

In the Interior of Time. Constants and Contrasts*

Fernando Távora, Aldo van Eyck, Porto School, Temporal Depth, Project Methodology

/Abstract

The significance of the role of the CIAM doctrine in modern Portuguese architecture is undeniable, particularly within the post-war Congresses.

The involvement of architects from the Fine Art School of Porto in the CIAM meetings will be empathetic to the different group interpretations of the Corbusian grid, with Alfredo Viana de Lima and Fernando Távora at the helm.

This empathy will be amplified with future participation in Team X meetings. The relations between Fernando Távora and Team members, namely Aldo van Eyck, will be fundamental in cultivating a more sensitive approach set on an open dialogue between modernity and tradition.

Fernando Távora's formative path will articulate these concerns with a precise notion of tradition triggered through his cultural/family heritage, implying the premise of the architect as a cultured man, which he will sustain and amplify throughout his career.

This article draws a parallel reading to the notions and concerns amply shared by Aldo van Eyck and Fernando Távora, using the Santa Marinha da Costa Convent as a case study, even though each author traced a personal path set inside a specific socio-cultural framing and influences.

The exemplary conversion of Santa Marinha da Costa Convent, set in Fernando Távora's home city, Guimarães, into a hotel facility will trigger an in-situ reading that depicts the physical conditions, restraints and values inferring an extended reading of time, recognising the interpretation of the ensemble's inception as a design tool. The convent's heritage condition will be amplified through a collective memory reading, where Távora's reminiscence will be embedded. An approach that will place the foundational question linked to the Porto School *modus operandi*: it's not just about continuing but how to continue.

This reading will underline a methodology that draws on thematic empathy between the two authors, built patiently by acknowledging the layering of time within occasion, i.e. the interior of time.

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The first post-war Congress, CIAM 6 (September 1947), designated as the Reunion Congress, was organised in the bucolic countryside, at Bridgewater in Somerset, England, away from the big urban centres, with English as the common language and MARS group as hosts.

This setting personified the beginning of a significant shift – in reading and interpreting the changing centre of human reality – in the following decades in terms of architectural sense and sensibility.

This shift, although gradual with some setbacks and contradictions, is closely linked to the inclusion of junior groups in the CIAM meetings and affairs associated to the publication of the TEAM magazine and the inception and gradual consolidation of TEAM X meetings, which will, in turn, inspire a whole generation to the possibility of change by reading and apprehending reality, not only, through the notions of space and time but also place and occasion. Time will start to be understood and interpreted in-depth as a symphonic continuum, where the past, as an informant, would be as important as the present in the future to be.

In 1967, Aldo van Eyck published in *Forum* magazine a text written in 1962 and 1966, which synthesized these readings in a crystalline and mature way:

As the past is gathered into the present and the gathering body of experience finds a home in the mind, the present acquires temporal depth – loses its acrid instantaneity; its razorblade quality. One might call this: the interiorisation of time or time rendered transparent. It seems to me that past, present and future must be active in the minds interior as a continuum. If they are not, the artefacts we make will be without temporal depth and associative perspective.¹

This sensitive reading was shared by a handful of architects in the Fine Arts School of Porto, under the protecting hand of Carlos Ramos, a small local community that believed in universality (modern movement premise) but within the discipline of architecture, a belief which later was to be the inception of the Porto School. Fernando Távora was among this community, with a particular individual role in building and enhancing these notions, which can be interpreted in different dimensions.

Firstly, this meant that the architects from the Porto School were not only aware, but also in tune with the current debates occurring in central Europe. In the case of Fernando Távora, this meant attending the CIAM meetings, as a CIAM Porto member, with Alfredo Viana de Lima and later Sérgio Fernandez, presenting his work to CIAM colleagues, namely Team X members, attending UIA meetings, or structuring specific study trips, through his extensive travels to the United States, Mexico, Japan, Thailand, Pakistan, Lebanon, Egypt and

* The inception of the present text results from a talk in "Távora 100 in continuità_pensiero e opera", Politecnico di Milano – ABC Department, Milan. May 2023. The title evokes Aldo van Eyck's text "The Interior of Time", written in 1962 and 1966 and published in 1967 in the magazine *Forum*.

¹ Aldo Van Eyck, "The Interior of Time", in Vincent Ligtelijn, Francis Strauven eds., *Aldo Van Eyck: writings, the child, the city and the artist, an essay on architecture, the in-between realm*, Vol I, (Amsterdam: SUN, 2008): 474-475.

