

Fernando Távora's Passion for the Antique

Fernando Távora, Antique, Reconstruction, Details, Sketches

/Abstract

The text discusses Fernando Távora's deep passion for history and how it influenced his architectural work and worldview. Távora's study of history, particularly Portuguese history, and his appreciation for the past's connection to the present had a significant impact on his design philosophy. His approach to architecture was rooted in a rational interpretation of the past, allowing him to create modern designs while respecting historical and geographical contexts. Távora's passion for history also influenced his teaching methods, shaping the pedagogy of the Porto School of Architecture for many years. Additionally, the text highlights his travels and his fascination with ancient objects and art, demonstrating how his love for history extended beyond academic pursuits.

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Antonio Esposito (Rome, 1961) teaches Architectural and Urban Composition in Cesena and Bologna and distributes his commitment between design, teaching and research, focusing his attention on the redevelopment of post-war urban areas. He has produced and published several studies on Portuguese contemporary architecture, a reality with which he has forged a relationship of cultural confrontation since more than thirty years.

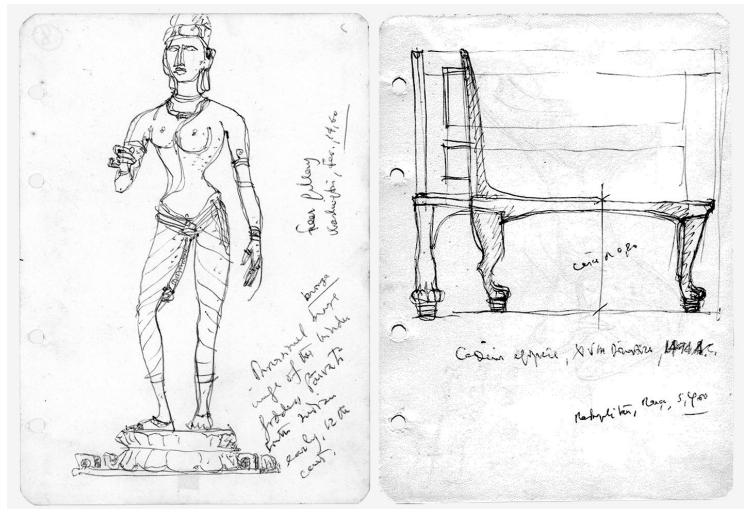
Fernando Távora has been a passionate connoisseur of history throughout his life. Of Portuguese history *in primis*, but not only.

Knowledge of history entails, perhaps inevitably, an intrinsic awareness of feeling part of a flux and a whole, with outcomes that lead thought and feeling towards an attitude disposed to revolutionary subversion, for one extreme, or to instinctive and affective preservation for the other. It cannot be said that Távora positioned himself intellectually close to one of the two limits of this ideal scale of values, but we can legitimately think that he preferred an attitude of rational or reasonable interpretation of the present in an evolving form, in constant movement, such that its meaning is updated from time to time, placing it in direct and visible relation with what has been and what will be.

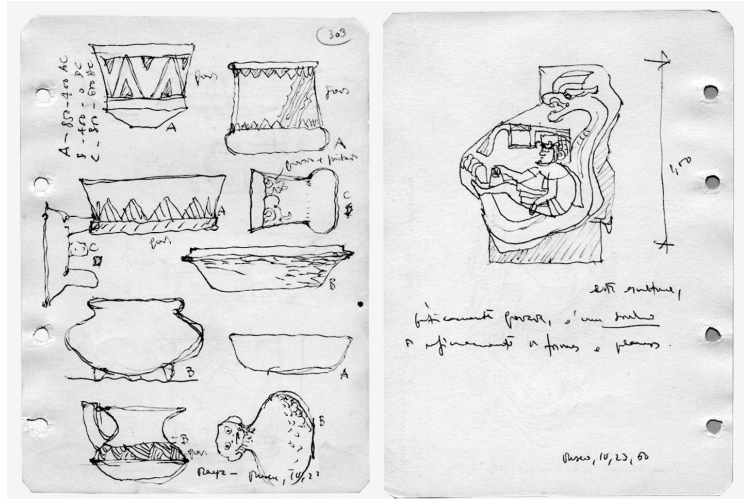
Távora therefore knew history, we start from this assumption which is generally shared by studies and direct testimonies on his figure. He studied it to find the reasons for the present. The history of his country had already begun to be absorbed, one could say, in his mother's milk, through the stories, facts, objects and houses that his families of origin, of ancient descent and high lineage, passed on from generation to generation¹.

His instincts and his culture pushed him, in his design conduct, towards philology – whether it was a place, a city, an author, a building – which he did not perceive as a deterministically blocked methodology, which cages the project by leading it to univocal results, but rather as a reservoir of multiple information to be subjected to free processes of selection and re-composition. It was in the philological process of ideal reconstruction of the past of a building or a place that he rooted the reasons for the project in order to project them into a development to come. In discerning between the multiple possibilities, his creativity found its place.

It was not only the project that was the pretext to approach the study of history. On the contrary, having a clear diachronic scheme of facts and thoughts in the course of time was for him a presupposition, an *a priori*. Recognising



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Fig. 1

Drawings from the Gulbenkian trip: the goddess Parvati from the Freer Gallery in Washington and an Egyptian chair from the Metropolitan Museum in New York (FIMS/AFT).

