

# The Search for Eternity and the Polyphony Prodigy in Távora

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*Fernando Távora, Portuguese Architecture, Journey to the East, Modernity, Tradition*

## /Abstract

Fernando Távora was a pioneer. As he never tired of saying wisely and kindly, "I am Portuguese architecture!" He not only integrated various references in Portuguese architecture but also deeply understood architecture as culture in a profoundly innovative way.

The intense immersion in modernity without abandoning tradition, the desire to innovate while simultaneously not forgetting the roots, are at the core of the rich and complex personality of the architect Fernando Távora, which is reflected in his actions, his work, his teaching, his life.

From Le Corbusier to the modernists of *Orfeu*, from traditional Japanese architecture to Portuguese vernacular and erudite architecture, from classical order to *Miesian* rigor, Távora thinks, feels, and builds a heterodox and inclusive path, a genuine journey in search of truth to "arrive at solutions of eternity".

As he wrote in 1960, "I am increasingly convinced that only by doing the same thing over and over again, in one lifetime or over generations, is it possible to refine and arrive at everlasting solutions. From the Theséion to the Parthenon there is a whole path of progress, as with Mies' Lake Shore 1st and 2nd phases".

In Japan, Távora rediscovers the weight of history and the call to "arrive at solutions of eternity." The investigation into the Portuguese house (1945-1947), the field surveys conducted within the framework of the "Survey of Portuguese Regional Architecture," and the study of vernacular and erudite architecture find resonance in Japan.

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She has a degree in Architecture (ESBAL, 1982), a Master's degree in Art History (UNL, 1994) with the thesis *Os Verdes Anos na Arquitectura Portuguesa dos Anos 50* (FAUP Ed., 1997), and holds a PhD (IST-UL, 2003) on culture and technology in Modern Architecture (*Idade Maior*, FAUP Ed., 2015), awarded the X BIAU Prize in 2016.

Her research field is the critical history and theory of Modern Movement architecture. On this field she has published namely *Key Papers in Modern Architectural Heritage Conservation* (with Liu Kecheng, 2012) and *Modern Heritage. Reuse, Renovation, Restoration* (Birkhäuser, 2022). She was PI of the research project *Exchanging World Visions*, which publication *Modern Architecture in Africa: Angola and Mozambique* (2014) was awarded with the Gulbenkian APH Prize 2014; and of the research project *CuCa\_RE: Cure and Care\_the rehabilitation, from which resulted the publication Curar e Cuidar. A arquitetura da saúde em Portugal (1901-1976)*. Further she was co-PI of the project *The Critical Monumentality of Álvaro Siza*. In 2023 she was co-curator of the commemorative exhibition of Fernando Távora's centenary at Fundação Marques da Silva.

President of Docomomo International and editor-in-chief of the *Docomomo Journal* between 2010 and 2021. She is president of the Portuguese section of AICA. She was distinguished by the President of the Republic with the Order of *Infante Dom Henrique*.



## **In Search of Eternity or the Prodigy of Polyphony in Távora**

Fernando Távora was a pioneer. Not only did he integrate various referents in Portuguese architecture, but he also understood architecture as a culture in a profoundly innovative way. Architect and thinker, persistent critic, he possessed that unity of vision that gives coherence to scattered projects. His work was that of a founder of Portuguese architectural culture.

Fernando Távora is not in history, he is history! In other words, he is not just the object or subject of history, but he himself is history, he is change, since one of the so-called historical factors operating on him, is himself. Távora is the Portuguese architectural culture.

Being polyphonic, nourishing the desire to seek eternity, led him to turn to architecture to understand Portugal and the World, or rather, Portugal's location in the World.