Greece (Corbusian Grand Tour concept) as the intentions expressed in his “On board” *Diary can corroborate*.

This implies that although Portugal was a peripheral country with a harsh dictatorship that blocked out most of the news, especially linked to modern culture and architecture, Távora and his colleagues would be able to find intermediating ways to access vital and updated information.

Secondly, is how Fernando Távora’s formative path not only runs parallel to the research linked to Team X and its members during the 50s and 60s but is also informed by his family cultural heritage, i.e. arrives at these premises within his own personal journey, implying an autobiographical quest. This quest will be carefully orientated and informed by personal cultural preferences in such a way that he pursued a line of thought, the lesson of the constants, hinged in integrating into open dialogue, a way of understanding the meaning and framing of what came before him and what was around him.

The lesson was clear, “It is the function of history to know the existence of man’s manifestations and to determine the possible constants that this existence presented. It is a necessary and indispensable function that justifies all interest in past knowledge for the contribution it can bring to the present”.²

On the one hand, he is passionate about Modern Architecture, Art and literature, where the master’s rhetoric, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Fernando Pessoa, among others, are informed by an extensive library³ which he enriches avidly (with first editions), on the other, a cultural awareness framed by family values and traditions linked to an aristocratic background and education, which he identified with, and did not want to leave behind but blend with his modern education and values. In this sense, we can state that Fernando Távora’s collective insight and work are set on an autobiographical trigger.

Possibly, the most overwhelming testimony of this pursuit is an inscription Távora copied from Álvaro de Campos’ poem⁴, into one of his favourite books in his library – Le Corbusier volume 1 (1910-1929) – “ARRE, estou farto de semi-deuses! ONDE É QUE HÁ GENTE NO MUNDO?” (Ugh, I’m sick of demigods! WHERE IS THERE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD?)

Van Eyck will also reaffirm the need for a collective insight “Whoever attempts to meet man in the abstract will speak with his echo and call this a dialogue”.⁵

For Fernando Távora, this understanding could also be associated with the unfertile direct depiction (import) of international models or references associated

2 Fernando Távora, *Teoria Geral da Organização do Espaço. Arquitectura e Urbanismo: a lição das constantes*, (Lisbon: FAUP Publicações, 1993): 7 (translated by the author).

3 In the 40s certain books already stand out: *Eupalinos – L’amé et la danse dialogue de l’arbre*, by Paul Valéry; *La Rebelión de las Masas*, by José Ortega y Gasset; *La Decadencia de Occidente*, by Oswald Spengler; *Tu Y el Arte, introducción a la contemplación artística y a la Historia del Arte*, by Wilhelm Waetzoldt; *O que é arte?*, by Abel Salazar, among others. In FIMS/FT.

4 Fernando Pessoa, “Poema em linha Reta”, in Fernando Pessoa, *Poemas de Álvaro de Campos*, (Lisboa: Ática, 1944): 312 (translated by the author).

5 Aldo Van Eyck, “Place and Occasion”, in *Aldo Van Eyck: writings, the child, the city and the artist, an essay on architecture, the in-between realm*, Vol I, eds. Vincent Ligtelijn, Francis Strauven (Amsterdam: SUN, 2008): 471.

with the *tabula rasa modus operandi*, which ignored realities, past and present, and gave an incomplete framing and, most of all, a one-sided understanding of the problems at hand – the lesson of the constants. Nevertheless, the modern intent, the desire to transform, associated with a progressive insight on society, should continue to guide the architectural reading and structure the formal discourse.

Aldo van Eyck expressed this continuum concept more precisely:

It is obvious that the scope of this enormous environmental experience cannot be contained in the present unless we telescope the past, i.e. the entire human effort, into it. This is not historic indulgence in a limited sense, not a question of travelling back, but merely of being aware of what “exists” in the present – what has travelled into it: the projection of the past into the future via the created present – “Anna was. Livia is. Plurabelle’s to be” (who knows Anna Livia Plurabelle may yet preside over architecture!).⁶

We cannot deny the thematic empathy between Fernando Távora and Aldo van Eyck.

Associated with this line of thought, Fernando Távora will defend a more sensitive approach set on an informed, open dialogue between modernity and tradition, which blends his modern education and teaching career at the Fine Art School of Porto with the notion of tradition triggered by his personal cultural heritage. For Távora, there are three aspects, three constants, in the evolution of architecture: “its permanent modernity, the collaborative effort that it has always expressed, its importance as a conditioning element of human life”.⁷ However, his body of work will best explore the notion of harmonious cultural openness.

