

A Project with Many Dates. Fernando Távora, Santa Cruz and Sansão Square in Coimbra

Távora, Sansão Square, Coimbra, Heritage, Urban Design

/Abstract

This text seeks to relate Fernando Távora's urban design of Sansão Square, in Coimbra, with the social, cultural and material conditions that surrounded it and, above all, with some particular characteristics of Távora's mindset regarding his own design practice.

On examining the process, it becomes abundantly clear that the relationship between the developer, the supervisors, the architect and the builder was far from balanced. Fernando Távora submitted the preliminary project for approval in April 1993. From then until construction was completed, by the end of 1997, a myriad of problems arose during the natural development of the project: from delays in formalising the contract, to successive disagreements over the choices of materials, or even the attempt to include different elements from the approved project. Without any kind of concessions to the traditionalist way, Távora sets out on the 8 de Maio Square project – one of his dearest, in his own words – with full awareness that historical reposition is not something to be searched for, under the dust of a thousand circumstances, it is not something flexible that could be adapted to the occasion, under risk of losing its tie to the truth.

Finally, we intend to reflect on the meaning of time and space limits in design practice and in the final result of architecture. The duration of a project, of a work, time itself, is not, never has been and never can be a condition for inclusion or exclusion in any category.

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José António Bandeirinha graduated in 1983 as an architect from the Escola Superior de Belas-Artes of Porto. Currently he is full professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of Coimbra, where he completed his PhD in 2002 entitled "The SAAL process and the architecture in April 25th 1974". Having as main reference architecture and the organisation of space, he has been dedicating his work to several subjects – city and urban condition, housing, cultural studies. From 2007 until 2011 he held the position of Pro-rector for cultural affairs at the University of Coimbra, and from 2011 until 2013 he was the Director of the College of the Arts at the University of Coimbra. In 2012 he curated the exhibition "Fernando Távora Permanent Modernity", coordinated by Álvaro Siza. He was the scientific consultant of the exhibition "The SAAL Process Architecture and Participation 1974-1976", curated by Delfim Sardo and organized by the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Oporto, Portugal, in collaboration with the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Canada (2014-2015). He is a senior researcher at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra. He held the position of director of the Department of Architecture at the University of Coimbra from 2002 until 2004, from 2006 until 2007, and from 2017 to 2021. José António Bandeirinha had been continuously working on the urban and architectural consequences of political procedures, mainly focusing on the Portuguese 20th century's reality.

The oldest Portuguese university, based in Coimbra, which traditionally followed a conservative pedagogical approach, founded a Faculty of Sciences in 1911, created from the fusion of the faculties of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy. Sixty years later, in 1972, the new Faculty of Sciences and Technology was created, offering a range of engineering courses, and teaching for the development of applied research. But architecture education, in the historical university of Coimbra, started in 1988, when the old schools of fine arts of Lisbon and Porto were already integrated in the respective universities and the teaching of the subject was instead taught in the recently created faculties of architecture. The University of Coimbra, however, decided to incorporate this new school of architecture in the Faculty of Sciences and Technology. What were the reasons for this decision? It is a difficult question to answer, although the affinity with the engineering courses could be one of several possible arguments.

In any case, following the creation of that department, by the end of 1989, Fernando Távora began to collaborate with the University of Coimbra. He was invited along with two other professors, Alexandre Alves Costa and Domingos Tavares, who had already assisted him in transitioning architecture from the School of Fine Arts to the Faculty of Architecture of Porto. The department in Coimbra had already been running for a year, in a very rudimentary way, from a disciplinary point of view. It had no lecturers in the area of architecture and no courses dedicated to design studios. The first mission of this Porto delegation was to modify radically the curricular structure, hire architects to teach and try to recover the time lost by the first year's students¹.

This is how the history of architecture education in Portugal's oldest university began. But, in fact, at its core, the more conservative environments of the university, and of the city, did not see this new pedagogical feature in a very positive way, a discipline which, only a couple of years before, did not have a real *university quality*. Furthermore, at the time, in Coimbra, the involvement of architecture in the so-called urban planning was always very marginal and mostly confined to mere building design. Urban planning, as a generic technique for acting on urban fabrics, was the exclusive responsibility of civil engineers, who had been trained in the same university since 1920, for the first two academic years, and since 1973, with the full curriculum.

Why should this be mentioned? Firstly, to explain the presence of Fernando Távora in Coimbra, and secondly, because this situation may help to explain, at least partially, much of what occurred around the project we are going to focus on, the urban arrangement of the Sansão Square, in front of the Santa Cruz Church.

The Monastery of Santa Cruz, of the Augustinian Priests, is located in a strategic position in the city, at the entrance to the Ribela valley. It may be considered

¹ Rosa Marnoto Bandeirinha, *O Limiar do Claustro. Origens e práticas do Departamento de Arquitectura de Coimbra* (Coimbra: Master's Thesis in Architecture submitted to the Department of Architecture, under the supervision of Professor Jorge Figueira, 2013), 151-161. And also: Alexandre Aleves Costa, "Primeira anotação do Curso de Arquitetura de Coimbra (2012)", in Id., *Centralidades do Real* (Coimbra: eljarq, 2018), 151-160.



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the structuring element of the urban fabric that expands westwards. Its central location and significance are clearly demonstrated by the layout of Direita Street, the main northern exit, but also by those of Corvo Street, Louça Street and Moeda Street². Together with Visconde da Luz and Sofia streets, they form an immense fan shape that opens towards the river, and converges in the monastery. It should be pointed, however, that Sofia Street was opened later, in the early 16th century.

