

Fernando Távora

O problema da casa portuguesa

In November 1945, at only 23 years of age, Távora entered the national debate on the 'Portuguese house' by publishing an essay considered decisive in the construction of his identity as a designer: O problema da casa portuguesa. The essay, revised and expanded, inaugurated, two years later, the first series of the "Cadernos de Arquitectura", a series published in Lisbon, conceived by Manuel João Leal and Nuno Teotónio Pereira to disseminate the ideas of the Modern Movement in Portugal. The text is considered an initial formulation of the key idea of a 'third way': not an adherence tout court to the positions of the Modern Movement, not an acceptance of the regime's demands – celebratory monumentalism or the invention of a popular national style – but a search for a 'new realism' that combines design research on Portugal's specific conditions with an understanding of the innovations taking place on the international scene.



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Architecture is the art of matching the forms of a civilisation with its content.
W. LESCAZE

Architecture and archeology

It was felt at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the present that Portuguese architecture was losing what today is conventionally called its character, and that the perhaps decadent aspect that was manifesting itself in Portugal was merely a reflection of what was happening throughout Europe during this tremendous period, The problem presented itself to architects, and above all to the aesthetes, as a very serious one, because they were watching old and established forms disappear without being able to react to it with movements that would, if not resolve, at least diminish the crisis that was spreading so overwhelmingly. The romanticism still latent in these spirits determined them to look to the past for all the lessons to solve their problem, and here they are, armed with history, armed with a false interpretation of ancient architecture to resolve issues that are very present and very alive. A very superficial study of our past architecture and, in practice, the disconnected and illogical use of certain forms of that same architecture – this is the therapy used to cure the problem. A serious illness was treated by means of an even more serious illness and from the laudable intention of the reformers a sad reality was born. The *Casa â Antiga Portuguesa* (Old Portuguese House) which, within civil architecture and the daughter of this archaeological orientation, did not introduce anything new to Portugal; on the contrary, it delayed all possible development of our architecture¹.

While being laid abroad the foundations of the so-called Modern Architecture, or rather, of the only Architecture that we can be sincere about, Portuguese architects orientated their activities around the inglorious desire to create an Architecture that was local and independent in character, but not at all incompatible with the thinking, feeling and living of the world around them. It was, you could say, an architecture of archaeologists and never an architecture of architects. The major problems, certainly more the fault of the time than of the people, were not studied and, if nothing else, satisfactory solutions did not emerge; rather, if there was a beginning of chaos, it was tragically increased with yet another “style” that will be very difficult to banish from our architecture. Any style is born from the People and the Earth with the spontaneity and life of a flower; and the People and the Earth are present in the style they have created with that naivety and unconsciousness that characterise all truly meaningful acts, whether they are those of

This essay was first published in the weekly ALEQ on 10 November 1945. It is this article, now reworked and expanded by the author, that aptly inaugurates the publication of “Cadernos de Arquitectura”.

¹ We don't think it's necessary to define what we mean by an Old Portuguese House because, unfortunately, any reader will associate these words with a type of house, with certain characteristics of its own, a certain plainness and sweetness of form, a large number of useless details resulting in excessive picturesqueness, a complete lack of dignity and no sense of the realities of our world.

a man or a community, of a lifetime or of many generations. The reaction of the creators of the *Casa a antiga portuguesa* was therefore devoid of any real, living meaning.

False architecture

Through strange reasoning, it was established (that's the word) that our "traditional" architecture was characterised by a certain number of decorative motifs whose application would be sufficient to produce Portuguese houses. This gave rise to a new form of academism, whereby this attitude of mind means that Art can be codified into eternal forms, according to fixed and immutable rules. These men who believed so much in and were so attached to history were unable to reap any fruit from it, because history is worthwhile insofar as it can solve the problems of the present and insofar as it becomes an aid and not an obsession.

Architecture cannot and should not be subjected to motives, to more or less curious details, to archaeological trivia. The authors of these "Portuguese-style houses" forgot and still forget that the traditional forms of the whole art of building do not represent a decorative whim or a baroque manifestation. From the outset, and in their true sense, architectural forms result from the conditions imposed on the material by the function it is obliged to fulfil and also from the spirit of the person acting on the material. That is why in all good architecture there is a dominant logic, a deep reason in all its parts, an intimate and constant force that unifies and binds all the forms together, making each building a living body, an organism with its own soul and language.

