

# Fernando Távora: the Meaning of Time and the Reason of Things

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*Fernando Távora, Culture, Creativity, Drawing, Architectural and Philosophy*

## **/Abstract**

The text discusses the admiration and respect for Fernando Távora, focusing on his influence as an architect and philosopher. It emphasizes the importance of understanding Távora's thoughts and works in the context of his life and passions. The text also highlights Távora's emphasis on culture, creativity, and the ability to draw conclusions based on individual circumstances. Overall, it praises Távora's approach to architecture and philosophy as one that values learning, reflection, and purpose.

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I thank the organisers for the invitation to participate in this initiative that honours Fernando Távora on the centenary of his birth.

Talking about Fernando Távora is always a great joy, a great honour, but also a great responsibility. And I will certainly not add much to what has already been said about Fernando Távora.

For this tribute, I have thought or tried to present a thought based on a look at what surrounded and interested Fernando Távora (references, architecture, things, events, travels). I must say that every time new texts come to light, testimonies of his thought through new notes, my admiration grows.

I understand that all those who take care of his archives and libraries need time, just as we who want to understand his works and thought need time... Indeed, I think that these (works and thoughts) are not immediately understood, neither with a linear and chronologically considered reading, but perhaps with a glance that can connect distinct things and different periods. As Fernando Távora constructed it... a slow, integral and unified path...

Therefore, the feeling that persists is that one cannot know his position as an architect outside the framework of what his life and passions were. That is to say, Távora in the construction of each of his work desires and realises the creation of a set of multiple elements linked together, granting it the character of a sort of structure, of a system of thoughts endowed with meaning.

It has not been my intention to interpret the issues that can constitute a theoretical axis in Fernando Távora, but in confronting his thoughts, I have sought above all to understand how they were constituted, as an immanent and inseparable whole, fundamental pillars of his works and integral parts of his complex being and doing. Perhaps more than the search for a kind of cultural identity, Fernando Távora's thoughts on the world and life reflect a permanent questioning of the meaning of time and a tireless desire to understand the reason for things. As he states here referring to the strictly design issue, "the problem of composition and project is a problem of culture, of moral and intellectual formation, what matters is to understand the system of relations that binds the different levels of reality, the important thing is to know how to relate things".

Thoughts, works, objects that Fernando Távora, then or in the future, always wished could belong to everyone – a wish he expressed when, in 2001, he stated:

'Living is something that is priceless....

Priceless...

I will leave something extraordinary, I think it is great for me...

I leave everything here...

Everything you see here...

These trees, these paintings, these friendships, the bricklayer, the car-

penter, I don't know...

What I leave behind of people, of relationships, of friendships, of images, of texts, of, of...

About the work I did".<sup>1</sup>

From the wealth he left to everyone, we understand that Fernando Távora was a cultured man. And a cultured man is not an erudite man.

The cultured man rejects the sterile and encyclopaedic condition of just wanting to know more, but, on the contrary, bases his knowledge on a purpose of action, on the dimension of doing and on the value of creativity.

Fernando Pessoa very correctly separates these two characteristics "The erudite reads and knows, the cultured man, in general, the more he reads the less certain he becomes... because a cultured man is one who naturally feels, or tries to feel, and does not draw conclusions, or when he does, it is according to his state of mind at that moment".<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely this ability to draw conclusions to the mood of the moment that is linked to the 'circumstance' that Távora conveys from Ortega y Gasset: "I am me and my circumstance, if I do not save it, I will not save myself".

To save the circumstance understood as the capacity and responsibility that man has, as a being who thinks and acts, to be able to change and transform the reality in which he lives so as not to be a victim of it. A primary lesson also in doing architecture, which Távora advocates when he concisely states "that the opposite is also true", a sort of formula that apparently admits everything, but which encapsulates the need for study, reflection and purpose, for a choice.

The permanent heterodoxy of his philosophy of life, teaching, design and architectural works has always allowed Fernando Távora to look carefully where circumstance, context, place in time and space are factors that inform and shape reason, idea and project. By distancing himself from immutable convictions, he moves away from "superficial creatures", those who, according to Pessoa, always have profound certainties.

This daily, slow and extensive learning, which he philosophically summed up as "nulla dies sine linea", was extolled in his lectures, in his conversations, in the elaboration of his projects, not forgetting, however, to emphasise the importance of intuition understood in the sense that Henri Bergson attributes to it, i.e. intuition as an intellectual faculty that ends up resorting to concepts to express itself, a sort of "self-conscious instinct, capable of reflecting on its object and understanding it".<sup>3</sup>

This perception of the importance of intuition, thus always leaving room for doubt and vacillation, essential states for every act of thought and action, has

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1 Fernando Távora's testimony in the documentary 'Fernando Távora', RTP2, 23/12/2001.

