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VISUAL

A Dialogue On-Site with Álvaro Siza

A CONVERSATION WITH

Álvaro Siza

The following text is the transcript of a dialogue with Álvaro Siza that took place on 23 February 2016 during a visit to the Vila da Feira Market as part of the “Revisitar Fernando Távora” trip.

We thank Álvaro Siza for revising the text in its English version for this publication.



<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/20066> | ISSN 2611-0075
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Fig. 1

Fernando Távora, Quinta da Conceição, photo by Giorgio Liverani taken during the trip “Revisitar Fernando Távora”, 2016.

In 1953, the design process of the *Vila da Feira Market* was at the end, and I participated in the final part, the drawing of the executive project. I had worked with Távora for the first time in an exhibition in Matosinhos, for which he had invited me to collaborate. I worked on assembling the exhibition and later the rearrangement in Guimarães. In fact, in 1949, Távora was a professor in the fourth year; 49 plus 4 makes 53, so it was in the fourth year that he invited me, which means that the *Vila da Feira Market* was already in construction. The structure of this project was designed by Távora's brother, a collaborator here, as in other works.

This cup-shaped fountain is similar to the *House in Ofir* it is from the same period. When Távora was working on the house, he brought it to the studio on sketch paper and showed it to us. It was a big shock because that house came at just the right time, and the project was built without a competition in four months because Távora's brother was a partner in a construction company, and the leading partner in that company was the *House Ofir* owner. That house is a beautiful work, but it has a particular interest; the organisation of the house is mixed, with the atrium and the three porches divided by zones, so it is a modern plan. The language has a great relationship with the surrounding space in terms of materials; the chimney, which is a volume with great importance in the composition, is cast.

Távora brought the completed project of the *Vila da Feira Market* to a CIAM meeting. Each participant would bring a project: if they did not like it, the work was harshly criticised by everyone, as happened to some Italian architects.¹ And in this CIAM Távora was very close to the ideas of the TEAM X group, above all he was very close to Van Eyck, who wrote an enthusiastic text about the *Market* project. They later maintained a great friendship, and later I was with both in Holland at an exhibition of Van Eyck's work and noticed that he really had an incredible admiration for Távora. Read Van Eyck's text about the *Market* because it is very good. He talks above all about the movement within the design of this market as a public and open space².

As far as the management of the greenery in the *Market project* was concerned, Távora did it all: he normally worked with a gardener who gave him directions, as in the *Quinta da Conceição*, but he himself had a lot of knowledge about it, not from scientific knowledge of plants, but from pure experience due to the fact that he had the house at the Quinta de Covilhã in Guimarães. Távora ran his country house, which was not very big, and made wine, a very good *vinho verde*, and then gave directions to the farmer who looked after the whole estate, telling him where he wanted the trees and what kind of plants to put in. He had a great knowledge, through study, of ancient Portuguese gardens and was very interested in these things and in all Mediterranean gardens in general.

¹ Probable reference to the attacks on the Torre Velasca presented by Ernesto Nathan Rogers during CIAM 1959 in Otterlo.

² See Oscar Newman, *New frontiers in architecture, CIAM '59 in Otterlo* (New York: Universe Books, 1961): 136.

He did not generally work with landscape architects, except for *Quinta de Conceição*, where he worked with Ilídio Araújo,³ a good man and a very important landscape architect, very good friend with Ribeiro Telles⁴ and of the same generation. They were very close friends, I met them several times in Évora, Ribeiro Telles was at the University, and I met him several times when I was doing the plan in Malagueira, on the train ride, because Ilídio de Araújo himself used to visit and discuss things with Ribeiro Telles. So Ilídio Araújo worked with Távora in the *Quinta de Conceição* and I witnessed this from close, they were both real 'gentlemen', but regarding the idea of intervention on the *Quinta* there was a very heated confrontation; they never argued in a bad way, but you could see that there was a very strong difference in thinking. Then, when we returned to the studio, Távora would complain to me.