However, the "Portuguese House" movement produced none of this, and we can say without fear that it was dominated by the architectural lie that characterises bad works and bad artists. If societies and people condemn lies, it's paradoxical – but significant – that a concept of architecture is being protected that is false, that doesn't correspond to any Portuguese truth and that as such should be banned entirely in the same way that we seek to eliminate from society any element that is harmful to it because it is a lie. We can say that there is an ethic in Architecture and if Man is the unit of the scale that measures it, the same qualities should be demanded of it as we all demand of the true Man, hence the conclusion that protecting the current concept of "Portuguese House" is legalised in a lie and the society that proceeds in this way, in any of its active forms, is a failed society.

Towards a Portuguese architecture of today

We are referring to the dangers that the past posed to the solution of the problems in question, especially given the way in which that past was used. Today's houses will have to be born of us, that is, they will have to represent our needs, result from our conditions and the whole series of

circumstances within which we live, in space and time. This being the case, the problem demands real and present solutions, solutions that will certainly lead us to very different results from those achieved so far in Portuguese architecture.

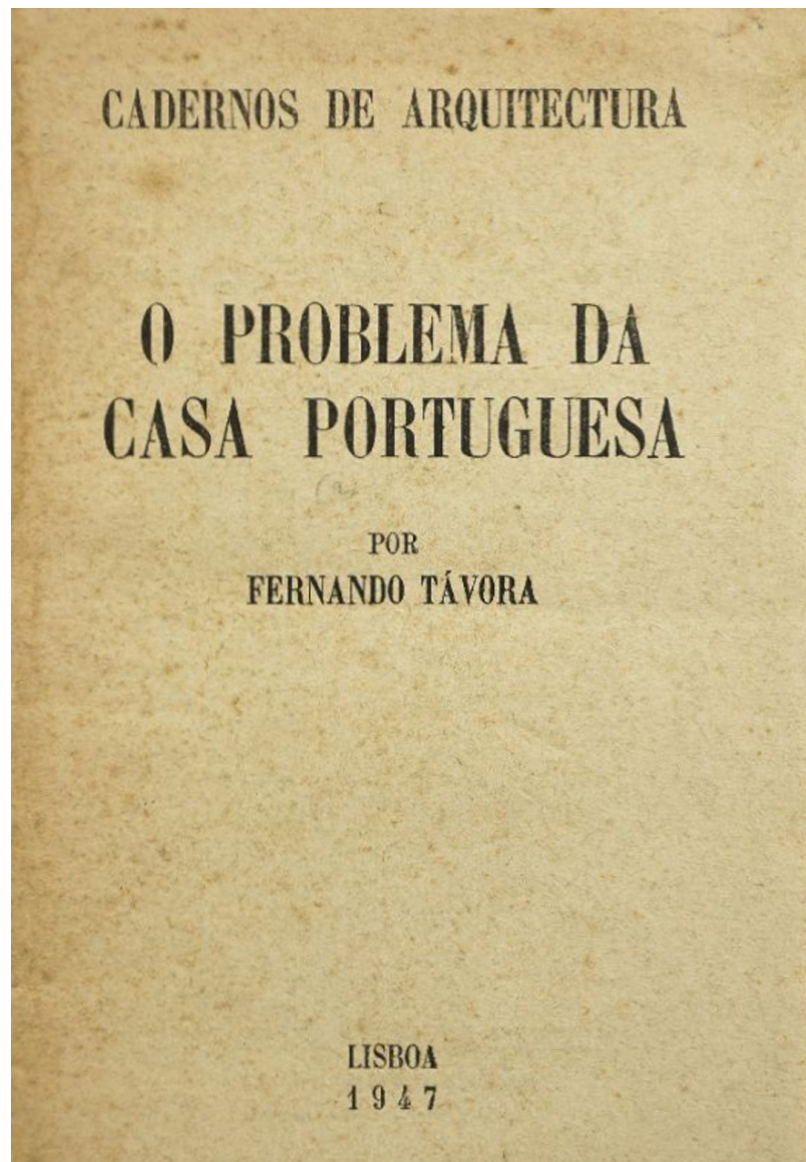
Vast horizons and fertile fields of possibilities open before us, whether we are young or old and armed with a new spirit, because everything has to be redone starting from the beginning. The work to be undertaken is so great that one might wonder if the realisation of its scale might not immediately invite us to give up.