Fig. 2

Drawings from the Gulbenkian trip: pottery and sculpture from the Maya civilisation in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City (FIMS/AFT).

¹ Távora refers on several occasions to his ancestral relationship with places and history through his family. For instance, in an interview with João Leal in 1996 and now published as "Fernando Távora sobre o Inquérito à Arquitectura popular em Portugal" p. 14 – dossier contained in the collection edited by Manuel Mendes, Fernando Távora. "Minha casa", FIMS, Porto 2013.

in the events of men and human things, the intrinsic reasons they preserve and transmit, this was his constant exercise.

Of the knowledge of the past before taking a position and facing action, he had been somewhat of a promoter, since the 1940s advocating the need to study the Portuguese territory and the historical architectures that were preserved intact in its most remote and isolated lands, suspended in pre-modern and rural history of Portugal. Full awareness of their materials, construction systems, settlement logics, formal expressions, climatic and geological conditions, would have been indispensable before being able to understand, in the dispute between late second-hand modernism and obsequious traditionalist and ruralist rhetoric of the regime², on what roots the plant of an architecture truly rooted in the territory, its history, geology, geography, in the name of an authentic and constant modernity, could take root.

The ancient is for Távora, from very early, a mine of teachings on techniques, from which much can be learned, cultivating the ability

to discern in the ancient, to have depth of field to distinguish qualities according to a set of principles that do not exclude personal inclinations. Historical investigation allows him to appropriate the intimate reasons for things, to make them his own in order to understand their possibilities for new life. It thus becomes a fundamental part of the project methodology that he adopts for himself and transmits to his students. His passion for history thus gradually became a myth that characterised the Porto School of Architecture and shaped its pedagogy for many years.

2 It is the clash between the two positions that faced each other after World War II in Portugal, succinctly referred to as the problem of the Portuguese home. Hence Távora's youthful pamphlet of the same name, *O problema da casa portuguesa*, published in two editions in 1945 and 1947. After it was published in Portuguese and English in Luiz Trigueiros, *Fernando Távora* (Lisbon. Editorial Blau, 1993): 11-13



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Fig. 3

The Távora tower in relationship with the Cathedral bell tower (photo by the author).

The cognitive passion often took on the guise of a desire to possess antique objects, for their collection cultivated since his youth as a modern architect. The attraction for the content of art and knowledge is at the same time a sensual attraction for the material³. In his 1960 travel diary⁴, in several passages he himself speaks of it almost as a mania or weakness, incompatible with the finances at his disposal. And if reading those pages reveals all the fascination of being immersed in a new world, the American one, so projected into tomorrow and so distant from the historicity of the European tradition, the visits – accurately described and annotated in the drawings – to the antiquities collected and exhibited in American museums, so rich in variety of epochs and provenance, absorbed and captured him. While, in the long run, the efficientist pragmatism and the devilishness of modern American life disturb and even annoy him. Even sharper still is the spiritual relief that comes over him when he leaves the United States and goes to Japan, a country still firmly anchored to traditions and the permanence of the ancient in everyday life, despite the pressing Americanisation.

When he was already an old man and made another trip, this one also becoming somewhat mythical due to the co-presence of Álvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto Moura, the latter recounted that the Inca walls of Machu Pichu surprised him with the precision of the hydrology of a stone rain gutter⁵. In the wonderment, masked with *non-chalance*, lies all his ability to grasp the technical wisdom of ancient civilisations at a glance.

3 Eduardo Souto de Moura, *Fernando Távora: "Ritratto dell'artista da giovane"*, in Antonio Esposito, Giovanni Leoni, *Eduardo Souto de Moura. Tutte le opere* (Milano. Electa Milano 2012): 509-510 reports that he liked to keep an ivory object in his pocket to stroke with his thumb.

4 Fernando Távora, *Diário de "bordo"*, edited by Rita Marnoto (Matosinhos: Associação Casa da Arquitectura 2012). Italian critical edition: Fernando Távora, *Diário di bordo*, edited by Antonio Esposito, Giovanni Leoni, Raffaella Maddaluno (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2022).

5 Eduardo Souto de Moura, *Fernando Távora e la natura delle cose naturali: tre episodi per il mio prossimo millennio*, in Antonio Esposito, Giovanni Leoni, *Fernando Távora. Opera completa* (Milano. Electa, 2005). Text written for the ceremony conferring Távora the Laurea Honoris Causa at IUAV, 29.4.2003. Also published with some cuts in *Casabella* no. 713 (July-August 2003).