At the time it was not the custom to call them landscape architects: in the beginning there was no landscape course, they were agronomists, and within the agronomy course, during the 1950s, there started to be a specialisation called Landscaping, and a little later in the 1970s, prompted by Ribeiro Telles, the Landscape course in Évora. So, then what were the references of a landscape architect? An agronomist worked in the field of agriculture and farming tradition, knew technically a lot about how to treat gardens, but had no artistic training, so in the Landscape course it was tried to include a specialisation with an artistic component. Ilídio Araújo then did a beautiful book on the Portuguese garden, I don't know if you know the book *Arte paisagista e arte dos jardins em Portugal*⁵; it is an important book that is out of print, I happen to have the photocopies, I think he got them for me, but the book is out of print and there doesn't seem to be a second edition, and he also wrote something else on the Portuguese garden, although the great references at that time were the Nordic gardens. They had great prestige and use at the time by architects and agronomists, who referred to the gardens of the United States, England, Sweden, and the north in general.

But Távora was Mediterranean, so if you see his work at the *Quinta*, you can clearly see the weight that his culture as a man from the south had; he was referring rather to the Italian garden, or rather especially the Italian garden and the Mediterranean in general.

He did a lot of travelling, a lot of drawing, and one part strictly dedicated to gardens. So that when he returned, (I still remember the great discussions I witnessed), he would modify the whole project. It was just like that, because Távora set the *Quinta da Conceição* through great axes, as that hill has a particular topography, highs and lows, but Távora established, analysing that topography, the great axes and the stairs that connect the top entrance to the

³ Ilídio Araújo (1925-2015) was a Portuguese landscape architect, author of several *Quintas* and botanical garden projects in Portugal.

⁴ Ribeiro Telles (1922-2020) was an agronomist and landscape engineer and founder of the Portuguese Association of Landscape Architects (APAP).

⁵ Ilídio Alve de Araújo, *Arte paisagista e arte dos jardins em Portugal* (Lisboa: Ministério das Obras Públicas, Direcção Geral dos Serviços de Urbanização, Centro de Estudos de Urbanismo, 1962).

low entrance and transversely to the courts where they used to have parties with dances.

The geometry is very clear and essential, based on a sequence of spaces and then using different frames along the way. At one point you arrive at a tennis court right in front, then a horizontal space, then the long staircase continues with landings that define different spaces and ends in an upstairs access where there is a beautiful *pátio* bordered by red walls. There is this staircase, at the top there is this *Red Courtyard*, and then on the side there are these large avenues, where the festivities took place, and so these elements made the design solid, which later also included more organically shaped paths, which develop naturally on the hillside.

There was an old convent at the lowest location, where he then made the fence with the hedge, and he managed to convince the Municipality to buy a porch that he had found in Gaia, it was in a convent in Gaia, not as part of the convent itself but in a garden, and he convinced the president of the Municipal Chamber to bring it here because it was a period historical thing and reminded him of the old convent that had been built here. The Quinta, at the time, was a private country house, and a pleasant and interesting thing something happened. The administration of the Port of Leixões at the time decided to develop the size of the quays and therefore to build a second dock in addition to the one already existing in the port. The urban planner of



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Fig. 2, 3
Alvaro Siza speaking during the trip "Revisitar Fernando Távora", 2016 (photo by Giorgio Liverani).

Matosinhos was Moreira da Silva⁶, a professor of urbanism at the university who was both Távora's professor and mine, Marques da Silva's son-in-law... and I remember that in the first lectures he used to say: "Urbanismo is the translation of the French word *urbanism*". He made various plans in Portugal when he returned from France, he also made the plan for Matosinhos, the chessboard plan, which fits well with the terrain, the relationship with the sea, and with a good relationship with the ancient area. Then urbanism evolved a lot, Moreira da Silva turned out to be old-fashioned and when he made the plan around the port he had designed a viaduct whose construction went through the expropriation of the *Quinta da Conceição*, which had a larger area that reached the river, where you could embark and navigate along it. It had a splendid beach, free of any pollution.

The Leça River was a paradise, I don't know how many kilometers long and ended in an area where there was a Roman bridge and then went to die in the port of Leixões. The new quay has already cut much of this landscape and destroyed the Roman bridge. When the second dock is developed, it penetrates a lot into the territory and eats away at the low land of the Quinta da Conceição where the embarkation space and the beach used to be. Távora and the Mayor, who was Fernando Pinto de Oliveira, very interested in tourism, took an interest in this Quinta and in another one after, the Quinta de Santiago. So the Mayor called Távora, whom he knew very well because of the relationship between the families, and told him: "We advance land in the Quinta da Conceição, of which the municipality does not need, and I spoke with the port director, a remarkable and very intelligent man, and he said that he will give up this land because it is no longer needed for the port, and I would like you to make a Municipal Park". Távora then took the plans, jotted down some notes, and went to talk to the director, explaining to him what he was going to do with the Quinta. However, he could not refrain from pointing out to him that there was a big problem because the port would need other infrastructure, a viaduct that would connect the north side with the south side quickly, and around the port space there had to be a widening, a road with two lanes in each direction, because the port would have a lot of movement of large trucks, and the plan as it was conceived did not work. The director understood the importance of this and decided to hand over the plan for the whole area to Távora.