In 1972, Távora was presented with a very particular commission and a unique opportunity that would be the perfect testing ground and a milestone in his layered approach - the conversion of the Santa Marinha da Costa Convent, set in the north of Portugal, in his home city, Guimarães.

Fernando Távora had a personal connection to the site, a place where, as a youngster, he had visited and played among the corridors of the convent.

This proximity and familiarity to the site, this personal memory, will be blended into a broad and sensitive environmental reading set on the notion of heritage and collective and individual memory. This reading will be fundamental because when Távora receives the commission, the convent had already been abandoned and had suffered a great fire leaving the complex completely destroyed and in ruins. Távora looks at this as an occasion, as a moment to synthesise the notions of continuity that he had been deepening and testing through the years.

In the 1950 and 1960s, Fernando Távora had a very productive design phase, an exemplary body of work exploring the sense of place and cultural embodiment with the Vila da Feira Market (1954-1959), the Quinta da Conceição

⁶ Van Eyck, “The Interior of Time”, 474.

⁷ Távora, “Arquitectura e urbanismo – A lição das constantes”, 9.

Municipal Park and Tennis Pavilion (1956-1960), the Ofir Holiday House (1956), the Cedro Primary School (1957-1961), among others, and in parallel a resilient role in the Fine Art School, besides Carlos Ramos. This role advocated an informed modern overview of teaching methods and recognising the structure of the architects' task through interdisciplinary actions and pursuits (his travels to the United States sustain this intention).

At the beginning of the 70s, the conversion of the Santa Marinha da Costa Convent enabled Távora to be culturally syntonically – look at the built ensemble not only as heritage but as a collective memory, where his personal memory would be embedded. He looks at this building through these notions following an environmental reading where time will not stand still or be fragmented but flow harmoniously in-between the rebuilt architectural elements and the reborn spatial continuity between past and present, as in Aldo van Eyck's writings.

The first stage of the design will be an open but embedded encounter with the built structure and the site. Set on rigorous observations and technical surveys but also sensitive and sensorial readings, as if Távora and the site had to get mutually acquainted, and get to know each other better.

About this design phase, Távora would often say, with time, "I got to know the building better, and the building got to know me better, so we learnt from each other".

This first reading, built patiently by acknowledging the layering of time, where every construction phase is equally valued without prejudice, is one of the most important moments within the design. The *in-situ* reading depicts the physical conditions, restraints and values but also goes into an extended reading of time, implying a rigorous parallel research phase (archives and libraries) in order to fully understand how it all came about, in reality, the inception of the complex [Fig. 1].

