

Soutinho, the Italophile Architect

Alcino Soutinho, School of Porto, Portuguese Architectural Culture, Tradition and Modernity, Ethics of Design

/Abstract

The text examines the figure and work of Alcino Soutinho within the context of Portuguese architectural culture in the second half of the twentieth century, focusing on his position within the so-called “School of Porto” and on his long-standing engagement with Italian architectural thought. Particular attention is given to the formative impact of his extended study trip to Italy in 1961, which established a durable framework of references and critical tools rather than a superficial adoption of stylistic models. The author traces the cultural and disciplinary influences that shaped Soutinho’s autonomous and coherent approach to design, characterised by a deliberate distance from the construction of a personal language and from the communicative and mediatic imperatives of contemporary architecture. Soutinho’s work is interpreted not as eclectic or linguistically pluralistic, but as the outcome of a rigorous design practice grounded in constructive logic, typological clarity, a strong sense of belonging to the ground, careful control of space and light, and an ethical attention to use, durability and maintenance. Through the discussion of key projects – including interventions within historical contexts, civic buildings and large-scale territorial works – the text highlights a poetic stance that privileges the collective, material and often implicit dimensions of architectural knowledge, relegating language to a subsidiary role within a complex and balanced process. In this perspective, Soutinho’s contribution emerges as fundamental in preserving the plurality and critical depth of Porto’s architectural culture, countering the risk of stylistic academism and offering a lesson in restraint, continuity and responsibility that remains highly relevant to contemporary debates on architectural identity and practice in Europe.

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To entrust my testimony on Alcino Soutinho to the written word, I preferred to publish one of the various texts I had written over the years, the result of reflections on his work, which I had drawn on extensively to prepare my speech in the courtroom. The most articulate and complete had been written for a small monograph - the first on his work - that Giancarlo Mainini¹ wanted to dedicate to him in 2005. It seemed to me to be richer and better written than the one read in Lisbon. The use of the present tense indicates that at the time his activity was in full swing and some of the projects described had recently been completed.

In November 2013, Alcino Soutinho passed away, so I will limit myself in these lines to adding a few notes of updating or confirmation, prompted above all by the general theme of the conference: the relationship between Portuguese and Italian architectural cultures, which has grown and become increasingly close over the years, in which Alcino Soutinho played a recognised role in the two-way transmission of thought and design. In fact, if Alberto Sartoris jokingly and affectionately called him an ‘Italophile’, it is a sign that he had noticed his evident fondness for our country and its architecture.

Soutinho’s passion for our country began and took root with the Gulbenkian trip in 1961, which lasted eight months and took him to the main Italian cities, where he devoted himself in particular, but not exclusively, to museum architecture, as an in-depth study of the theme dealt with in his final year project (CODA, Museu das artes e tradições populares, 1959). This experience of learning and cross-fertilisation has not yet been the subject of a specific study, and what little we know has been gleaned from his impromptu accounts or interviews. I believe that at a time when original research and studies are multiplying, exploring the events of late 20th-century architecture, a study on this topic is also desirable.

On that journey across the peninsula, Soutinho certainly visited the numerous museums that had been built in Italy over the previous decade as part of the effort to rebuild cities damaged by bombing: in Milan, the Castello Sforzesco museum by BBPR (1954–1956) and the PAC by Gardella (1947–1954); in Genoa, the Bianco (1946–1950) and Rosso (1953–1961) buildings and the San Lorenzo treasure (1952–1956) by Albini, and in Palermo, the Abatellis building (1953–1954) by Scarpa. Castelvecchio is still a construction site and he will visit it on subsequent trips.

Recalling that experience, at the urging of this or that interlocutor, Soutinho mentioned the buildings that had struck and influenced him, especially those in Milan: Gardella’s apartment buildings in Milan (1947–1955) and the Borsalino houses in Alessandria (1947–1952) and the house in Zattere (1958–1962), still

¹ The Italian edition of the present essay is included in the volume: Giancarlo Mainini, *Alcino Soutinho. Opere recenti*, Officina, Rome 2005. The volume benefited from the contributions of two historians who collaborated with Soutinho: Armando Minopoli and Luca Dubini. Giancarlo was also a mentor and friend of mine, who had a profound influence on me. He is discussed and studied less than he should be. The photographs taken from the Soutinho Studio Archive and all the drawings included in this contribution are published with the permission of the Soutinho family and of the Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS) which holds the Alcino Soutinho archive.