For Távora, and because architecture is culture, everything could be a reference in his process of falling in love with the world and its creative, artistic, and poetic expressions. His stay in Japan was an inescapable mark on his career and work. Since the mid-19th century, the search for a synthesis of Western and Eastern artistic cultures has opened unexplored horizons, both figurative and conceptual. Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) explicitly declared his debt to Japanese architecture, seeing it as his adherence to naturalism and reflecting it in his own poetics. The experience of Japanese modularity, the adherence to emptiness and the beauty of imperfection, the profound sense of minimal culture, the art of "empty space", the abstraction and free floating of the art of calligraphy, are some of the aspects that we can highlight of the Japanese contribution to the development of the architecture of the Modern Movement throughout the 20th century in the world. The figure of Bruno Taut (1880-1938) has been recognised as fundamental for his stay in Japan in 1934-1935, as well as the fascination of authors such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Josiah Conder (1852-1920), Antonin Raymond (1888-1976), and later Carlo Scarpa (1906-1978). In the wake of the discovery of Japan by Western architects (German, American, English, Italian), Távora explores the relations established with Portuguese architecture and the affinities between the ancient cultures of both countries, analysing the mutual influences established and created.

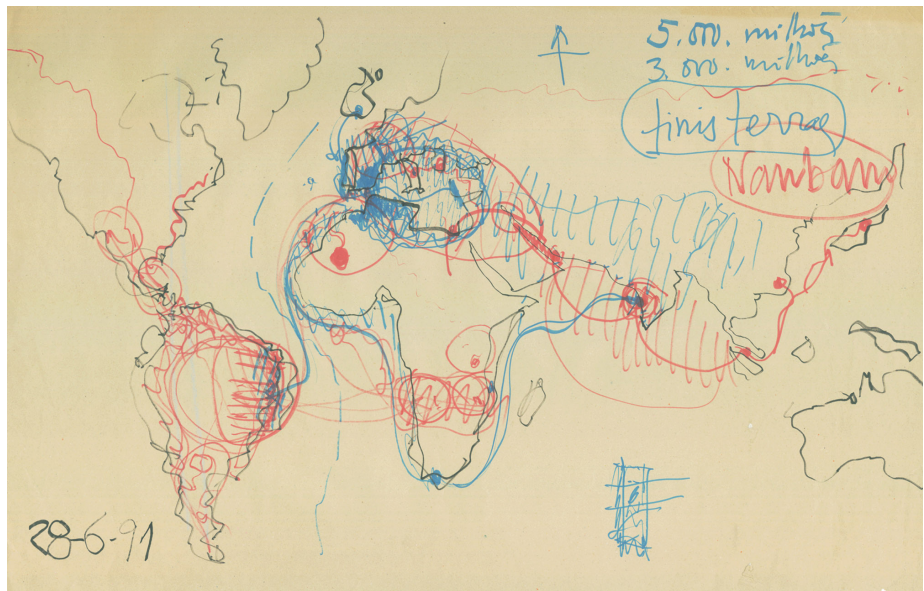
## **Portugal and the World, History and Geography**

If Távora's references are diverse, then the important reference is history. It is from time and architecture that Távora intensely investigates – in his capacity as an attentive observer, an insatiable scholar, a man of action based on everyday experience, a lover of life full of desire for the world – history as a way of understanding human existence.

For this reason, the landscape is seen at the crossroads between geography and history, analysing the strong and definitive influences that define the territory. Geography understood as the culture of the sensitive territory, capable of realising that the "Portuguese natural landscape is luminous and tranquil

‘more poetic than plastic’<sup>1</sup>, because if every history is a geography, geographies are also symbolic [Fig. 1].

Távora organises the understanding of architecture through the territory and history, space and time of Portugal in order to detect and perceive aspects that have marked the national identity, and certainly the “architectural culture manifested throughout the existence of the country and



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throughout the space that it encompassed throughout the territory where the Portuguese diaspora was felt.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of its architecture, this was revealed in the need to create “less academic and more hybrid solutions, which are faster, more flexible and more adapted.”<sup>3</sup>

The desire to understand the current significance of the Portuguese presence and its architecture in territories where it once established itself leads to the permanent study of the process of cultural transfer, since “just as we export concepts and forms to the various communities of the diaspora, we receive from them, or from others, actions and lessons that are reflected in the cities and architectures of the continent.”<sup>4</sup> Lúcio Costa (1902-1998) and Óscar Niemeyer (1907-2012) who, in addition to their constant debt to Portuguese architectural culture, recall our presence, invoking the spirit and formal atmosphere of the same architectural culture.