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Fig. 4

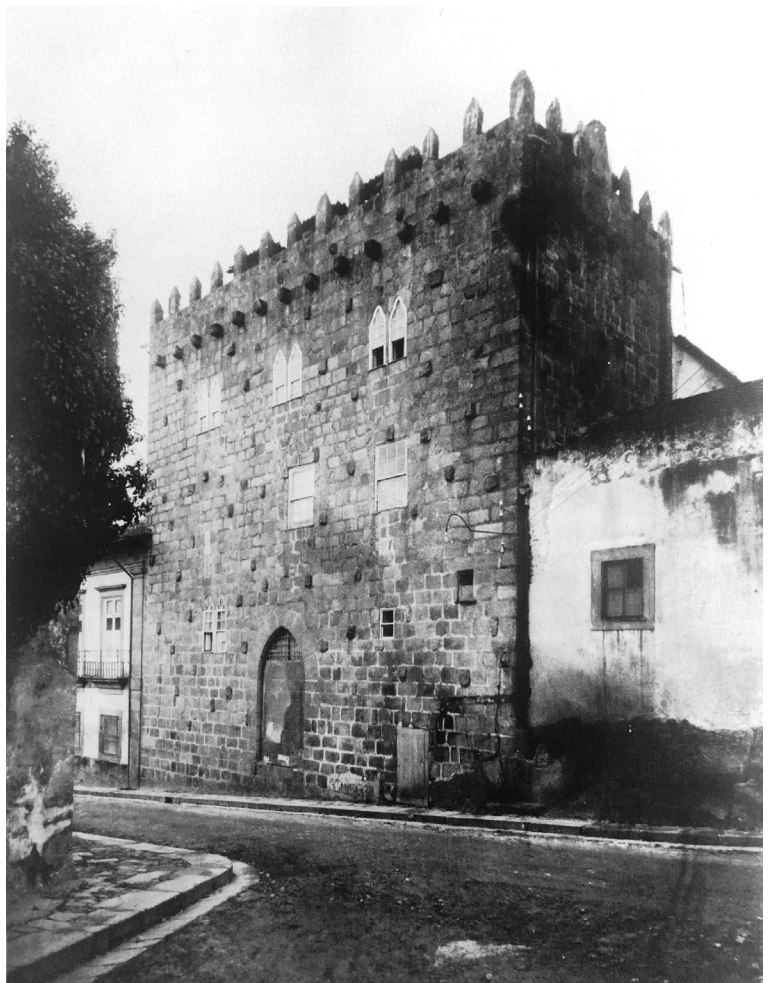
The Cathedral as seen from the top of the Clérigos tower before demolition in the 1940s.

Fig. 5

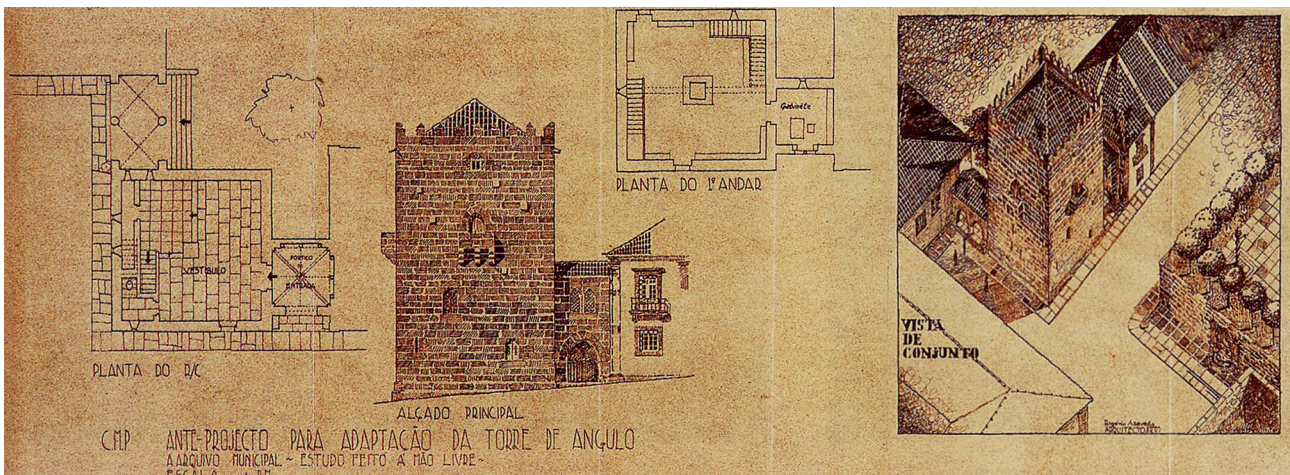
Map of demolitions (in red) due to the thinning of the blocks north and west of the Cathedral, in conjunction with the gutting due to the construction of Avenida da Ponte. From: Teresa Pires de Carvalho, Carlos Guimarães, Mário Jorge Barroca, *Bairro da Sé do Porto, contributo para a sua caracterização histórica* (Porto: Câmara Municipal do Porto, 1996): 96.

In the projects he has come across in the course of his long activity, we are surprised by his ability to insert himself into the flow of history that places and buildings hold. In their vicissitudes he seeks the constants that guarantee the continuity of the flow, each time finding a way to adapt the artefact to the present day. Thus in the Convento da Costa, in the agricultural school in Refoios do Lima and in the houses (Covilhã, Briteiros, Pardelhas, Rua Nova among many others).

But Távora's work in which his passion, aesthetic and gnoseological at the same time, for antiquity can be measured to the highest degree of purity, is undoubtedly the tower built next to Porto Cathedral, a reconstruction of the ancient Casa dos Vinte e Quatro⁶. Now that the granite has acquired the patina that amalgamates it with the city's other monuments, it is even more beautiful. Its bearing as a historical monument is even more natural, both as a work in itself and as a fulcrum that organises the urban space.