From another perspective, if we consider the ancestral route that crosses the Mondego river near the Portagem Square, and runs tangential to the hill that was once walled, through the Ferreira Borges and Visconde da Luz Streets, it touches the city wall near Porta de Almedina and then goes north, we can notice that its design pauses at a slight vertex, precisely in front of the Santa Cruz Church, and then continues along Direita Street. Given the harsh topographical circumstances – it is a very steep hillside mainly in the western and northern slopes – its tangentiality to the city wall is understandable, but the subtle nod of this small vertex clearly testifies to the polarising force the monastery has always processed [Fig. 1].

What is more, this is also confirmed by the *forma urbis* of a centrality that does not only derive from its local and urban significance, but also from the role it played in the context of the political and cultural establishment of a

2 Walter Rossa, *Diver[s]idade. Urbanografia do Espaço Urbano de Coimbra até ao Estabelecimento Definitivo da Universidade* (Coimbra: Doctoral dissertation submitted to the Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia da Universidade de Coimbra, 2001), 465-478.

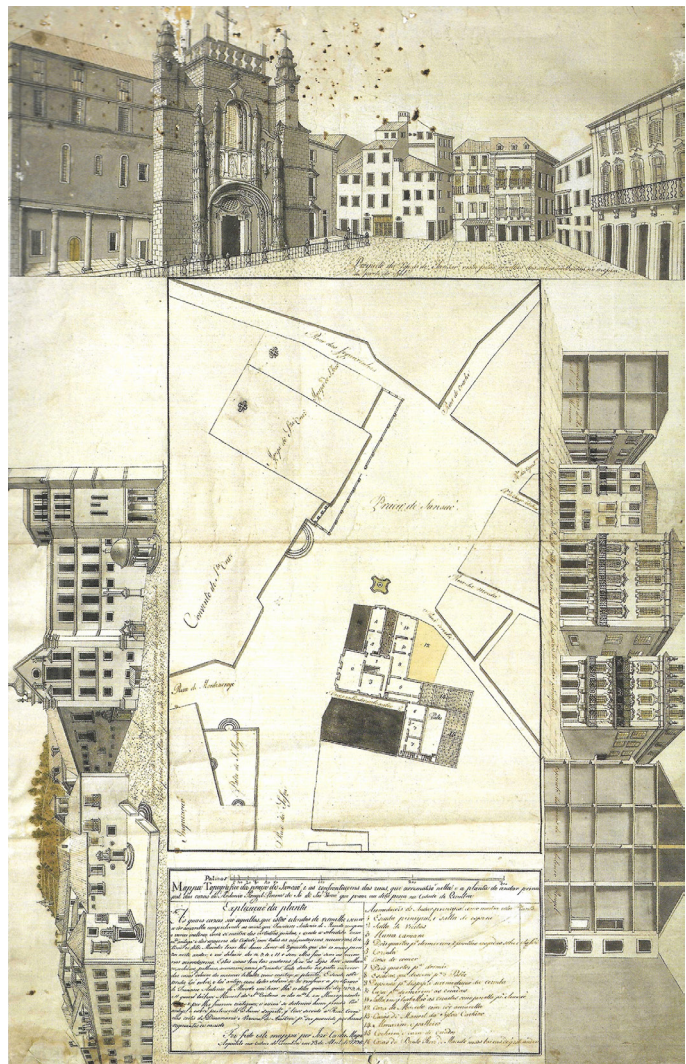
Fig. 1
Aerial view of Santa Cruz Monastery and urban surroundings. Filipe Jorge, photography, & José António Bandeirinha, text. *Coimbra From the Sky*, Lisboa: Argumentum, 2004: 35.

primordial national identity: “(...) With the foundation of Coimbra’s Santa Cruz Monastery, from 1131 onwards, it appears as the most original and powerful cultural centre of the beginning of Portuguese nationality”³.

With the establishment of independence and national identity, the Monastery of Santa Cruz generated an urban environment with a layout that is an extension of its own spatial order. In the first stage, it extends over the urban fabric developing to the west. Then in the 16th century, the eloquent layout of Sofia Street. Later on, in the 19th century, large urban developments were settled over the territorial structure of the monastic complex. There is a perennial and irrefutable dynamics that flows from the spatial matrix of Santa Cruz It balances its scale and is its urban front.

But there is no doubt that the main site of this contamination is the Sansão Square, also known as 8 de Maio. This square was the first public front of the building complex, where the frontispieces of the church and monastery were located. It is the entrance space, but also the space that allows the monastery to breath and balances its scale. It is its urban front.

However, as in all these areas of lower elevation in downtown Coimbra, the alluvial flooding of the river caused the floodwaters to rise, which in turn led to successive embankments of the streets and public spaces, in order to protect them from flooding. Whenever it was necessary to redesign the interior of buildings, the thresholds of houses were lifted. In this case of the Santa Cruz Monastery, only some areas – the church, the Cloister of Silence, the refectory – maintained their original floor levels. All throughout history but particularly in the 19th century, with the construction of the Town Hall building – between 1877 and 1886⁴ – and the subsequent transformation of the São João de Santa Cruz Church – currently Café Santa Cruz –, the surrounding spaces gained new interior and threshold levels. However, the entrance to the monastery church remained the same, and in the middle of the 16th century, there were still four steps up to enter. But progressively, the exterior pavement became higher and higher [Fig. 2]. At the end of the 18th century, around 1796, the high gap entering the church was already noticeable, people walking in had



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Fig. 2
 Sansão Square. *Mappa topographico da praça de Sansão e as confrontações das ruas, que arrematão nella...* Executed by José Carlos Magne, 1796. Divisão de Documentação Fotográfica / Instituto Português de Museus. José Pessoa.1993.