It is from this referent, history, that Távora invokes memory, the deep layers of a country’s culture and a discipline, architecture, to lead an initiatory journey into modernity. A modernity that fascinates him, which is why he endeavours to understand the roots and epic of the contemporary world by situating Portugal and its diaspora in this process.

The slow speed of the long duration of architecture made up of the path of progress and transformation, plunges into the sense of the Kublerian “form of time”<sup>5</sup> revealed in the tradition of Portuguese *arquitectura chã* (plain architecture) that Távora knew how to recognise between Portugal and the world.

1 Fernando Távora, “Imigração/Emigração. Cultura Arquitectónica Portuguesa no Mundo”, in Ana Tostões, Wilfried Wang, Annette Becker, *Portugal: Arquitectura do Século XX* (München/New York/Frankfurt/Lisbon: Prestel/DAM/PF 97, 1998), 141.

2 Távora, “Imigração/Emigração. Cultura Arquitectónica Portuguesa no Mundo”, 142.

3 Távora, “Imigração/Emigração. Cultura Arquitectónica Portuguesa no Mundo”, 143.

4 Távora, “Imigração/Emigração. Cultura Arquitectónica Portuguesa no Mundo”, 143.

5 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

Fig. 1

Fernando Távora, TGOE class, 28 June 1991 (FIMS/AFT).

## Modernity and its Contradictions

The fascination of contradictory affinities with modernity made of attraction and repulsion, is evident in a vast cultural framework that goes from the construction of the collection of modernist texts to the Le Corbusier (1887-1965) collection of books, to mention two important references. There are hundreds of titles, including first editions of or about the Swiss master, but also revealing the most revolutionary aspects of his work and at the same time a plural and hybrid vision of modern architecture, since Távora was born in the year *Vers une Architecture* was published and began his professional life when Le Corbusier surprised everyone with the density of the Ronchamp chapel or the maturity of the convent of la Tourette. Távora is a man from the last generation of the C.I.A.M. who feels the restlessness of the new times and, as Álvaro Siza (1933) puts it, was “formed in admiration of a Corbusier of certainties, immediately sensitive to the LC of disconcerting turns.”<sup>6</sup>

Likewise Frank Lloyd Wright’s discovery when, during his long stay in the USA, he undertook a journey into the Wrightian universe, precisely on the first anniversary of the master’s death, moving himself “to tears” in the supreme place: “Taliesin [...] is more than a building, it is a landscape; [...] Taliesin is also a life and a philosophy.”<sup>7</sup>

In his dispute with modern rationalism, Távora discovers a tradition as old as man himself<sup>8</sup>, while at the same time not ignoring the works of contemporary masters, the new construction processes: “we will lose nothing by studying foreign architecture, otherwise it would be pointless to pretend to speak of Portuguese architecture.”<sup>9</sup>

## The House and Garden as a Whole: the Organisation of Space

The discovery of Japanese architecture<sup>10</sup> will leave a deep imprint on Távora<sup>11</sup>, constituting a prospective enquiry<sup>12</sup> that begins with a focus on the present, on

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6 Álvaro Siza, “Fernando Távora”, *Desenho de Arquitectura: Património da Escola de Belas Artes do Porto e da Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto*, (Porto: Universidade do Porto, 1987).

7 Fernando Távora, *Diário de “bordo”*, 1960 (Guimarães: Associação Casa da Arquitetura/Fundação Marques da Silva, Família Távora, Fundação Cidade de Guimarães, ed. fac-simile, 2012).