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The history of this project starts from afar and from a circumstance of brutal and extensive erasures that lay bare an extremely rich and complex historical stratigraphy. The primitive walls (12th century), which encircled an area slightly larger than the Cathedral, were soon incorporated into the internal growth of the medieval city now bounded by the much larger new Fernandina circle of walls (14th century). The four gates were demolished in the 19th century in a normal process of improving the movement of goods and people in the liberal,

Fig. 6

Medieval tower demolished in the 1940s thinning campaign, photo taken from the book *A cidade do Porto na obra do fotógrafo Alvão. 1872-1946*, ed. da Fotografia Alvão, Porto 1984. Contains the introductory text of Fernando Távora, *O Porto de Alvão*.

Fig. 7

Rogério de Azevedo, project for the reconstruction of a medieval tower near the Porto Cathedral (1941).

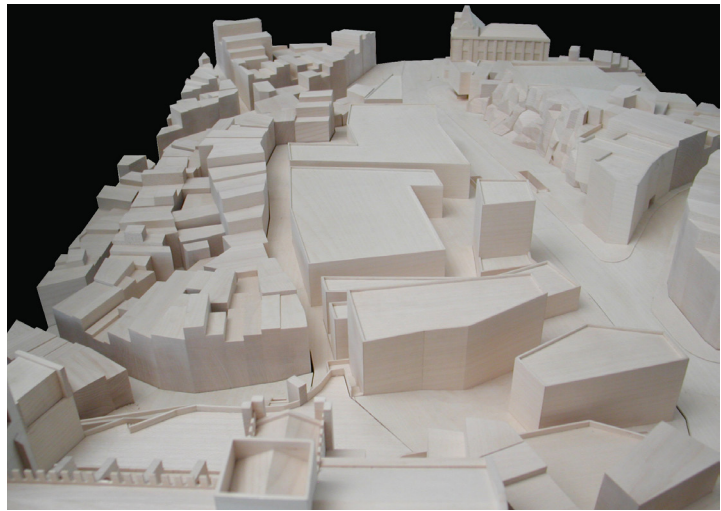
⁶ So called because of the number of guilds whose representatives governed and exercised the civic power of the city alongside or in stark contrast to the ecclesiastical power of the archbishop.

bourgeois city. One of these, the *Porta da Vandoma*, is in direct contact with the *Casa dos Vinte e Quatro*, a medieval tower close to the primitive city walls, where civic power was exercised until the mid-18th century.⁷

The campaign of 20th-century demolitions in the heart of the old city began, on the one hand, with a utilitarian purpose in mind: the construction at the end of the 19th century of the Luis I double-decker bridge required the cutting of Monte da Cividade to connect the mercantile and bourgeois city, which stood at a high altitude in the rugged orography of the banks of the Douro, with the opposite bank and the road to Lisbon. This opened a wound in the body of the city, which has still not been sewn up to this day. In parallel, an aesthetic and formal purpose, linked to the theory of thinning, dictated the demolition of buildings on the *Pena Ventosa* hill to the north and west of the Cathedral, starting in the mid-1930s. These included the demolition of a medieval tower-house (sometimes confused with a tower of the primitive walls) rebuilt a few metres away with extensive remodelling, to a design by Rogério de Azevedo.⁸

Until then, in the area around the cathedral, the Baroque narthex on the north side of the church, designed by the Tuscan Niccolò Nasoni – invited to the city as a painter-scenographer and established as an architect – is the only element of the cathedral that enjoys depth of field and scenographic centrality and constitutes the cathedral's true urban façade, framed on the left by the buildings flanking the *Rua da Vandoma* and on the right by those abutting the front of the Cathedral and, until its collapse, by the bulk of the old *Casa dos Vinte e Quatro*.

Throughout the 20th century, a succession of proposals for the arrangement of the gutted area followed one another, all centred on the high viability of the bridge and the scenic centrality of the cathedral's isolated mass. Some envisage further gutting, others focus on re-stitching; among these is the one by Távora himself in 1955, the debut act of the long relationship of study and intimate approach between author and project area. Until precisely the construction of