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unfinished and already less popular than the others. During those months, he obviously took part (and perceived it as a decisive issue) in the all-Milanese dispute between Ponti and Nervi's Pirelli skyscraper (1956–1960) and BBPR's controversial Velasca tower (1955–1961). He recounts how his Brazilian friend, on foggy days, which were frequent in Milan at the time, dared to say 'What a beautiful day! You can't see the Velasca Tower'.

Thinking back now on one of the most active Italian architects of that period, I don't remember him ever mentioning Luigi Moretti when we talked about his trip or in the interviews I happened to read or hear. Perhaps it was simply an oversight. It would be necessary to study his notes and travel reports, since Moretti's most famous buildings certainly did not go unnoticed: the building on Corso Italia (1949–1955) in Milan, the Girasole building (1947–1950) and the Olympic Village (1958–1959 with Libera and others) in Rome.

The debate in Italy and Europe during those years was influenced by Rogers' theory of historical pre-existences, and he was certainly inspired by the reflections and suggestions offered by the combination of history and modernity, by the attention that the architecture before his eyes attributed to history. About ten years after that trip, Soutinho found himself working in a historical setting at the Pousada de Vilanova da Cerveira (1971–1982, Europa Nostra Award 1982) [Fig. 1], and then at the Convent of São Gonçalo in Amarante (1977–1987) [Figg. 2a-2b]. I had the great fortune to be able to follow the final stages of the museum part of the latter, dedicated to Amadeu Souza Cardoso, during my apprenticeship in his studio (1986–1987), accompanying Soutinho on his more or less weekly visits to the construction site and attending meetings in the studio.

During that period and throughout the latter part of the 20th century, the question of language was at the centre of the debate on architecture. The crisis of

Fig. 1
The dining room at Pousada D. Dinis in Vilanova da Cerveira (1973) (photo by the author)



2a



2b

modernity as an act of faith – which crumbled with the drama of the Second World War – in undefined progress, in those years transformed, in architecture, into a critique of the modern that drew on the contributions of history and tradition, often remaining on the surface of issues and limiting itself to language and the adoption of easy stylistic elements without delving into the depth of the project. Continuist theoretical positions (Habermas, for example, defines modernity as an interrupted project, not a defunct one²) are viewed with suspicion.

The 1980s saw Siza's consecration, even in Portugal, as a leading figure in architecture, within what everyone now called the Porto School, giving rise to a highly controversial issue in those years, which has now been laid to rest.

The international press, with its need to convey the Portuguese phenomenon by identifying a triad of heroes, Siza first and foremost, followed by Távora and Souto Moura, overlooked the figures of that group who were wrongly considered minor. But today we discover that this was a convenient but now anachronistic interpretation of the phenomenon. The evolution of Portuguese architecture in recent decades shows an incredibly fertile ground in which individuals of extraordinary value and interest have flourished and been of primary importance for four consecutive generations. Each with its own specificity. Thus, the metaphorical image that best represents Portuguese architecture today is not that of a pyramid (as seen in international magazines a few years ago) but that of a mountain range with peaks of different heights, each appreciable individually and as part of a whole.

During those years, the training of young architects from Porto – their design pedagogy – was not immune to the strong influence exerted by the international renown of a figure of great importance such as Álvaro Siza and the charm of his architecture. This influence concerned methodology (compulsive drawing

Fig. 2a-2b
São Gonçalo Convent at Amarante, the new wing of the small library (photo by the author)

2 J. Habermas, "Modern, Post-Modern and Neoconservatism", *Alfabeta* no. 22, 1981, pp. 15-17.

in which perspective sequences are distorted to investigate even what is not directly visible, 'cinematic' spatial sequences, complex and unstable geometries, etc.) as well as a highly personal language. Both these aspects revealed an excessive imitative attitude and the risk that the newly established Faculty of Architecture could turn into a sort of Siza academy (albeit an anti-academic one), which frightened Siza himself.

A decade after the Carnation Revolution and SAAL, the eyes of Europe were once again focused on Portugal (mainly Porto), driven by the growing fame of Siza and his projects. As a result, students in Porto risked becoming too focused on their own world, too navel-gazing. This circumstance led Távora and the other teachers to make an effort to de-provincialise the School, investing resources to open it up to the outside world (series of lectures *Discursos sobre a arquitectura*, Porto 1991), to show young architects, from the mouths of the main protagonists themselves, the events of international architecture and the different ways of conceiving the reasons and forms of design.