3 José Mattoso, "A formação da nacionalidade no espaço ibérico", in *História de Portugal. Segundo Volume* (Mem-Martins: Círculo de Leitores, 1993), 262. (Translated from Portuguese by the author of this text).
 4 Rui Lobo, *Santa Cruz e a Rua da Sofia. Arquitectura e urbanismo no século XVI* (Coimbra: EIdlarq, 2006), 46. And also A.C. Borges de Figueiredo, *Coimbra Antiga e Moderna* (Lisboa: Livraria Ferreira, 1886), 76.

to descend, and the exterior entrance platform, which coincided with the level of the threshold, was vast, ample and only minimally proportional to the scale of the building⁵. Nearly ninety years later, Borges de Figueiredo refers to the "(...) very small churchyard, where today we descend from the 8 de Maio square by three seven-stepped stairs (...) "⁶, obviously referring to the semioval ditch, protected by a balustrade with wrought-iron gates, which overcame the gap between the lower inside of the church and the higher exterior square pavement. This strange circumstance of the entrance to the monument, although seen as purely as a functional resource, in fact completely changed the ancestral system of relations that the church maintained with its closest urban surroundings. Mainly, because the axis articulating the system was transversally displaced, and the layout dynamics that had been reproduced towards the outside, starting from the axiality of the religious space, which had generated not only the square but also a dense and regular fabric towards the west⁷, was subjected to a perpendicular transversal axis, as preponderant as that of its longitudinal predecessor.

The church, sunk down in relation to the street, was then in a very fragile position, and could hardly respond to the needs of articulation of the central area of a city with progressively transforming dynamics that, just like urban spaces all over the world throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The main circulation flows, which induce street outlines, had undergone a ninety degree shift and became tangentially to the church.

Meanwhile, the square began to fill up with shops, cafés and services. Trams and other vehicles crossed it, indifferent to the hidden entrance to the symbolic and ancient monastery [Fig. 3]. Anyone who descended the "seven steps" in one of the "three staircases" entered another world, dedicated to worship and prayer, but also to the contemplation of the intense artistic and architectural significance of the pieces and the spaces that remained inside. The urban circumstance of the monument, seen by less observant eyes as a necessary effort to regulate incompatibilities considered inevitable, had in fact subverted all communication between the building and the city, negatively affecting its semantic representativeness and, above all, its symbolic meaning. The layout of 8 de Maio Square, at the time, was a dual diagram, of both cause and effect for the depleted and inferior condition of the Santa Cruz Church. This situation persisted for more than a century. And this is how Fernando Távora found it when he was commissioned to redesign it.

Hence, at the beginning of the 1990s, following the recommendation of the urban consultant and civil engineer Jorge Carvalho, the Coimbra City Council made the decision to invite prestigious architects with previous remarkable

5 According to the engraving of José Carlos Magne, 1796, Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro, no. INF 5849, described in: Virgílio Correia, *Obras*, vol. I (Coimbra: Universidade de Coimbra, 1964-1978), 274-283.

6 Borges de Figueiredo, *Coimbra Antiga e Moderna*, 52. (Translated from Portuguese by the author of this text).

7 Rossa, *Diver[s]idade. Urbanografia do Espaço Urbano de Coimbra até ao Estabelecimento Definitivo da Universidade*, 465-467.



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urban interventions in the city⁸. Since some of these recognised architects were teaching at the time in the newly established Architecture School of the Faculty of Science and Technology, the association was happened naturally. As a result, Fernando Távora, Raul Hestnes Ferreira and other professors⁹ were invited to carry out projects in places considered strategic by the urban administration. Távora, who was highly reputed for his works in the historical district of Guimarães, was in charge of 8 de Maio Square, not as a limited space, but rather as part of the area of the so-called Bota Abaixo. In Portuguese, the expression Bota Abaixo is a popular and generic reference to demolitions. In Coimbra, particularly, it is a popular originated toponymic term that roughly designated the western limit of the streets Louça, Moeda and João Cabreira. It is a set of demolished blocks, hence the obviousness of the toponym, which establishes the old plan of connecting the Avenida Fernão de Magalhães to the City Hall. This intention, generically known as Avenida Central, had, in terms of design and layout, numerous developments: In the 1930s, with the Plano de Urbanização da Baixa da Cidade, by Luís Benavente (1936); in the 1940s, with the Plano Preliminar de Urbanização, Embelezamento e Extensão da Cidade de Coimbra, by Étienne De Gröer (1940), with specific designs for that intervention; in the 1950s, with the Plano de Remodelação da Baixa da Cidade, by Alberto Pessoa; and, in the following decades, the 1960s and 1970s, with various studies presented by the City Council's technical agencies¹⁰. The commissioner's intention was rather clear: to settle the issue of the square itself and,

8 Jorge Carvalho, ed., *Urbanismo Coimbra Anos 90* (Coimbra: Câmara Municipal de Coimbra, 1993).

9 Alexandre Alves Costa, for instance, would be invited to submit a proposal for an intervention in the Guarda Inglesa area, which subsequently did not come to be carried out. The Plan for Bairro da Rosa, near Ingote, a suburban area with a high concentration of public and semi-public housing, would be committed to Raul Hestnes Ferreira.