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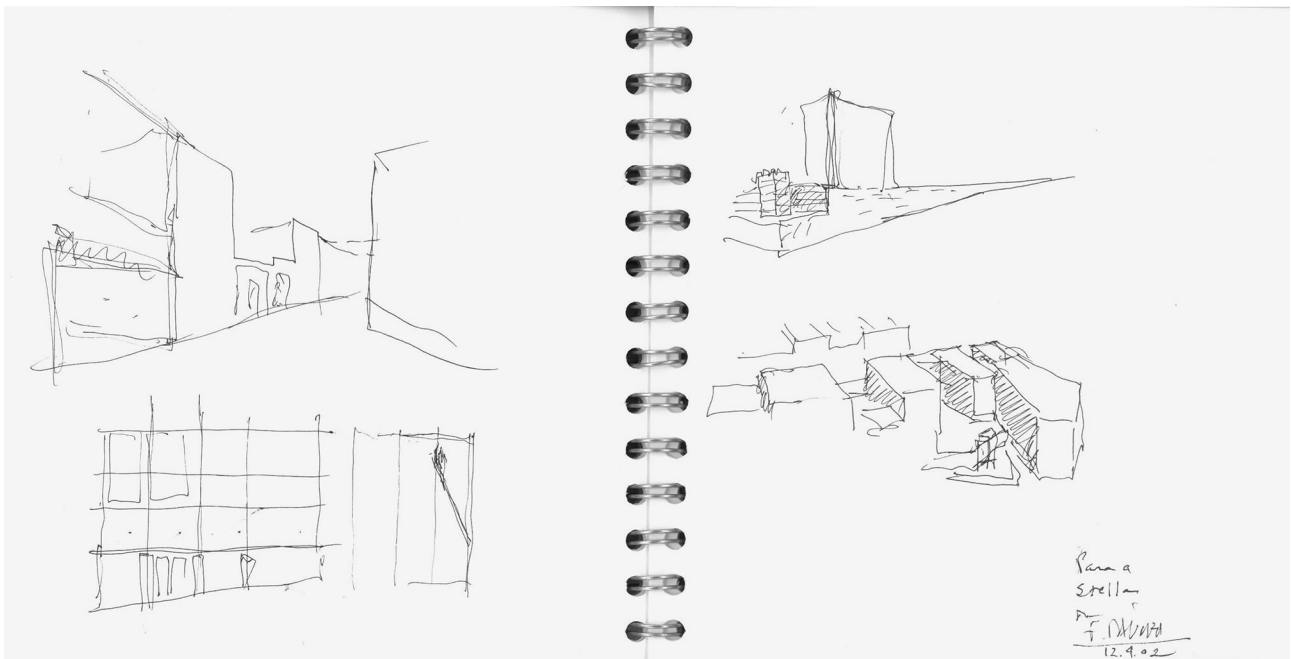
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7 After a long period of disuse and neglect, the tower was destroyed by a violent fire in 1875.

8 Alexandre Alves Costa, Jorge Figueira, "Terreiro da Sé: ideias e transformações", *Monumentos*, no. 14 (March 2001): 72-81. See also: Jorge Miguel Faria da Cunha Pimentel, "Obra pública de Rogério de Azevedo. Os anos do SPN/SNI e da DGEMN" (doctoral thesis in the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura, University of Valladolid, Tutors: Maria Helena Teixeira Maia, Ramón Rodríguez Llera): 70-72. The drawing at page 294 was taken from there.

Fig. 8, 9

Álvaro Siza, model for the masterplan for the redevelopment of the Avenida D. Afonso Henriques (2001).



the new tower and Álvaro Siza's second proposal⁹ which conceptually overturn the objective, supported by the construction of the underground line which, by appropriating the upper level of the bridge, completely cancels the need for the carriageway continuity, fluid and fast, for which the bridge had been built.

When Távora received the commission¹⁰ to arrange the ruins of the ancient *Casa dos Vinte e Quatro*, he had already drawn up project sketches that had matured on the basis of a long activity of study and historiographical investigation of the area, which built on the intimate relationship with the ancient city that had begun forty years earlier. The design idea already shows in nuce that it does not want to follow Rogério de Azevedo's historicist and mimetic path, but rather exhibits from the outset the appearance of a contemporary building, in the usual expressive sobriety of its author when dealing with historical heritage.

The game of cross-references and triangulations that the new volume establishes (or restores) takes shape in the project, strengthened by the decision to reintroduce the route to the cathedral on the site of the ancient *rua e porta da Vandoma*, in alignment with the *rua Chã*, which still exists, in an ideal and significant, albeit faint, spatial mending between the two halves of *Monte da Cividade*. It supports the idea that a single pivotal element can reorganise urban space by separating the Baroque narthex from the Romanesque façade, so that even the *Terreiro da Sé* finds its own edge and a limit to the disorienting view generated by the thinning of the 1940s.

The completed building scandalises some people who perhaps expected something more like Rogério's tower of half a century earlier. Instead, it surprises

Fig. 10

Unpublished sketch (private collection) made by Fernando Távora during what was perhaps his last teaching experience in what was a workshop organised in April 2002 in Porto with a group of undergraduates from the Faculty of Architecture in Bari, led by Giovanni Leoni and myself. The thesis project was about the *Avenida da Ponte* area, based on Álvaro Siza's new masterplan and the *Casa dos 24*, currently being completed. Thanks to the incomparable support of Francisco Barata, it was possible to organise an intense project activity and lectures at Faup with Fernando Távora, Álvaro Siza, Domingos Tavares, Manuel Fernandes de Sá, Bernardo Ferrão, António Madureira, Manuel Mendes and the same Francisco Barata.

9 This refers to the controversial master plan that Siza elaborates in 2000 and somewhat opposed to its first proposal in 1968, which envisaged the construction of a building on the rock face east of the *Avenida*. Fernando Távora, Álvaro Siza, "Lavorare 'insieme': conversazione tra Álvaro Siza e Fernando Távora", *Casabella*, no. 700 (maggio 2002): 54-57. See also the video in which Siza explains his masterplan in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7k7P3gheVhM>