2 Fernando Pessoa, *Sobre Portugal – Introdução ao Problema Nacional*, edited by Maria Isabel Rocheta, Maria Paula Morão, introdução organizada por Joel Serrão (Lisboa: Ática, 1979).

3 Nicola Abbagnano, *História da Filosofia*, vol. XII (Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 1985).

been pedagogically put into practice in teaching and craft through a maieutic process of critique, allowing for a progressive and increasingly aware pertinence of intuition in the creative act, while not lacking the duty to experiment and verify it. A process in which, however, emotion and passion should unite, allowing flexibility and distancing from all normative pretensions, thus giving space to a personal and genuine thought.

“And it is this passion for Life that I passionately want to transmit. For he does not live who does not immerse himself permanently and passionately in the passion of Life” Távora used to say.

In this capacity to dazzle and marvel at life there was no lack of critical judgement, which encapsulated a desire for order, for a precise refinement in the face of things, in the face of the world. An order permanently subject to new revisions but which, in the need for its precision and essentiality, manifested itself at every moment as perpetual, as permanent.

Perhaps for this reason Fernando Távora was a great collector, one who fights against dispersion, choosing, uniting, organising, ordering a collection of fragments so that they can be recognised as a whole, as harmony and permanence.

In 2002, three years before his death, Fernando Távora confessed “... I collect everything. Mainly books on architecture and poetry, always around Pessoa. I am very interested in ancient architecture and even more so in Greek architecture. My D. Sebastião of architecture is Greek architecture. It is the gods who accompany me from up there. I have a large collection of Portuguese statues. I buy many things. I have a collection of books on classical Portuguese and French architecture. There are many things from the past that I should still buy and many things from the future that I would like to have ... Despite everything I have had a good life. My problem is that, necessarily, I am about to die” he concluded.

If collecting for many authors means precisely preserving in order to eternalise, that is, to go beyond death (a dimension of the future, let us say), others understand it as preserving the past, as saving history and for history.

A past that was, in Fernando Távora’s view, a “selected” past, “a past that the present needs to know”, not to commemorate it, but to interpret and prepare for it, to create the future, as Lucien Febvre pointed out.

If Le Corbusier confessed, paradoxically for some, that he had only one master: the past; and only one discipline: the study of the past, Fernando Távora said “when I thought I would become a great modernist, when I really thought I was a modernist, I was far from being able to be or capable of being one because my modernism was not in my blood, because it was a result of my schooling and not a result of my education”. At this point, allow me to refer to Rogers, quoting him: “He is just as deluded who believes that culture based on knowledge of data is enough to guarantee creation, as he who thinks he can do without it: the difficulty lies precisely in establishing the dynamic balance between these antinomic tendencies, so that the result (the synthesis) is always the affirmation

of a present open to future indications and not a critique, however active, of the past, nor, worse still, merely the verification of the past".<sup>4</sup>

In Fernando Távora too, therefore, the tension between memory and research is established in an apparently antagonistic process between the duty of memory and the ability to forget; "forgetting is a way of selecting. A way of remembering...", he said, remembering as a way of forgetting in order to remain present. It is, therefore, in the conscious choice of these two values, memory and forgetting, and their critical balance that Távora identifies the permanencies that enable him to connect the past to a creative future and endow it with temporality.

In his architectural work, Távora denies false memory, that which is based on the uncritical repetition of forms, just as he despises "the manipulation of memory through the collage of styles"; what Távora always sought, and what he always taught us, was that "... it is not History in the classical sense, as a discipline, that 'interested' but above all the historical view of problems. ... Basically, it is the introduction of time, the awareness of time. Today we are forced to work on many histories and geographies, in many times and spaces at the same time, and if we really want to understand them, we have to study them historically".

Fernando Távora founded and defended the knowledge of history as an architect's working tool and material for reflection, which integrates both a process of direct investigation and study and a project of perception and appreciation of creativity. Thus, and through this tension that tradition establishes with renewal, Távora allows himself to identify the fundamental facts and to distinguish them from transitory facts, those that, in themselves, do not have the capacity to be part of a new tradition or do not allow for an authentic historical continuity.

The simultaneous fascination for history and for the astonishing reality of things present, encapsulates Fernando Távora's permanent desire to "understand beings and things" and the discovery of their possible relationships, as a way of thinking and a faculty of feeling. He said: "There is one fundamental thing about studying as we understand it today: it is comparisons; and every comparison demands absence of partisanship, knowledge of cases about which no value judgement is made but one is considered in relation to the other; there are no more or less true facts or cases, absolute facts or cases, but facts present and evaluated by comparison, relatively".

Relating things will therefore be part of the relentless action of 'knowing how to see', as Alberto Caeiro put it, i.e. unpretentious but definitely exigent:

"The main thing is knowing how to see  
Knowing how to see without thinking,  
Knowing how to see when one sees,  
And not thinking when one sees  
Nor seeing when one's thinking.