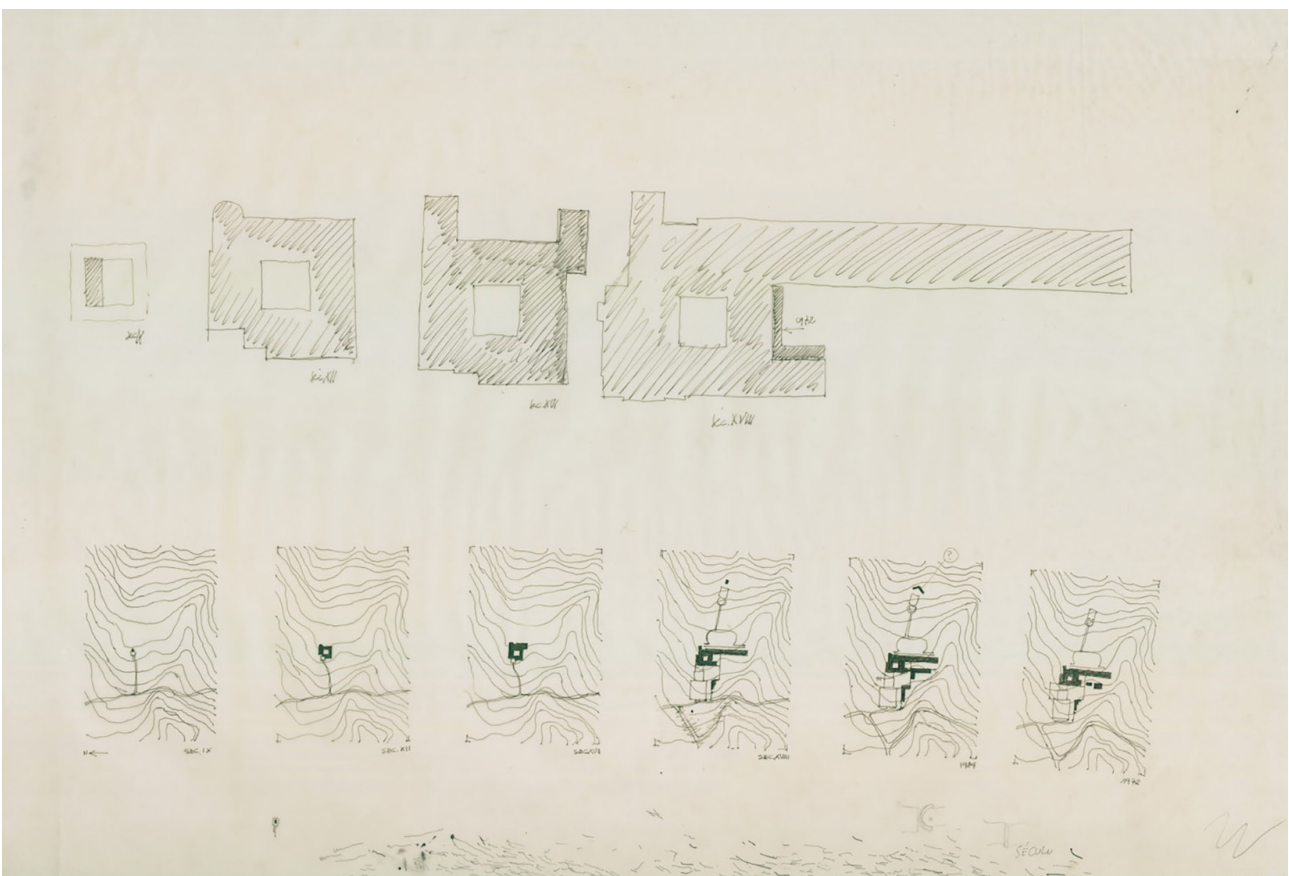


Fig. 1
Santa Marinha Convent,
General Plan – Existent, 1972
(FIMS/AFT).

of sleeping rooms required were not adequate for the dimension and configuration of the Convent's built structure.

One of the first lessons that Távora taught us was that when you reach a place, you must understand its nature and character and, within this reading, what it can hold, withstand, i.e. what the place can endure without losing its character.

Távora understood that the convent's formal structure – scale, proportion, rhythm and spatial sequences – would naturally limit the areas that could accommodate sleeping rooms and thus condition their numbers, imposing two extensions, a technical basement under the central patio and a new volume attached to the existing structure, dimensioned and proportioned to the new spatial units. For Távora, "the knowledge of the past is as valid as the measure of the present. It is certain that the indicated constants, by their very nature, have not lost their relevance".⁸