10 Távora, Siza, "Lavorare 'insieme': conversazione tra Álvaro Siza e Fernando Távora".

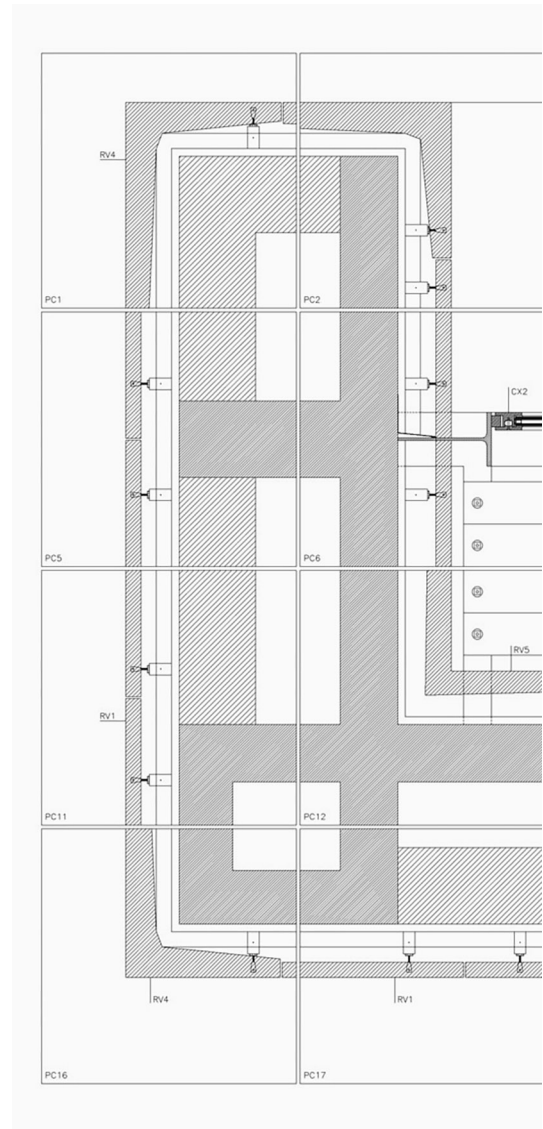
and fascinates the international community of architects and becomes the fulcrum around which Siza's proposal for the general layout of the area unravels, which, by the way, includes a couple of tributes to Távora's reflections on the area itself almost half a century earlier.

The tower is a contemporary monument in the ancient city understood as a living structure in continuous transformation. Constructed without pretence or camouflage according to current reinforced concrete technology, it stands out from the remains of the pre-existing tower's historical masonry in granite blocks. Explicit here are the reduced thickness of the granite slabs and the dry lining technique, in which Távora convincingly opts for the staggered joint installation that only emulates, without masking, that of solid, load-bearing blocks.

As Álvaro Siza argues from the outset, it is a testimony for the 21st century of how one can intervene not only in the dense fabric of the ancient city's dwellings, but also by introducing new monumental elements.

"I knew, even before I saw the first signs, that a place like that and an accumulation of history like the one present there, placed at its disposal, were ideal conditions for the appearance of something that today's ancient cities desperately need: a sign of vitality, a challenge to courage in the face of timidity and conformism.

Fernando Távora has carved it deep and in the centre of the city: a robust and compact opening – an intimate and at the same time wide-open door between the past and what is to come.



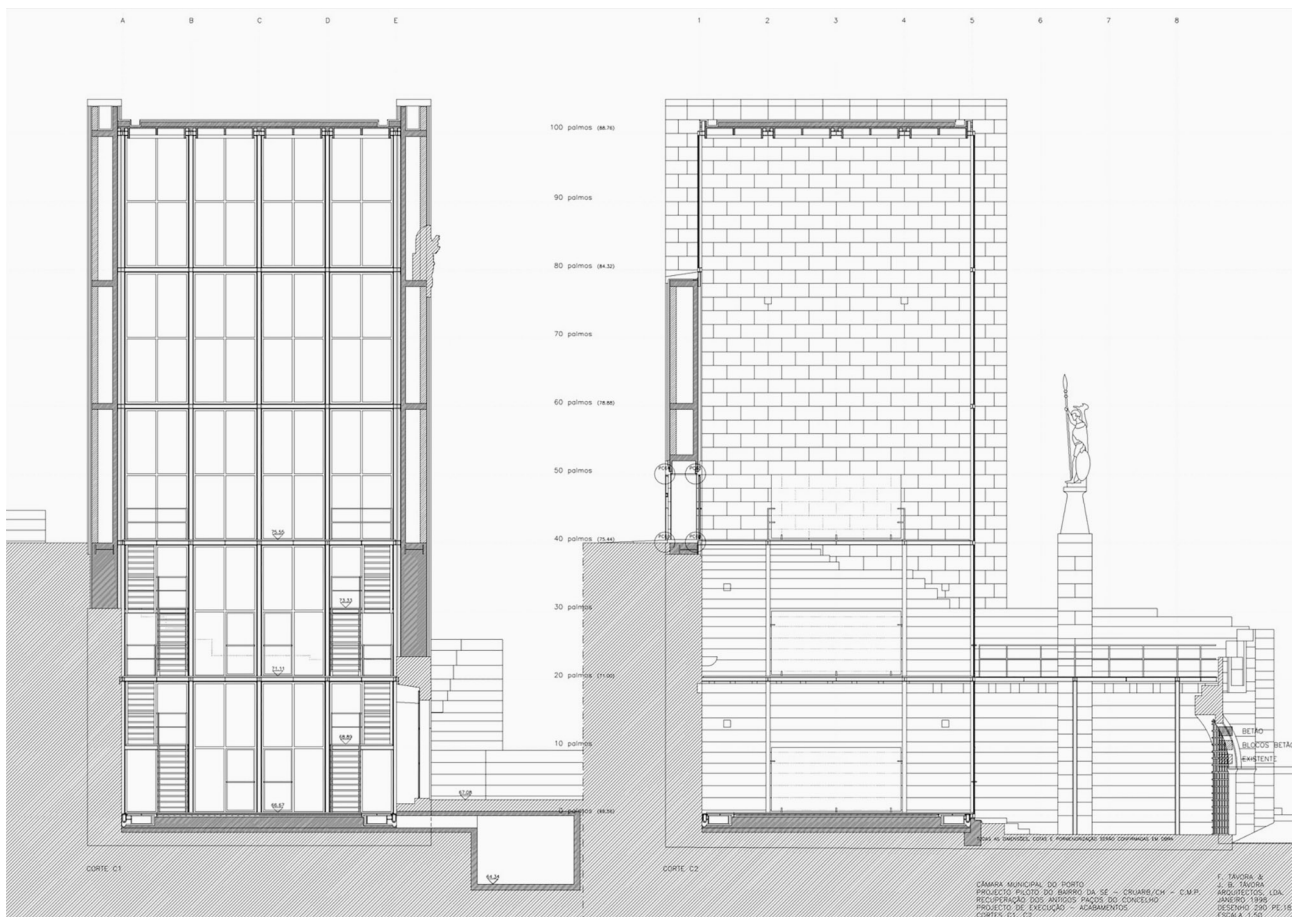
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Fig. 11, 12