We can all collaborate and it's wrong to think that only architects are responsible for resolving the case, or that the problem is merely aesthetic or formal. Architecture has something of everyone because it represents everyone, and it will be great, strong, and alive to the extent that everyone can see themselves in it as a mirror that reveals their qualities and defects. Collaboration will be required from the greatest number

so that the result can satisfy everyone; a serious, concise, well-orientated and realistic work is needed, the studies of which could perhaps be grouped into three orders: a) the Portuguese environment; b) existing Portuguese architecture; c) architecture and the possibilities of modern construction in the world.

a) In the study of the Portuguese environment, we should consider the two fundamental elements, Man and the Earth, in their present and historical development, mutually influencing each other and conditioning all Architecture that intends to be built within the Portuguese truth. They are the decisive factors to be studied in detail in all their manifestations and possibilities, and in those areas where they can directly affect architecture.

Conditions vary, Portuguese circumstances are different, today's men are not the same as yesterday's, nor are the means they use to get around or live, just as their social, political or economic ideas are different. If the degree of these variations is so great, why shouldn't the solutions to be found for today's Portuguese be different, much different? Why persist in staying when everything invites us to take a different path?



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Fig. 1

Cover of *Cadernos de Arquitectura*, n. 1, 1947

b) The study of Portuguese architecture, or of construction in Portugal, has not been done. Some archaeologists have written about and dealt with our houses, but from what we know of them, none have given current meaning to their study, making it a collaborative element of the new architecture. The past is a prison that few know how to get rid of gracefully and productively; it's worth a lot, but we need to look at it not in terms of itself but in terms of ourselves.

It is essential that in the history of our old or popular houses we determine the conditions that created and developed them, whether they were the conditions of the Earth or the conditions of Man and study the ways in which materials were used and met the needs of the time. The popular house will provide us with great lessons when properly studied, because it is the most functional and the least fanciful, in a word, the one that is most in keeping with the new intentions. Today it is studied for its "picturesqueness" and stylised in exhibitions for nationals and foreigners: there is nothing to expect from this attitude, which leads to the dead end of the most complete negation that could have been reached.

c) We are men of an era, tragic perhaps, very sad perhaps, decadent even, but in which not everything is decay and ruin, and which does not feed exclusively on the remains left by other times. It's not hard to see a promising solidity in contemporary architecture; a new character emerges from new conditions and, because these conditions also affect us, Portuguese architecture should be rooted in them without fear of losing its "character". Individuality doesn't disappear like smoke, and if we possess it, we have nothing to lose by studying foreign architecture, otherwise it would be pointless to claim to speak of Portuguese architecture. It is neither fair nor reasonable for us to close ourselves off, in self-seeking ignorance, to the works of today's great masters, to the new construction processes, to a whole new kind of architecture that is full of vitality and strength.

We travel around our cities, we visit the countryside and villages, we look everywhere for a new expression in our architecture and the conclusion is always the same and always the same: in Portugal today, architecture is not being made and, even worse, we don't even want to make architecture.

The situation only allows for the alternative of either moving forward or stagnating in the chaos in which we find ourselves. Faced with this dilemma, we have decided to opt for the first position, with the firm hope that it is the only one possible for those who were born to add to the past something of the present and some possibilities for the future, for those for whom to live is to create something new, not out of the stupid desire to be different, but out of the imperative determination of life that does not allow any stoppage or any stagnation, otherwise posterity will not forgive us.

It would be frivolous to think, and this was one of the mistakes of the creators of the Old Portuguese House, that the new architecture will emerge in a few years and all the problems will be solved overnight. It is impossible for today's

men to see the complete result of their efforts, but great works and great realities belong not to individuals, but to a community made up not only of those present but also of those to come, and in this spirit we will be happy to know that future generations will obtain the solutions we dream of and collaborate on, without however having the prize of their complete realisation.

Porto, 1947