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<sup>4</sup> Ernesto Nathan Rogers, *Gli elementi del fenomeno architettonico* (Napoli: Guida Edizioni, 1990), 78.

But all this (what a shame we all wear a dressed-up soul!) –

All this demands serious looking into.

A thorough learning in how to unlearn”.<sup>5</sup>

Right from the archive and library of Fernando Távora, as his scholars confirm, emerges the almost methodological principle of the need to ‘relate’. In this regard, Ricardo Vasconcelos, one of his curators, states “there is no book that does not have a note, indications of other books, of things he had read, of drawings, of notes”.<sup>6</sup>

The development of his theoretical thought, based on or nourished by ideas from various fields of knowledge, was not, however, the product of meaningless mechanicality, but materialised in a net that Távora wove among the things he was knowing, operating, then, as a place of memory, tradition, project, tomorrow...

I will use, once again, the thought of Fernando Pessoa when he states “besides plebeianism, celebrity is a contradiction. A man of unknown genius can enjoy the soft voluptuousness of the contrast between his obscurity and his genius; and he can, thinking that he would be famous if he wanted to, measure his worth by his best measure, which is himself. Celebrity is irreparable. From her as from time no one turns back or contradicts himself. Every man who deserves to be famous knows that he is not worth it”.<sup>7</sup>

I would say, or think, that Fernando Távora never sought or fought to be famous. On the contrary, advocacy for the so-called “return to anonymous” in the field of architectural theory and practice was even a goal in his life. The way in which he tried to find in some others a reflection of his convictions, reinforced, in his own eyes, that particular anonymous character. The silent, stubborn path to a purpose, that of knowing and knowing himself, that of making sense of architecture, of being Portuguese, of life, were stronger than the desire to make himself known and allowed him great freedom and relative autonomy.

Today, we are witnessing an increasing underestimation of teaching and the profession of architecture at the expense of isolated research practices that swell the curricula, perhaps a consequence of a singular need for knowledge or even worse the result of an increasingly poor understanding of what architecture is or could be.

We observe, too passively, what seems to be consensual: that the contemporary city seeks its identity in the spectacularism or originality of certain buildings, and in the media coverage of these objects or of the authors who designed them.

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<sup>5</sup> From: Alberto Caeiro, “O Guardador de Rebanhos”, in Fernando Pessoa, *Poemas de Alberto Caeiro* (Lisboa: Ática, 1946) [Fernando Pessoa, *The Keeper of Sheep / O Guardador de Rebanhos* by Alberto Caeiro, bilingual edition, English translation by Edwin Honig and Susan M. Brown, (Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1971)], 65.

<sup>6</sup> “Fernando Távora, o arquiteto que encontrou Fernando Pessoa antes do tempo”. See: <https://espacodearquitetura.com/artigos/fernando-tavora-o-arquiteto-que-encontrou-fernando-pessoa-antes-do-tempo/>, (last view May 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas Íntimas e de Auto-Interpretação* (Lisboa: Ática, 1966).

In this regard and facing the Portuguese reality, Fernando Távora stated: “the contemporary Portuguese cultural phenomenon, while presenting obvious positive and hopeful aspects, presents other – and perhaps more important – signs of a sad existence and a compromised future. We refer, in the context of our professional practice, to the problems of the quality of the space that surrounds us, normally addressed by disciplines such as architecture, town planning, or landscape (...), among us, today, there is no culture of the city as a work of art and the country is being destroyed, with an alarming speed, in the day after day of its construction”.<sup>8</sup>

To recognise Fernando Távora as a great thinker, with a global project of architecture and life, is to understand the timelessness of his work and, decisively, its disconcerting but increasingly appropriate topicality. And it represents, for us, his students, a great pride, but above all it designates the duty to perpetuate his teaching, his thought.

As his son José Bernardo Távora says:

“Fernando Távora was always a man ahead of his time. He had a horror of incompetence, stupidity, lack of education, mediocrity. But he did not say it or rarely said it. He forgot it by reading, writing, drawing. (...) Reading, writing, drawing, these were his real interests. And above all to have time to think (...) In the end he was a happy man, very happy, I am sure of it today”.<sup>9</sup>

Fernando Távora would also have been happy to be here, for this homage, and he would certainly have been thrilled, hiding it under some seductive and intelligent irony, but once back home, he would have gone to sit as always, in the silence of the night, in his little armchair to quietly read, write, draw... to think about architecture, life and the future.

Thank you

Madalena Pinto da Silva

Milan, 23 May 2023

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<sup>8</sup> Fernando Távora, “Prefácio”, in Bernardo Ferrão, *Projecto e Transformação Urbana do Porto na época dos Almas, 1758/1813: Uma contribuição para o estudo da cidade pombalina* (Porto: FAUP Publicações, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> In José Bernardo Távora, “Fernando Távora: um homem de paixões, 1923-2005”, December 2017. See: <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:759887/PDF/> (last view May 2024).

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