Detail of the assembly of the granite slabs on the reinforced concrete masonry. Drawing archives Távora (FIMS/AFT); photograph by Carlos Martins.



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As it is recent, this project is not yet a memory; it will be, as a relevant moment of his work and teaching, as this disciple sees them: continuous construction of Tomorrow's Memories. As tools: memory, open eyes and heart, serenity and desire.

This work and teaching are today recognised and celebrated¹¹.

The tower therefore represents an antidote to the fetishistic and passive attitude towards history – which by now rages everywhere, especially in Italy – according to which whatever comes from the past is in any case worthy of being preserved and handed down without alteration, without the possibility of critical interpretation of the past. An attitude that hurts history itself, the idea of history as a constant and unstoppable flow. A more secular and less mythologising conception of history is instead important for the construction of history itself, a constant process of making and unmaking, of memory and forgetting. So that even our contemporaneity is a piece of the flow of ideas, of ways of working, of techniques.

That the legacy of the past is a useful testimony to contemporary culture is a universally recognised fact. This awareness, however, in the common feeling of our times, not infrequently transcends into dogmatic worship of the historical object. Architectural culture should instead learn to “continue innovating”¹²,

11 Speech read by Álvaro Siza during the ceremony conferring Távora the Laurea Honoris Causa at the IUAV, Venice 29.4.2003. Now in this volume at pages 6-11.

12 This is one of the mottos that recur most frequently in Távora's writings and conversations.

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Fig. 13, 14

The reinforced concrete masonry standing out from the remains of the historic granite block masonry. Two 1:50 scale sections, drawing Távora archive (FIMS/AFT); photograph Carlos Martins.



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Fig. 15

The side access to the low level where the relationship between the wall of the new tower and the remains of the old building is evident (photo by the author).

Fig. 16

The same material relationship in a detail of the interior (photo by the author).

i.e. to appreciate the materials of history with a capacity for discernment and a perspective reading of time. With the ability to intervene in history, even to use part of heritage itself and transfigure it. In sensitive cases such as this, it is only permitted to do so at the apex of a conscientious, attentive and reflective magisterium, miles away, as Távora's wisdom dictated, from the cravings for protagonism and individual exhibitionism of career architects. If, on the other hand, everything is sacralised and crystallised in the same way, damage is done to contemporary culture and to the collective baggage or inheritance that we will hand down to future generations; a piece of the expressive capacity of our era will be taken away from them. Cultivating memory, Fernando Távora often argued, means keeping it alive and becoming aware of the limited space it has, with the consequent need to select what we consider worthy of being remembered. This is why forgetting and remembering are two complementary processes of equal importance in the mechanism of memory. It is therefore necessary to know how to wisely preserve and, at the same time, erase and rewrite in the process of memory related to architecture¹³.

The historical documents describing the tower¹⁴ determine the height of the building as one hundred palms, approximately 22 metres, and suggest to the author the coffered ceiling covered in gold leaf to capture and amplify the last glow of light, as in the baroque talhas douradas introduced in the altars of medieval Portuguese churches. But it is also safe to assume that the suggestions induced by the gilding of Japanese temples and shrines¹⁵, visited on the Gulbenkian trip in 1960 and the fascination of the gilded surfaces of Luis Barragan's interior spaces, which he visited in the winter of 1990-1991¹⁶, had not subsided when this detail appeared in the project.

After the death of its author, the tower has been poorly utilised and for the past ten years at least, it has remained closed, due to the disinterest and hostility of the municipal administration following the one that had promoted and supported it, and due to incompatibility with its function as a tourist information office for which it had been unhappily intended. In fact, it is a building that does not stand up to utilitarian purposes. Távora was well aware of this – and somewhat proud of it – ever since he conceived it as the City Memorial. Somewhat like the tennis pavilion in the Quinta da Conceição forty years earlier, its presence in the urban space is symbolic and monumental, and as a monument it helps to organise a space that had become uncontrollably silted up. Its interior space is to be interpreted as a scenic machine, a real stage from which to observe the urban landscape and a crossroads where the footsteps of those moving through the ups and downs of the ancient city converge and come to rest.