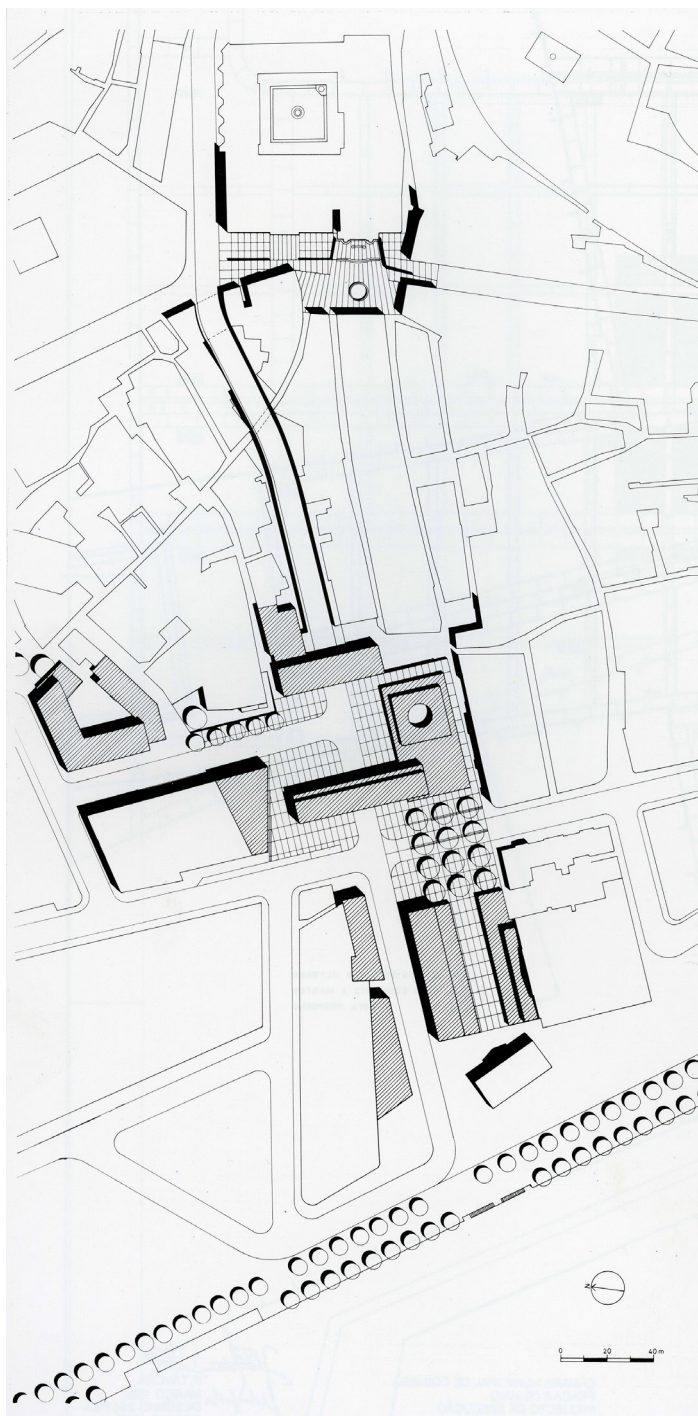
10 Sandra Maria Fonseca Almeida, *A Cidade Baixa. Evolução e Caracterização do Espaço Urbano* (Coimbra: Final exam of the Degree in Architecture of the Faculty of Sciences and Technology of the University of Coimbra, 1997).

Fig. 3

Sansão Square C. 1040s. Foto Estrela, unknown photographer.

at the same time, revive the insistent question of the connection to Avenida Fernão de Magalhães.

This was commissioned in May 1992 and just a few months later, in October, Fernando Távora presented an overall design, summarised in a layout plan, already contained a well-developed structural basis for the intervention at Sansão Square, but also including extended intentions towards the west, all the way to the river bank¹¹. This design plan was published and widely publicised by the City Council [Fig. 4]. It is a document that reveals the still embryonic desire to darn urban areas in a severe state of decline. Its starting point is the peripheral closure of the Bota Abaixo area, in an attempt to create a square, and the proposal of a street that artificially overlaps the existing fabric, almost a canal, that runs through the interior of the block and reappears in the axis of Rua Olímpio Nicolau Rui Fernandes. It's noticeable that the intervention at Sansão Square is wisely disconnected from the others and that, above all, it is much more studied, much more and matured. This exclusively planimetric design, which has a degree of finalisation compatible with a scale of 1/2000 or, at most, 1/1000, was never fully developed. Coimbra's City Council decided to move forward with the execution project for 8 de Maio Square and dropped the order for the remaining spaces. Nevertheless, the plan guided the entire building mass that various architects were proposing for the area. In a distorting and, above all, deeply unfair attitude, the various buildings that were built according to that first study were then attributed to Fernando Távora. It is essential, for his memory and above all out of respect for the truth, to clarify what has been done. It is, in fact, enough to simply observe to notice how different those buildings are from each other and, above all, how different they are from Távora's work¹². It seemed clear, anyway, that 8 de Maio Square was the work that really interested him. So, this was the work that he would have developed later, due to the explicit intention of the municipality. But this was also the



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Fig. 4
Fernando Távora. Detail plan for the axis Praça 8 de Maio – River. Carvalho, Jorge, coord. *Urbanismo Coimbra Anos 90* (Coimbra: Câmara Municipal de Coimbra, 1993): 29.

11 Carvalho, *Urbanismo Coimbra Anos 90*, 29.

12 On several occasions I have heard the architect Fernando Távora describe to me, among other vicissitudes of the project, the meetings he had with the designers of those buildings, also showing his growing distance in relation to what was being built.

work for which he already had a structuring purpose, which basically consisted of the following premise: if the floor of the Santa Cruz Church does not coincide with the exterior, the exterior floor should be lowered to coincide with that of the Santa Cruz Church¹³.