8 Fernando Távora, “Escola do Cedro”, in *Arquitetura*, no. 85 (1964), 175-179.

9 Fernando Távora, “O Problema da Casa Portuguesa”, in *Cadernos de Arquitectura*, no. 1 (1947): 12.

10 Fernando Távora takes around 20 rolls of slides, makes drawings with more or less detailed annotations, buys books and publications and acquires various information about the cities, buildings, museums, universities and institutions he visits – postcards, maps, brochures, guides: “... as well as spending money, I spend precious time and suffer immensely to select books according to my possibilities and their probable interest, but it is necessary to take some to enlighten our Portuguese spirits that are too much in the dark...”, Távora, *Diário de “bordo”*, 181.

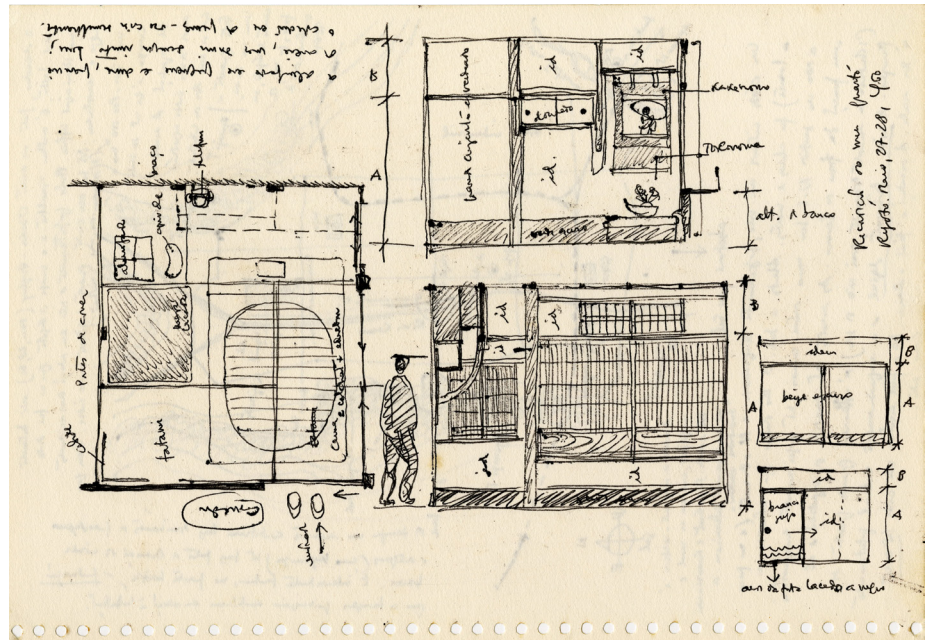
11 Távora is the first Portuguese architect to visit Japan after spending three months in the USA, travelling to pre-Columbian Mexico and then Egypt and Greece. Fernando Távora was a young teacher when, instigated by the director of the Porto School of Fine Arts (ESBAP), architect Carlos Ramos, he applied to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to go on a study visit to the USA to investigate the teaching of architecture, and to Japan, with a view to including in his trip to Japan, having received an invitation in the meantime, “... as a member of CIAM, to participate in the World Design Conference (WoDeCo) ...” to be held in Tokyo in May 1960. Carlos Ramos justified this by the importance of the conference (WoDeCo), which brought together the most important international architects of the time, and by the growing value of contemporary Japanese architecture, particularly the work of the architect Kenzo Tange. The grant was awarded and the five-and-a-half-month trip began in February of that first year. Cf. Fernando Távora, *Carta de Távora para o Conselho de Administração da F.C.G.*, 26/11/1959, A.A.F.T.

12 Cf. Ana Mesquita, *O melhor de dois mundos: a viagem do arquitecto Távora aos EUA e Japão – Diário 1960*, (Master’s Thesis, Coimbra: Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologias da Universidade Coimbra, 2007).