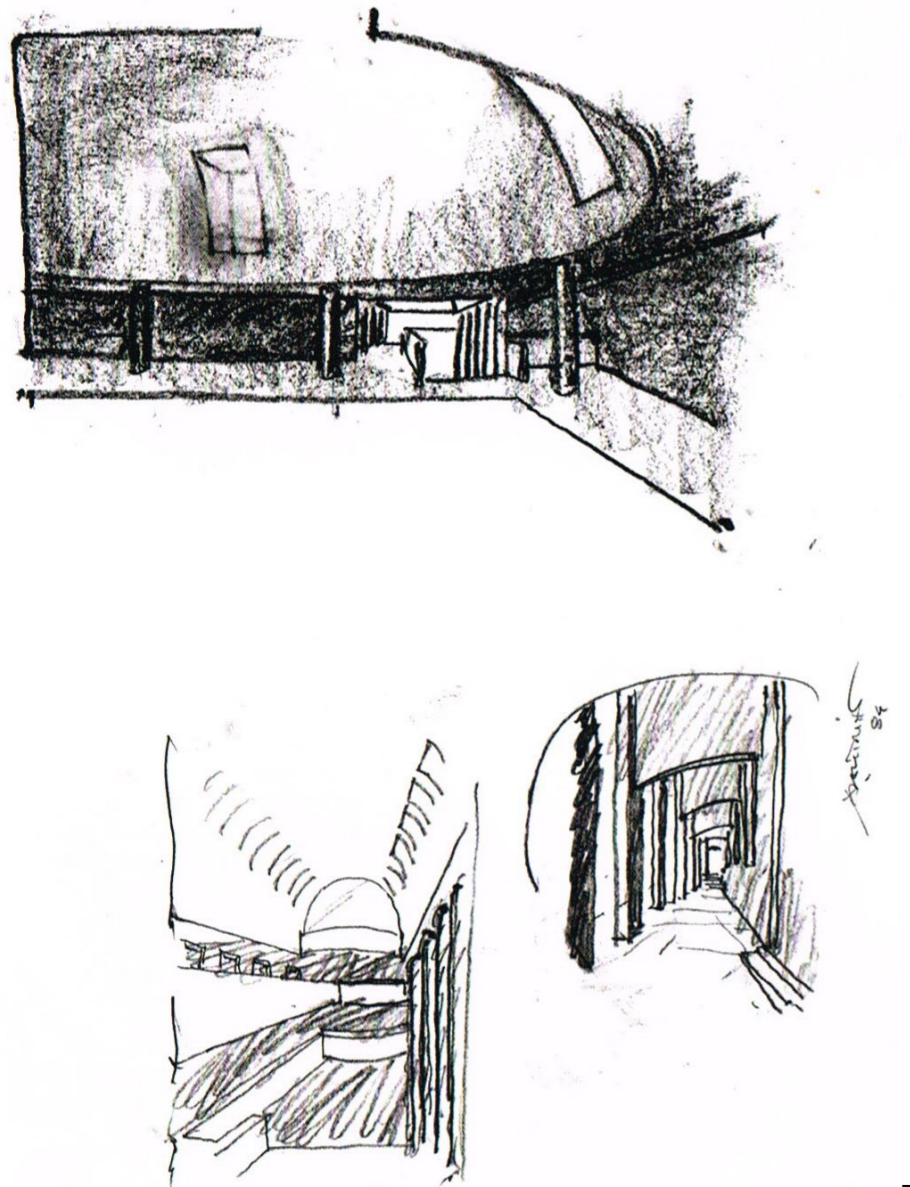


Fig. 3
Matosinhos Town Hall:
sketches of the Great Hall, the
entrance hall and the portico.

3

Soutinho's architecture entered the scene unexpectedly during those years with a series of projects with a disorienting expressive charge. Mainly two works, both completed in 1987: the Matosinhos Town Hall [Fig. 3] and the Pinto de Sousa house in Ofir [Fig. 4]. Rigorous geometry, modular construction of the plan and elevations, identification of a *façade*, typological references to the civil basilica and the impluvium of Roman architecture, independence of the *façade* (as in Renaissance and Baroque churches), 'telluric' visual weight of the masses.

The elevation of the building becomes the place where the relationship between two distinct compositional logics coagulates, that of the adaptive interior space commensurate with different uses and that of the public exterior space that does not allow for breaks, only slight disarticulations.