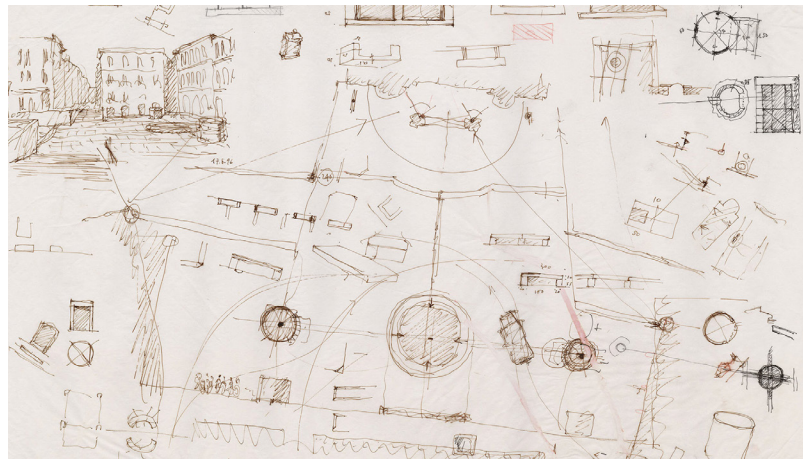
Therefore, Távora took the altimetric coordinates of the entrance to the monument, then the altimetric coordinates of the westmost side of the square, and connected them, thus restoring the initial axis [Fig. 5]. He established the whole composition system based on this principle, dictated by the very space of Santa Cruz Church: all the lines of the layout are directed to the centre of the main altar. The architectural strength of the church thus becomes a pole of irradiation, in a literal, almost rhetorical sense, for the whole compositive system of the surrounding public space [Fig. 6, 7].

But beyond this, throughout the new layout of the square, the pavement is an extension of that ancestral urban dynamic that generated the layout of the streets in a fan shape open to the west. The primordial historical sense was re-established, the original axially based on the intrinsic value of the building, precisely the one that had organized all the surrounding space, was not only reconstructed but improved as well.

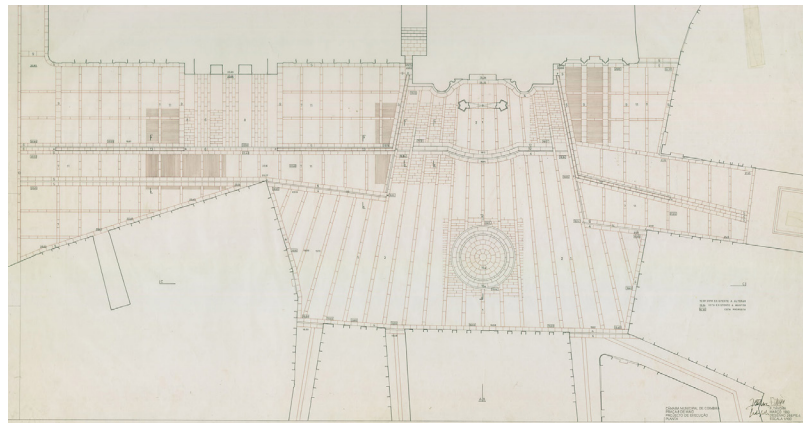
Some voices claimed that the project was a rupture. I don't think so, it simply carefully re-establishes another truth that had been temporarily forgotten. It gently heals a small yet uncomfortable wound in the urban space, *naturally*. It is just one more of the many interventions that the square experienced throughout its *life*. This time, however, the square did not dictate the rules of its own intervention, nor did the mitigation of the worst environmental adversities. The physical vicissitudes of the *circumstance* did not determine this intervention, but the critical rationality of a careful and liberated hence comprehensive look



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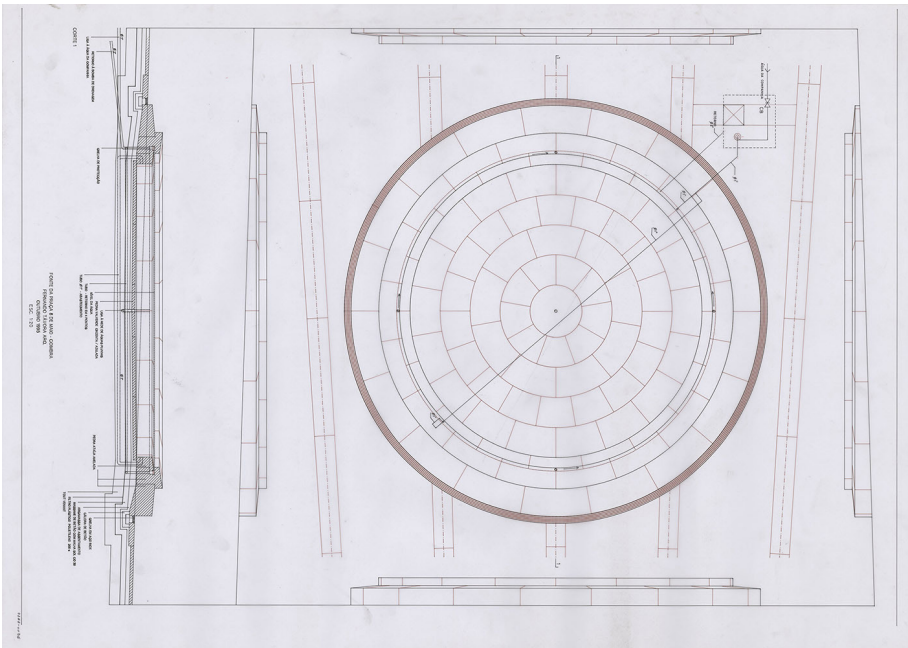
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Fig. 5
Fernando Távora. Sketch for Santa Cruz Church. Ball pen on paper. Undated sketch (FIMS/AFT).