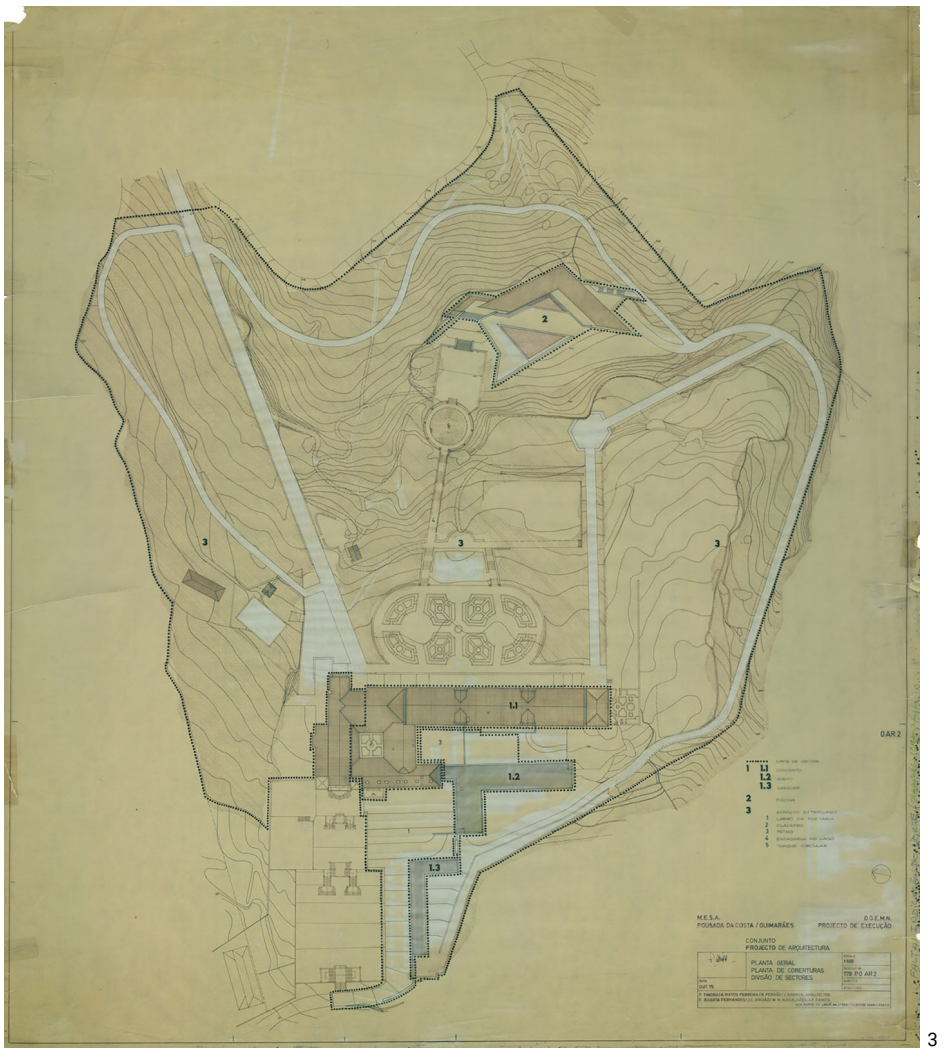
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Through a personal redrawing process, Távora uncovers the primary structure of the complex, a small chapel, and underlines a possible evolution sequence of the whole built system and its relation with the landscape by identifying the different four extension phases from the 10th century up to the 18th century [Fig. 2].

So, through this survey, Távora intends to underline how the system would naturally evolve by rendering a volume that extends one of the existing wings, the smaller volume associated with the main *façade*. Here is the idea of interpreting

⁸ Távora, "Arquitectura e urbanismo – A lição das constantes", 17.

Fig. 2
Santa Marinha Convent, Survey rendering on extension phases – 10th to 18th century, n.d. (FIMS/AFT).



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the reading of time, not only as a descriptor but as a design operator, a tool in siting the new volume.

Looking at the drawings of the new volume, we understand that although he is trying to complement the pre-existing structure in a natural extension sequence, Távora does not just want to mimic the past. He wants to do a contemporary building with its own identifiable constructive system and architectural expression. A volume that has its own identity, although set in open dialogue within a pre-existing palimpsest [Fig. 3].

The project introduces something challenging to teach, to pass down: identifying the need to continue a pre-existing structure, but at the same time, it is not just about continuing but how to continue, and there are no set rules to guide us.

This is one of the most demanding lessons from Fernando Távora because it is not about giving us a recipe, a prescription, or even a menu. Távora poses an approach, an attitude or a methodology of how to break down a problem, identify its different components and select and hierarchise them within the pursued intent. The approach relies on the notion of the architect as a cultured man who should have enough information to identify the different issues and make educated choices.

Fig. 3
Santa Marinha Convent,
General Plan – Proposal, 1975
(FIMS/AFT).

As such, Fernando Távora had two main concerns for the design, how to bring back the pre-existing structure and integrate the new extension.

It was clear that Távora wanted to evoke the memory of Santa Marinha da Costa Convent, but he did not simply want to repeat it by doing a pastiche. He understood the importance of bringing back the main character and atmospheres through identifying meaningful spaces, and this implied going room by room and understanding which elements each space needed to evoke the meaning of a convent set in his new intent.

This *modus operandi*, in the main cloister, will portray an extended timeline, dating from the inception of the complex, rendering a space filled with distinctive original architectural elements from different periods overlapping in open or suggested dialogue, activating an interwoven continuum flow of time.

In contrast, on the opposite side of the complex, the well-preserved granite balcony that overlooks the landscape and ends the main corridor, an emphatic enfilade of cells, is simply restored and completed by redoing the wooden ceiling and wall tiles in its original technique and expression, respecting the craftsman's metier.