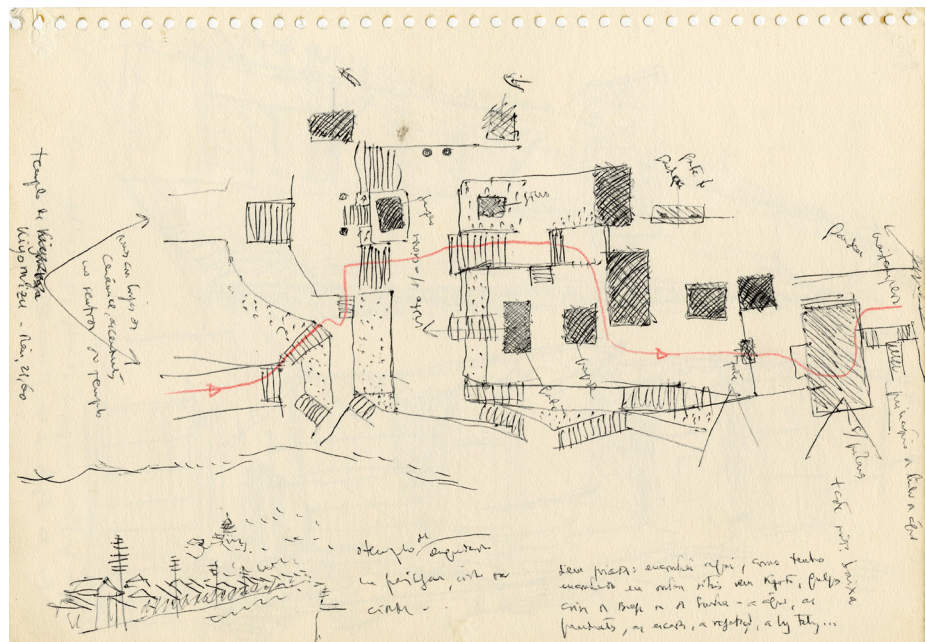
reality, but little by little Távora becomes involved with the subtle and complex question of tradition and how the strength of the past implies the culture of contemporaneity [Fig. 2, 3, 4].

Távora observes how the landscape is constructed in a balance between the natural and the built, understanding the weight of history and the seduction of the form of time. He interprets the relationship between architecture and landscape, concluding that in Japan the “great charm lies in the house-garden whole. It’s not a house and a garden – it is a whole.”<sup>13</sup> He finds in Japan the weight of history and the call to “achieve eternal solutions.”

The reflections he had carried out 15 years earlier regarding “O problema da casa portuguesa” [the problem of the Portuguese house] (1945; 1947) or the study of vernacular [and erudite] architecture that he had carried out as part of the *Inquérito à Arquitectura Regional Portuguesa* (Inquiry into Portuguese Regional Architecture) (1955-1961)<sup>14</sup>, find an echo in Japan. In a situation of ideological resistance, he had developed an approach to tradition and the question of cultural identity, initiating a process of ethical construction as a disciplinary affirmation, which resulted in the essay *O Problema da Casa Portuguesa* [“The Problem of the Portuguese House”], re-reading the myth of the “Portuguese house” based on the bridge between Modern Architecture, “the only architecture that we can do sincerely”, and the popular house, which “will provide great lessons when properly studied, because it is the most functional and the least fanciful, in a word, the one that



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Fig. 2

Fernando Távora, his room in Kyoto, 27-28 May 1960 (FIMS/AFT).

Fig. 3

Fernando Távora, Kiyomizu Temple, 21 May 1960 (FIMS/AFT).