Fig. 6
Fernando Távora. Sketch for the layout of Sansão Square. Ball pen on paper. 1996 (FIMS/AFT).

Fig. 7
Fernando Távora. Design project for the layout of Sansão Square. Plan. Ink on paper (FIMS/AFT).

¹³ A purpose that has become possible after the hydraulic works of the 1970s and 1980s, which partly regularised the riverbed.



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did, a look that focused on the essence of the site and understood that the only possible way to restore the spatial order was throughout integration, never disintegration. To do this, he cleverly sought out the centre – in this case the main altar of the church – and composed the whole system starting from it. But in the physical complexity of dense urban fabrics – resulting from the reproduction of the social dynamics – purity is almost a miracle. Távora, in this project, had to deal with two sets of adversities.

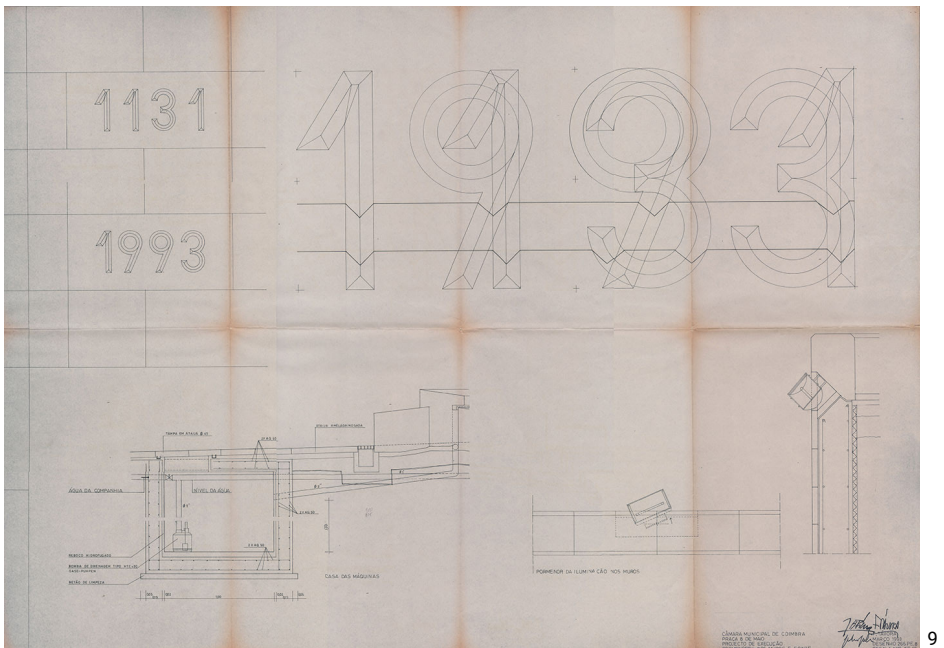
The first set concerns the subordination of the other axial dynamic, the one that was intentionally abandoned but not extinguished. The axis that violently crossed the front of the church was thus interrupted by design choice. It couldn't be otherwise, Távora knew that any concession to the refusal of such direct confrontation would jeopardise one of the foundations of the idea – its integrity. One can thus perceive the predominance of a sense of understanding of the square, which is that of the low elevation, that of the east-west axis: "(...) The tangential reading of the Church by the axis Visconde da Luz – Sofia is now replaced by the orthogonal reading of that set of streets of the medieval structure (...)”¹⁴. One can also perceive, inherently, a certain indifference towards the direction that the other axis, the north-south one, might take, particularly in what concerns the endings of Sofia and Visconde da Luz streets [Fig. 8].

The other set of adversities concerns the circumstances of the work. On examining the process, it becomes abundantly clear that the relationship between the developer, the supervisors – who were the same entity – the architect and the builder, was far from balanced. Fernando Távora submitted the preliminary project for approval in April 1993 based on the idea that had already been consolidated in the 1992 design. From then until construction was completed, by the

Fig. 8

Fernando Távora. Sketch for Sansão Square. Ball pen on paper, 1996 (FIMS/AFT).

14 Fernando Távora, *Câmara Municipal de Coimbra. Remodelação da Praça 8 de Maio. Memória Descritiva e Justificativa*, 1993. (Translated from Portuguese by the author of this text).



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end of 1997, a myriad of problems arose during the natural development of the project: from delays in formalising the contract, to successive disagreements over the choices of materials, or even the attempt to include different elements from the approved project [Fig. 9]. Regarding these, the most problematic was the idea, coming from the mayoral decision-making spheres, to include a flame in the pavement, to acknowledge the symbolic value of the place. At one point, addressing the mayor, Távora writes: “(...) I wish to state, in principle, my disagreement with your desire to introduce into the work an important element completely strange to the initial concept, which does not enhance it in any way, but rather introduces a certain conflicting situation in its sobriety and originality intended by the author (...)” and, further on, “(...) Life sometimes forces us to take apparently paradoxical attitudes of abandoning our most dearest work to defend its integrity (...)”. Távora considered giving up, with much regret, several times during this process¹⁵.

But the most striking result of this late set of constraints, and perhaps the only one significant in the context of the intervention, was the supposed impossibility of using Bordalo’s stone – traditional stone of the city’s historic buildings, the same as the façade of the Santa Cruz Church – in the exterior supporting walls, therefore denying the intentional distinction, in terms of material, brightness and texture, between the vertical walls and the pavement of the square. Very similar to the stone used on the ground, the walls relate too much to the horizontal plane, abstracting and dramatising the relationship with the church.