13 *Fernando Távora, pensieri sull'architettura* collected by Giovanni Leoni with Antonio Esposito, in *Casabella*, no. 678, (April 2000): 14-17. Then published in volume as *Fernando Távora, La mia opera* in Antonio Esposito, Giovanni Leoni, *Fernando Távora. Opera completa*.

14 No iconographic documents have been found showing its exterior and interior appearance.

15 Junichiro Tanizaki describes in his *In Praise of Shadows* the effect of golden surfaces at dusk in traditional Japanese houses (Junichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, Vintage publishing, 2019).

16 It was a trip he made with his family during the Christmas holidays. His son José Bernardo guides him on visits to the Barragan architecture that had passed him by completely unnoticed on the Gulbenkian trip in 1960.



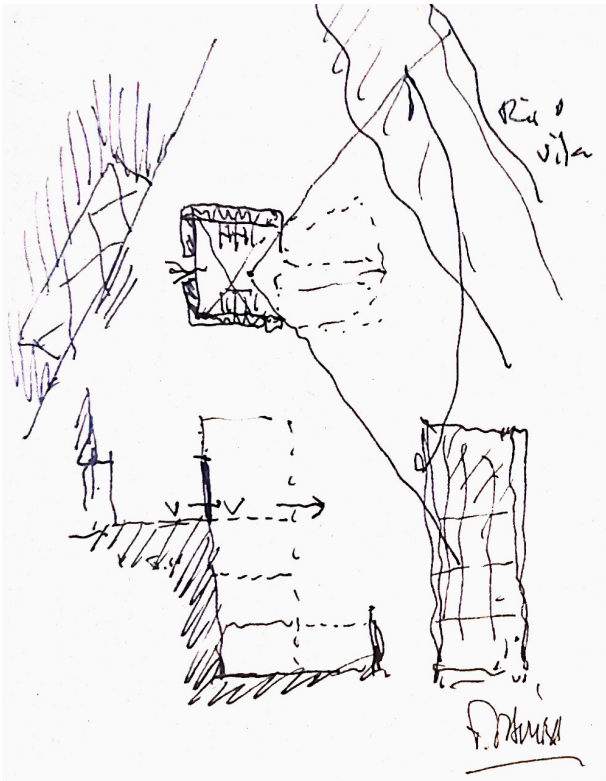
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The statue depicting the city of Porto in the form of a warrior, which on its high pedestal seemed casual and irreverent to some, revealed the reasons for its position with its back to the city, to those who accessed the main floor of the tower. Recovered in the gardens of the Crystal Palace, Távora decided, after a period of uncertainty between three possible locations, to offer it to the viewer in an unusual exchange of glances, placing it almost at the same level as him, as an amphitryon that invites one to dwell on the landscape of the historic city over which the Torre dos Clérigos stands.

Subtle analogies can also be drawn here with an earlier intervention, namely the wooden statues of angels in the Cathedral Treasury Museum, displayed on

Fig. 17

Fernando Távora, Arrangement of the Porto Cathedral treasury. (photo by the author, 1989).



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the granite wall by means of an invisible support and without any additional commentary. They seem to wander in the void and instead organise the space. We realise this as we leave the Chapter House.

The statue of Porto was removed and its tall pedestal demolished a decade ago; the building is in a state of neglect. But something is now being done to return the tower to the city and the international community of architects. On 24 August this year, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Fernando Távara's birth, its gates reopened to welcome visitors to the exhibition significantly entitled 'The urgency of the city – Porto and 100 years of Fernando Távara'¹⁷. Hopefully, this is only the beginning of a recovery and maintenance work that will lead to it finally being used as it was intended. We hope that will return to its place also the statue, now banally placed in a corner of Praça da Liberdade like a skittle, an object of stumbling, with the sole justification – which satiates the appetites of false philologists – of being near its original location¹⁸.

Fig. 18

Unpublished sketch (private collection) made by Fernando Távara in November 1999 to explain the meaning of the tower project that was being built: the relationship with the cathedral and the Nasoni portico, the opening of the view of the city landscape towards the Vitória hill and the Clerigos' tower, the relationship in section with the high elevation where the Cathedral rests and the low elevation of rua de São Sebastião. That meeting marked the beginning of a long period of study, by Giovanni Leoni and myself, of the figure and work of Távara and immediately produced the articles contained in Casabella no. 678, pp.6-25.

Fig. 19

The statue depicting the city of Porto before its removal (photo by Alessandra Chemollo).

¹⁷ Exhibition "The urgency of the city – Porto and 100 years of Fernando Távara", Antiga Casa da Câmara 24.8/29.10.2023; coordination by Jorge Sobrado; scientific curatorship by Manuel Leal.

¹⁸ The statue had been sculpted in 1819 by João Joaquim de Sousa Alão to place it at the top of the pediment (i.e. in a soaring position as in Távara's placement) of the Municipal Palace that had just been built in the Praça de D. Pedro (later Praça da Liberdade) and later demolished in 1916 when work began on the opening of the Avenida dos Aliados.

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