13 Távora, *Diário de "bordo"*, 330.

14 Published as *Arquitectura Popular em Portugal*, (Lisboa: Associação dos Arquitectos Portugueses, 1961).

is most in keeping with the new intentions.”<sup>15</sup>

Távora followed Tetsuro Yoshida’s (1884-1956) approach to tradition through everyday life and the traditional Japanese home, the importance of anonymous craftsmanship, the timeless objects that are so beautiful that they continue to shape our world, but also Kenzo Tange’s (1913-2005) argument in the process of recognising a traditional architecture situated between Katsura and the Ise Shrine, crossing them with Bruno Taut’s reflection on the connection between past and present, considering the meticulous work of relationship between the built and the natural.<sup>16</sup>

On his return to Portugal, Fernando Távora launched the course entitled “Organisation of Space” at ESBAP in the autumn of 1960, with innovative scientific objectives based on the conception of architecture as the organisation and production of space and defending architecture beyond the object. Távora combined a commitment to history with the avant-garde, seeking an authenticity based on the continuity of the sense of history and tradition. In a situation of assumed contemporaneity, he was a pioneer in questioning the dogmas of the Modern Movement, signalling the awareness of the urgency of reconciliation with history, in a dialectical perspective between tradition and future, between modernity and history, between space and time.<sup>17</sup>

### Classical Order and Heterodoxy

The intense plunge into modernity without abandoning tradition, the desire to innovate, but at the same time not to forget his origins, are at the root of architect Fernando Távora’s rich and complex personality, which is reflected in his actions, work, teaching, and life.

From the polyhedral figure of Le Corbusier to the modernists of *Orfeu*, from traditional Japanese architecture to Portuguese vernacular architecture, from classical order to Miesian rigour, Távora thinks, feels, builds a heterodox and inclusive path, a genuine path to “arrive at eternal solutions”.



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15 Távora, *O Problema da Casa Portuguesa*, 11.

16 Collected in Bruno Taut, *Houses and People of Japan*, (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1937).

17 Aldo Rossi, *Autobiographie Scientifique*, (Marseille: Ed. Parenthèses, 1988), 12.

Fig. 4

Fernando Távora, Street in Kyoto, 22 May 1960 (FIMS/AFT).

Portuguese matrices are crossed with the observation of the world, great architecture is placed in context, fuelling the conviction that one does not invent, but always continues. Távora gave substance to Eugenio d'Ors' aphorism manifested with regard to: "Classicism. There is only true originality when you are within a tradition. Anything that isn't tradition is plagiarism."<sup>18</sup>

As he wrote in 1960, "I am increasingly convinced that only by doing the same thing over and over again, in one lifetime or over generations, is it possible to refine and arrive at everlasting solutions. From the Theséion to the Parthenon there is a whole path of progress, as with Mies' Lake Shore 1st and 2nd phases"<sup>19</sup> [Fig. 5].

Távora carries out a permanent exercise of critical imagination, searching for the sublime in the dignity of architecture, to think and make the architecture of our time, integrating contemporaneity without falsehood: "the mythologised architecture", "the untouchable white virgin became for me a manifestation of life [...] And the myth fell apart. And between the cottage and the masterpiece I saw that there were relationships such as [I knew] existed between the bricklayer (or any other man) and the architect [...]"<sup>20</sup>

And, revealing his modernist convictions, between "moving forward" or "stagnating", he clearly decided on the former. His position is anti-academic in that he doesn't accept the codification of the Modern Movement's orthodoxy, its fixed and immutable rules. For him, History, which he learnt from Aarão de Lacerda, "is worthwhile insofar as it can solve the problems of the present and insofar as it becomes an aid and not an obsession."<sup>21</sup> The importance of Fernando Távora's contribution lies in his lucid and passionate approach to architecture. Without rejecting modernity and the contributions of the avant-garde, he sought an authenticity based on the continuity of a tradition.



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18 Eugénio d'Ors, «Clasicismo. Sólo hay originalidad verdadera cuando se está dentro de una tradición. Todo lo que no es tradición es plagio», (1911) published in "Primeros lemas", *Gnómica*, no. XVII, (1941).

19 Távora, *Diário de "bordo"*, 367.

20 Távora, *Escola do Cedro*, 175.

21 "Entrevista com Fernando Távora", in *Arquitectura*, no. 123, (1971), 150.

Fig. 5

Fernando Távora, photo of Lake Shore Drive, 1960 (FIMS/AFT), ref. 0251-01-sld0080).

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