However and for posterity what remained was an entirely renovated space in agreement with its founding matrix. A very successful square, regarding its use

15 Letter by Fernando Távora addressed to the Mayor of Coimbra, dated 15th March 1996. It is unknown, however, if this letter reached its destination. There are other letters in the process that express indignation about the way the work was going, some of them have indication of not having been sent, at the request of Távora himself (Fernando Távora’s documentation, Fundação Instituto Arquitecto José Marques da Silva, FIMS, Porto). Translated from Portuguese by the author of the text.

Fig. 9

Fernando Távora. Design project for the layout of Sansão Square. Plan for the central bowl. Ink on paper (FIMS/AFT).

by the residents despite some criticism, generated by certain more conservative sectors of public opinion, unhappy with transformation. Some newspaper articles, not numerous but widely read, went as far as to insult the public and professional personality of the author of the project¹⁶. Those unhappy opinions served, paradoxically, as a political weapon for the local elections in 1997 and 2001. Shortly after the 2001 election, the new city council decided to carry out some transformations in 8 de Maio Square. To that end, the mayor even visited the architect Fernando Távora in his studio. The new changes were indeed implemented, but one-sidedly. Spouts, reflows and metal grids were installed in the central bowl designed by Távora. At the time, these changes even gave rise to a statement signed by various cultural and architectural figures¹⁷.

If we consider the current intensity of use, even knowing that it is a central space in the city, we can hardly compare it to what used to happen before Távora's project. From the busyness of the locals to the attention of tourists, the square is permanently full of people passing by, stopping, people who, although they may not always be aware of it, cannot help but feel deep inside the emotion of a new perspective of the space and, above all, of the monument. The square has been used as a stage for cultural performances, with music concerts at the forefront, or as a significant value of public space, political demonstrations, religious ceremonies, in posters, postcards and leaflets for the most diverse types of distribution.

Without any kind of concessions to the traditionalist way, Távora sets out on the 8 de Maio Square project – one of his dearest, in his own words – with full awareness that historical reposition is not something to be searched for, under the dust of a thousand circumstantialities, it is not something flexible that could be adapted to the occasion, under the risk of losing its tie to the truth. It is indeed a geometrically clean and rational course, in the modern manner, firmly grounded in the bedrock of the historical matrix of space. This is the order of the project, this has always been its clearest, most natural destiny, all the rest were fluctuations of tendency, misunderstandings of circumstance. This was the only possible future for the place. Távora knew that any compromise would have weakened the work, he knew that the success of the project depended entirely on his ability

16 *Diário de Coimbra*, January 18, 1998.

17 "The undersigned express their strongest disapproval of the installation of coloured fountains and lighting fixtures, which they refer to as cybernetic fountains, in 8 de Maio Square, inside the water 'bowl', which is an integral part of the project for the same place, designed by Fernando Távora. The decision to install this device there was taken without consulting anyone, neither the author of the project, the population, nor the entities that should give their opinion, from the heritage agencies point of view. The previous alteration of one of the ramps had already proved formally disastrous and functionally ineffective. All the peacefulness of the initial intentions is now disturbed by an interference that, furthermore, is assumed as a frontal lack of respect for the work of an author who has a long and dignified career, with a recognized place in the Portuguese and European architectural culture. Santa Cruz and Sansão Square deserve Fernando Távora's contemporary intervention, and Fernando Távora's contemporaneity deserves Santa Cruz and Sansão Square. Coimbra and, above all, its political leaders, must also know how to deserve it. A significant part of the contemporary interest of 8 de Maio Square lies precisely in the urban arrangement of the 1990s, which is now subverted. Public space should not be subjected to personal whims, nor to amateurish measures of dubious taste". (Translated from Portuguese by the author of the text). Among several architects and cultural personalities, this statement was also signed by Alexandre Alves Costa, Álvaro Siza, Domingos Tavares e Gonçalo Byrne. The content of the text, without signatures, was finally published in the same newspaper that launched the campaign against the square design, endorsed by the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, at the time the President of a citizens' association in Coimbra, named "Pro-Urbe": *Diário de Coimbra*, August 2, 1996.



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to unite, on the way he managed to free himself from the constraints of the present, while resolving them, and to devote himself wholeheartedly to restoring the axial meaning of the space, which is also the restoration of its symbolic value, and allows for a considerable increase in its semantic dimension. Hence the disagreements. Hence the passion with which he followed the construction. Hence the everything or nothing attitude regarding the authorship of the project.

A life-size inscription, which was intended to be engraved in the stone of the supporting walls, is recorded in a drawing of the construction process: "1131-1993". Between the foundation of the Monastery of Santa Cruz and the construction of Sansão Square, 862 years had passed with incorruptible naturalness [Fig. 10]. Heroically installed over that time, a public space was erected that re-established the dialogue between the square and the church, a dialogue that was more than evident but that, in fact, was muffled and deaf. It was a natural, collective process that had been built up gradually over eight centuries, perhaps even much longer. Yes, because according to Távora:

between the first and the last buildings that make up this extraordinary urban organism there are a few centuries of difference, centuries that signify evolution, diversity, variety. Any of these buildings could have been

Fig. 10

Contemporary view of Sansão Square. Photo by José António Bandeirinha.

modern and because they all were, the constant of modernity dominates over the whole; it does not matter the style in which each one was made – what matters is the similar attitude that presided over its conception.¹⁸

The duration of a project, of a work, time itself, is not, never has been and never can be a condition for inclusion or exclusion in any category. However, heritage norms are always anxious to create limits, whether special or temporal limits. Spatial boundaries that you may find on heritage listed areas, with its limits and buffer zones. Temporal limits since heritage, as the name suggests, is something created by a previous generation. Furthermore, there is always a boundary between what may and may not be considered heritage. There is no respect for collective memory if we do not believe in the unlimited existence of a human chain that built those spaces, whether cultural or material. To create limits to this chain is to deny the very idea of memory. And disrespect it.