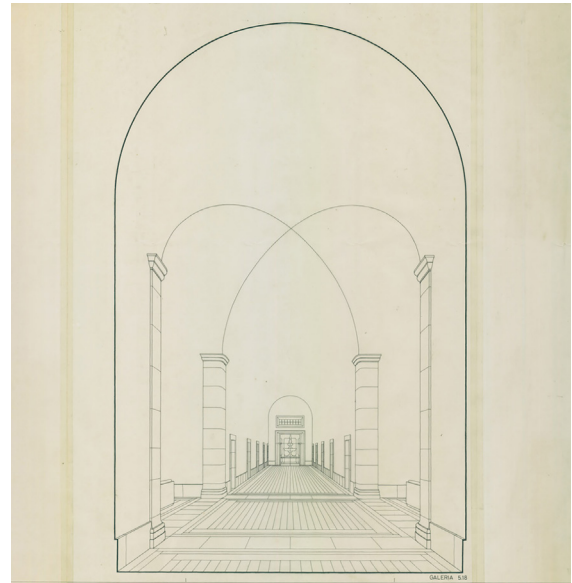
In the other spaces, like the main corridor, that had almost disappeared in the fire, Távora brings the idea of the void as a powerful space, i.e. the idea of architecture being more than a simple mould [Fig. 4].

Távora brings back a cleansed vaulted space, entirely cast into existing transitional features giving value to the essential architectural elements in order to evoke the atmosphere of the convent as it was within the small hotel it is now.

This idea can also be linked to Luigi Moretti's 1950s experimentation, an apparent link between Portuguese and Italian architecture. Távora is passionate about Italy's poetic circumstance, be it through the classics, the notions of Luigi Moretti, Ernest N. Rogers and Carlo Scarpa, among others, or even the timeless approach rooted in BBPR's work when linked to collective memory.

This passage of time is also emphasised in the volumetric relationship and architectural expression set between the existing buildings, within their different timelines, and the new extension.

The architectural expression in the new volume is in open dialogue with the language of the existing building, but once again, not by repeating the elements but by reinterpreting them, through the notion of texture, the lowering of the two-level volume, to be perceived almost as the pedestal of the pre-existing building and a distinct constructive system expressing the notion of the free façade. However, the continuous façade, mesh-like glazing, is rendered as an assemblage of elements that evoke the proportion, the metric unit, of the individual wooden window frames set in the pre-existing building.



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Fig. 4
Santa Marinha Convent,
perspective on main corridor
– proposal n.d. (FIMS/AFT).

In some perspective views, we almost do not detect the new volume, as it expresses a delicate recessed volumetric dialogue and takes into account the dominant colours and the materials – on one side, the white surface; on the other, the harmonious chromatic dialogue between window frames, individualised or continuous, and on the flat roof, interpreted as a platform, in terracotta ceramic tiles.

The footprint and expression of the recessed volume appear almost like a shadow, contrasting with the perforated expression of the clear white imposing pre-existing wings. The new volume in no way disturbs the space between the two main wings, creating a sequence of platforms that the tiled roof prolongs, keeping the original visual relationship with the surrounding landscape.

When we overview Távora's work, we have a clear idea that it is more than just about the significant principles, gestures and theoretical notions. Távora teaches us the importance of a precise design premise and a clear strategy; even because you have to ordinate all the different ideas and problems under that main principle, nevertheless, you must be open to the circumstantial. This openness implies a sensitive reading where "the stimulus of contrasts"⁹ come into play, maybe underlining van Eyck's premise, "I have heard it said that an architect "cannot be a prisoner of tradition in a time of change". It seems to me that he cannot be a prisoner of any kind. And at no time can he be prisoner of change".¹⁰

