos fibers into occupied areas and protect building occupants from exposure.