Fernando Távora and Manfredo Tafuri, using the same urban and spatial metaphor, San Marco Square in Venice, have referred to this very same subject. While their purposes were not the same, the periods in which they wrote were also very different, even the line of reasoning used has no reciprocal correlation, it is still possible to observe a common and abnegate focus on the idea of temporal continuity in both of them. Távora mentions the Venetian square as “a typical example of formal diversity and permanent quality”¹⁹ because, regardless of the time in which each of the building elements that integrate it were built, and there are several centuries of difference between them, the ensemble’s quality was always recognisable. And this ensemble, I would add, should be understood as the whole urban organism of the lagoon city in its integrity. Távora highlights the significance of the quality of the whole to the detriment of the time and the period context, what matters is “the similar attitude that prevailed over its conception”. What matters is what we rarely name but know well, it is architecture and the quality of space.

Manfredo Tafuri, in a master class that he gave at his university in 1994, also refers to the modernity of San Marco Square and even classifies it as “the first modern square”²⁰, but he uses other examples to explain the instant – “attimo” – and its meaning in contemporary times, its lost dignity, in short, he makes us aware of this loss and of how current works of art endeavour to mercilessly revive it. Venice, in this case, is not so much an example as the framework from which we, the contemporary humanity, might understand, or rediscover, this lost relationship with the instant, this enchantment that we no longer have with such tiny unit of time. To this purpose he uses the example of the *Obus Plan* for Algiers, by Le Corbusier, who intended to domesticate modern time by emphasising the Casbah. Above all Tafuri uses a Titian canvas to give us a

18 Fernando Távora, *Teoria Geral da Organização do Espaço. Arquitectura e Urbanismo. A lição das constantes* (Porto: FAUP Publicações, 1993), 12. First edited in 1962. (Translated from Portuguese by the author of this text).

19 Fernando Távora. “Arquitectura e Urbanismo a lição das constantes”, *Lusíada. Revista Ilustrada de Cultura*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (1952): 155. (Translated from Portuguese by the author of this text).

20 Manfredo Tafuri, *La Dignità dell’Attimo Trascrizione multimediale di Le forme del Tempo: Venezia e la Modernità* (Venezia: PL IUAV, 1994), 20.

better understanding of the metaphors of time, which make Venetian spaces perfectly coherent. It is *L'Allegoria della Prudenza*, an oil with a tricypitium representing the faces of an old man, a mature man and a young man, enigmatically overlapped with the snouts of a wolf, a lion and a dog respectively.

These three representations symbolise present times which, instructed by knowledge of the past times, acts with prudence for fear that the future might ruin its actions²¹. In other words, Tafuri aims to convey the practice of living each instant, of being in the abstraction we call the present, a practice which he classifies as eminently Venetian. It is a practice of being so intensely aware of the past that it allows us to face the future without any fear that the present is in danger of being somehow ruined. In this practice, the present has an absolute dignity, yet intrinsic and natural. Like breathing, Távora would have said in his unshakeable fidelity to the human condition. The only way for the present to respect what we often describe as heritage is to continuously build new architecture, in a constant search for quality, permanently investing in the dignity of the moment of creation, in the "dignità dell'attimo". But this production must contain the past within itself, it must include history in a hyperesthetic wholeness to better prepare for the future, always the future. If it gets caught up in the obsession of a precise time, of a single time, it falls into the labyrinth of limits.

Venice is modern because it contains this dream, this utopia of itself, Tafuri tells us, and this is precisely what Távora had already observed by reflecting on San Marco Square. Nonetheless the first one, a profound connoisseur of what was also his city, expresses a concern: too much emphasis on the crystallisation of spaces can submerge the best of the Venetian soul. Quoting one of his favourite masters, Sergio Bettini, Tafuri states that "ciò che si preserva, ciò che è nel nostro intimo, ciò che si nasconde, la struttura veneziana, è ciò che conta" and, on the reverse side, "ciò che è lì per lo sguardo è propaganda politica, è *decorum*, è qualcosa che ha a che fare"²². Venetian time and space begin to be assaulted by the new time, by that time that Le Corbusier wanted so much to domesticate so badly²³. In a space clearly delimited by its lagoon condition, temporal limits are around every corner. As long as the city is lived in, they will be surely defeated.

When space is distorted by the circumstances of the present, by successive presents, as it happened in Sansão Square, in front of Santa Cruz Church, we have to rely on drawing; only drawing can restore order. To achieve this, Távora favoured, without constraint or compromise, the resumption of the crystalline and geometric relationship between the main space protagonists. To this end he dived deep into a clarification of the founding matrix, making it even more intelligible than it was at the beginning.

21 Erwin Panofsky, "Titian's Allegory of Prudence; A Postscript", in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), 147-168.

22 Tafuri, *La Dignità dell'Attimo*, 18.

23 Tafuri, *La Dignità dell'Attimo*, 29.

Referring once again to Távora's intervention in Sansão Square, we've heard and still hear voices that dislike the liveliness, or disapprove of the stone texture, or detest the edges of the walls, or even vociferations, which were so disturbing for Távora, from political leaders that were not, at that moment, in that specific *attimo*, "all'altezza dell'altezza dell'oggetto da amministrare"²⁴, voices that matter and voices that don't matter that much, but the truth is that the final result of the project – architecture – offered itself to time, as if it had a pre-determined, almost deterministic rationality. Nevertheless, I do believe that time's rationality is far more abiding than the limestone softness may make it seem.

24 Tafuri, *La Dignità dell'Attimo*, 32.

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