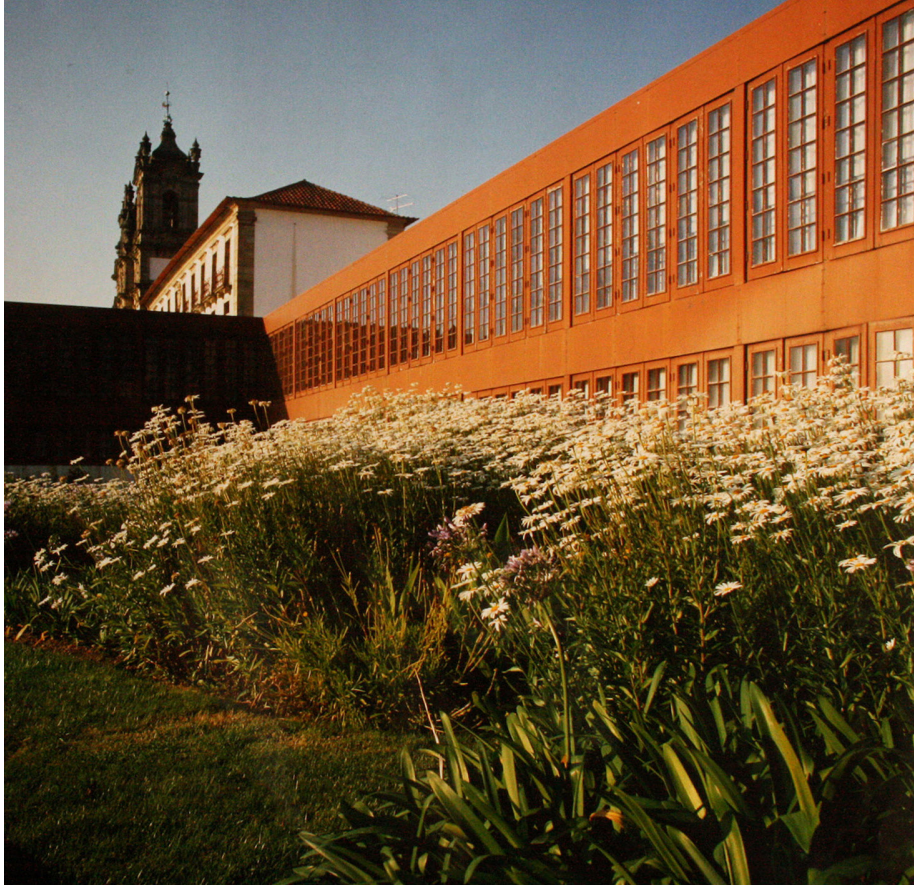
An example of this sensitivity is when the new volume and the pre-existing connect touch each other as if the two white-plastered volumes hold their breath in order to allow for a specific solution of transition [Fig. 5]. The pre-existing building, with its pilaster, defines the height of the new building, while a mesh of window glazing marks the transition separating the volumes but without dividing them.

Throughout the whole design, the idea of "the interior of time or time rendered transparent" is constantly underlined, confronting openly the different building types and timelines in the same perspective – the church, the courtyard volume, the main wings and the new volume are in total cohabitation. This is one of the more significant lessons regarding the approach to time. It is important to stress the word approach because, in reality, when we discuss the proposal, we are not interested in formal depictions of the design. After all, each case is a case, and each situation has its own triggers. Clearly, we cannot design without triggers, and for Fernando Távora, the triggers are to be recognised in the interior of time.

Aldo van Eyck expressed this concept with clarity, "If the lasting validity of man's past environmental experience (the contemporaneousness of the past) is acknowledged, the paralysing conflicts between past, present and future, between old notions of space, form and construction and new ones, between hand production and industrial production, will be mitigated. Why do so many believe they must choose categorically, as though it is impossible to be loyal both ways?".

9 Siza, Álvaro. "Fernando Távora – o estímulo dos contrastes", p. 7.

10 Van Eyck, Aldo. "The Interior of Time", p. 475.



5 |

As we have seen, the two authors share some significant common ground, concerns linked to understanding the circumstances of their time, although there is an aspect that we could consider somewhat divergent with clear results in the architectural work.

If we consider the direct quote, “Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more”¹¹, we understand Fernando Távora’s architecture and especially Porto’s community of practice¹², does not fully resonate, i.e. they do not share the same segmented understanding.

The four notions – space, time (associated with Gideon’s *Space, Time and Architecture*), place and occasion (as a revision of modern architecture shifting from the abstract grid to a more human-centred reality) – are equally significant and calibrated in Távora’s teaching and work¹³. This implies an approach set on an in-depth reading of reality but interwoven with a clear compromise with the poetic circumstance hinged on the sense of composition, materiality and experimental plasticity informed by, what Alison and Peter Smithson would call, “the heroic period of modern architecture”.¹⁴ They would go further “This heroic

11 Van Eyck, “Place and Occasion”, 471.

12 This community of practice is directly linked to Fernando Távora and the Fine Art School of Porto, as students, professors, close friends, and some as former collaborators, namely Álvaro Siza, Alcino Soutinho, Alfredo Matos Ferreira, Jorge Gigante, Rolando Torgo, Alexandre Alves Costa, Sérgio Fernandez, Bernardo Ferrão, Francisco Barata and last but not least Eduardo Souto Moura.

13 The notions of space and time structured lesson 23 in Fernando Távora’s course “Teoria Geral da Organização do Espaço”, at ESBAP and FAUP, until 1993, with the title “tipologias do espaço arquitectónicos: espaço e tempo” and lesson 24 with “Exemplos significativos de espaços arquitectónicos: Frank Lloyd Wright e Le Corbusier: semelhanças e contrastes”.