Távora had a delicate problem at that point because it meant revising his professor's plan. Távora talked to Moreira da Silva and there were no major problems, and they maintained a good relationship. And so, he did a new project in which people like Luis Botelho Dias, Rui Pimentel⁷, José Pacheco, Francisco Figueiredo, who did the study for the movable bridge, the first movable bridge that has now been replaced collaborated.

⁶ David Moreira Da Silva (1909-2002), a Portuguese architect and urban planner trained in Porto and Paris, was a lecturer in urban planning at ESBAP and the author of numerous urban plans.

⁷ Rui Pimentel Ferreira (1924-2005) was responsible for the working group (Minho region) with which Távora participated in the *Inquérito à Arquitectura Popular* in 1955.

So he formed a very good team, in which I participated for a while, until I was no longer working with Távora, but even after that I had nearby I don't remember which job, some houses, a parish centre. I always went with them to a tavern for lunch, and since we were together they would update me on the progress of the project.

So he formed a very good team, in which I participated for a while, until I was no longer working with Távora, but even after that I had nearby I don't remember which job, some houses, a parish centre, so I always went with them to a tavern for lunch where they ate very well, and since we were together they would update me on the progress of the project.

It was funny because they called an architect to make a jewel and the architect said: "OK, this is a jewel, but to define this you have to look at something more". Starting with the jewel, he analysed a much more serious problem: there was no viaduct, after all, there was no movable bridge, which was essential not to cut Matosinhos and Leça completely in two. But this is to say that he really intervened in all aspects of the city, and he had the advantage of always having an overall view, he never tackled a problem in isolation, so when they handed him the project for the *Quinta*, working on the development, from this he reasoned and defined the connection to Leça, the viaduct and many other aspects.

This is generally the case in all Távora projects. It never stops at the individual intervention but always takes an overall view.

So, I also worked on the *Quinta da Conceição* after the construction of the *Tennis Pavilion*. Távora worked on the project at home, and after finishing the construction of the *Pavilion* he was developing the *Pool*. And an incredible thing happened, which would be impossible now. I was obsessed with the Pool and constantly asking Távora questions about it until one day he said to me: "The best thing is for you to do this work in your studio"; and so he passed me the assignment. He had to ask the Municipality, as I wasn't yet graduated, but he knew the Mayor well.

I started from the project that had already been developing with all the other guys working in the studio and made a change, then I talked to Távora about it. The pool of the *Quinta da Conceição* was the *Quinta's* irrigation pool, so it was the highest point on the hill where a reservoir was located. Távora had proposed to use it for bathing. It was exactly as it is today, L-shaped, and I visited the site and thought that there was a need for space around the pool, so I proposed making platforms to accompany the slope of the hill and this led to a change in size. I left intact the language of the existing pools and their positioning in the ground, while on the other side I inserted horizontal platforms. He gave his consent to this change and supported me in the presentation to the Municipality, where he was always present as a guarantor.

It was 1962, I had already built the *Restaurant in Boa Nova*, which was a similar case: Távora had to sign the project because I and the others could not sign it.

The idea of tourist development for the centre of Matosinhos, and that of Leça, also allowed the idea of Boa Nova, because the same manager, together with Fernando Pinto de Oliveira, called Távora. From them came the idea of doing the competition. Távora chose not to compete, as did the architect Francisco Figueiredo, and called me along with his other collaborators. There were five of us and he asked us to do the project, saying he would sign it, as he did. We went with him to visit the Boa Nova site before he left for his travel.⁸ The site had a big beach and rocks and he said: "The restaurant must stay here". We panicked because the place was very difficult and impassable, but it really was "the place", and it was a fantastic discovery, because all the other participating groups did the restaurant project in the easiest place, turned towards the beach. He came to my office on the eve of the competition and got to work, drew, and wrote the descriptive memoir of the project, which is beautiful, and which he presented, winning the competition.