14 “In the period just before and just after the first world war a new idea of architecture came into being. In an amazingly short time it mastered its necessary techniques and produced buildings which were as completely realised as any in the previous history of architecture”. Alison & Peter Smithson, “Prelude to the heroic period of modern architecture”, *Architectural Design*, vol. XXXV, (December 1965), now in *The heroic period of modern architecture*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 5.

Fig. 5
Santa Marinha Convent, view on new volume, courtyard volume, and church in cohabitation n.d. (FIMS/AFT).

period of modern architecture is the rock on which we stand. Through it, we feel the continuity of history and the necessity of achieving our own idea of order” and underline “an architecture of the enjoyment of luxury materials, of the well-made, of the high finish. It is special to Mies and occasional to Le Corbusier and Gropius”.¹⁵ These are interesting notions that can help frame Távora’s later architecture, where the tradition of the constants plays a guiding role.

For Távora, “the Great Tradition, the tradition of the constants is confused with small and passing traditions. Because the lesson of the constants cannot be forgotten, contemporary architecture and urbanism must manifest their modernity, translate a total collaboration and not forget the importance they play as conditioning elements in human life”.¹⁶

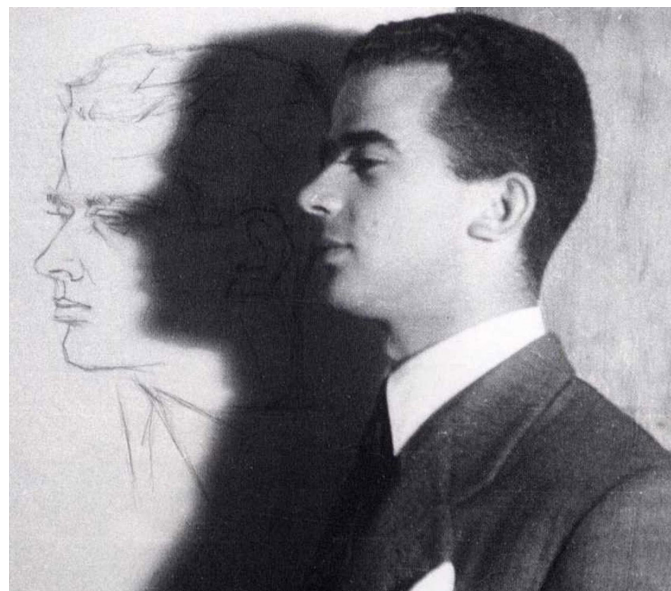
This standing will help, at the end of the 70s and particularly the 80s, the Porto School came together with the whisper of an embedded mindset approach, moving away from a loud post-modern discourse, with Fernando Távora always at the helm.

Although images have ambivalent meanings, we can find early echoes of Fernando Távora’s apparent thematic awareness linked to the notion of the past, present, and future *continuum*. We could say that one of his best-known portraits¹⁷ [Fig. 6], as a young architect, in the 1940s, seems to play with this notion of *continuum* with a layered disposition, the shadow evoking the past, his image the present and a setback drawing, done by Fernando Lanhas, representing the future. The elaboration of this layered portrait, rendered within a carefully coordinated setting, seems to evoke or even acknowledge the significance of understanding the interior of time – “time rendered transparent”.

Undoubtedly, we find reverberation between Aldo van Eyck’s personal research and Távora’s approach. Nevertheless, it is essential to understand that although the two authors shared a common ground and concerns linked to understanding the circumstances of their time, each author was also walking his own line, set inside a specific socio-cultural framing, influences and personal interests and sometimes we must be reminded of that.

Fernando Távora believed in a certain *tendência*, rooted in a universal understanding of Portuguese culture, which he strongly influenced with other protagonists, the Porto School believed in it too, but he also knew it was equally important, inside the *tendência*, to know how to walk alone.

However, as Fernando Távora constantly repeated, the opposite could also be true!



6

15 Ibid.

16 Távora, *Teoria geral da organização do espaço*, 19.

17 Fernando Távora Portrait, photograph by Alves Ribeiro with a drawing by Fernando Lanhas, in Foz, Porto, 1940.

Fig. 6

Fernando Távora Portrait; Photograph by Guilherme Álvares Ribeiro on drawing by Fernando Lanhas. Foz, 1940 (FIMS/AFT).

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