There winning project was then modified by the executive project. After a year of work, I asked Távora who was the one who had to sign, to change the solution we were working on, and he agreed. It was only during the construction that he managed to get the Mayor to change the contract and do it in my name; until then Távora had signed everything.

The restaurant, once it was built, was criticised and considered a silly building because the facade faced the back, but it really is the right place, anyone who goes there now understands that very well. However, it was difficult for us because a lot of work was needed and I used to go there and draw the outline directly on site and then it was during construction that we made some corrections because, during the staking out for the building, we noticed that there were some rocks in the way and we decided on the spot to rotate the whole project a bit.

I worked with Távora for a short time, about three years, and then I left because I had some work myself and the final touch came when Távora handed me the Swimming pool at *Quinta da Conceição and Boa Nova...* then it became practically impossible.

I think it also had an influence on the *Leça de Palmeira* swimming pool, because the construction of it began with a commission given to his brother Bernardo Ferrão to make a tide pool there, and Bernardo Ferrão called me saying he needed an architect because he felt a very great responsibility in terms of landscaping. And I am convinced that Távora pushed for this, obviously without wanting to overshadow the person in charge. He must have recommended my name to him, as was also the case later for the Avenida da Ponte, the first version of the project: I remember Távora saying to me one day: "Ah! I am going to lunch with Auzelle now and I would like you to come too, let's go to Rua Nova". So he basically introduced me to Auzelle⁹, and many projects for Avenida da

⁸ At that time Távora was leaving for his "travel around the world" thanks to a grant offered by the Gulbenkian Foundation. See: Fernando Távora, *Diário de "bordo"*, edited by Rita Marnoto (Matosinhos: Associação Casa da Arquitectura 2012).

⁹ Robert Auzelle (1913-1983), French urban planner, author of the Port Urban Plan in 1962.

Ponte had been done at that time, all of them rejected, and Auzelle invited me to propose a project. I remember Távora telling me about a conversation with the vice-president, the one who was implementing the urban plan in that area, who did not know me and asked him: "Do you think he is capable of doing this?"; Távora replied: "He is capable! Of course he is capable! He looks like Christ!"

At the time, Auzelle had developed a Plan for the central area of Porto that included a viaduct. He brought ideas, but he was also a man of vision, because he came to Porto to see the problems and the needs, and he said that what was needed was a plan to empty the central blocks. He then developed the Plan, calling in young architects, so there was a very interesting period in which a good team of young people was formed, of whom the only one alive now is Luís Cunha¹⁰, who was one of Auzelle's favorites and who also proposed a project for the *Avenida da Ponte*, which was also later blocked. Therefore, he brought about a good modernisation, created a good team, and did a good survey of the city, which resulted in two volumes analysing most aspects of the city of Porto, and then defined a plan of which practically nothing was developed. It is a radical vision, but it has allowed us to discover many new factors for which we still have no answers today.

Even today, almost every day someone says to me: "Ah! Távora did this for me or that guy..."; sometimes it's very funny things, sometimes, more serious things. But we, and I say we because we are a group of friends of different ages, which includes Souto Moura, Alcino Soutinho, Rogério e Cecília Cavaca, and others, that had a special relationship with Távora and we often went on trips together. Those trips were epics. Trips to Greece, Italy, Egypt, Morocco, India, China. And He for one was a very interesting person, regardless of architecture, because of his temperament, his ability to communicate, and he was also a person who liked to live a lot. He was a person who liked to eat, as much with the prime minister as with the site manager. He was a person who lived globally and therefore there are very nice stories in each of the many trips we made together, on which he always brought his Michelin guidebook, which he had already studied as well as having travelled to those places many times. At the same time it was a journey and a lesson for us. I went on a trip to Greece where we visited sanctuaries and in each one, he would stop and knew everything. He had a deep historical knowledge of those places; he was a person of a rare culture. And he was not in any way academic, in the formal sense. To a certain extent he was, but in a way that was very conditioned by various tendencies, various interests, various influences.

Vila da Feira Market, 23 February 2016

¹⁰ Luís Cunha (1933-2019), Porto architect at the time of the Auzelle Plan within the city's Urban Planning Department.