The same design themes are repeated in several other projects, such as the houses in Albergaria and Barredo and the Pina Vaz house, the renovation of the old Misericórdia hospital in Viana (not built), and the BPI headquarters on



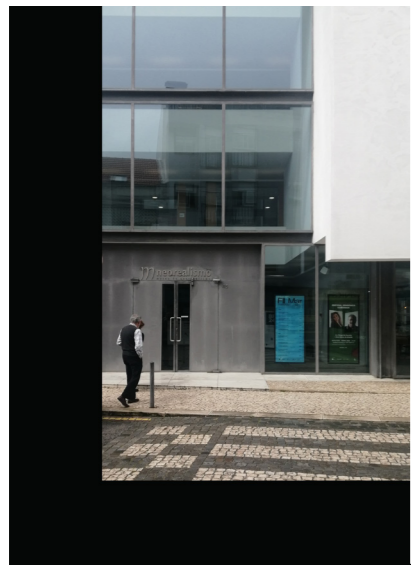
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Boavista, where the corner solution is accentuated in an almost classical manner.

It is this production that betrays the expectations of a broad audience accustomed to clichés and often leads them to identify him in internal debates as a discordant element of the Porto School, sometimes implicitly attributing him the role of a secondary figure. Such assessments may have caused him some bitterness, but they never affected his measured irony and sense of humour, the hallmarks of his elegance and good nature.

In fact, his architecture is anomalous compared to the dominant trend in the city, thanks to the fact that he brings his own cultural references, which are probably not shared by others, into his design experience. This position has

Fig. 4
Pinto de Sousa house (photo
from the Soutinho Studio
archive)



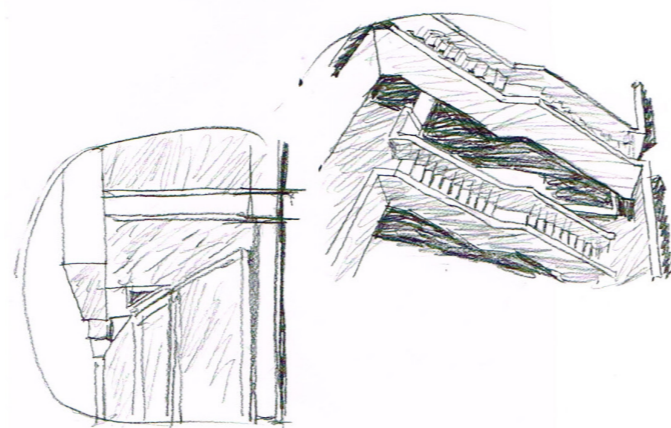
5a



5b



5c



5d

sometimes led to interpretations of his work as being marked by a certain eclecticism, a consideration that I have never understood and have always interpreted as a veiled, albeit benevolent, accusation. Perhaps this is just my misinterpretation or prejudice about the term 'eclecticism', induced by the fact that I am still tied to the critical and certainly not laudatory interpretation that, during my formative years, the Milanese debate attributed to late 19th-century historicist eclecticism.

In some cases, there has been talk of nods to post-modernism.

I believe rather that Soutinho has always given language a relative importance within the project, in an era that instead attributed absolute importance to language.

Responding with design to the stimuli coming from the cultural phenomenologies in which we are constantly immersed seems to me to be the result of a way of being in the world with open eyes and an alert mind, capturing its stimuli and thoughts. Memory – knowing how to recognise – always plays a fundamental role in the formation of design. To me, this does not seem so far removed from the design approach employed by Álvaro Siza when he designed in Berlin and The Hague in those same years.

Even in the projects of the following years, in which Soutinho returned to the use of white plaster on the exterior [Fig. 5a-5b-5c-5d], the volumes are composed of independent planes and touch the ground precisely, defying gravity with obvious overhangs without disguising it with subterfuge. Even in this period, at the turn of the century, Soutinho strongly reaffirmed the classical idea of architecture's belonging to the earth. Once again, language manifests itself naturally as one component among others in the project, part of a complex process that

Fig. 5a-5b-5c
Museum of Neorealism in Vila Franca de Xira (2002), views of the entrance and interior (photo by the author)

Fig. 5d
Museum of Neorealism in Vila Franca de Xira (2002), sketch of the entrance and two staircases in the central void



6b



6a

is influenced by the phenomenologies that surround it (physically and conceptually).

But it is two projects on a territorial scale, of architecture as modelling of the soil and landscape - the water treatment plant in Lever [Fig. 6a-6b-6c-6d-6e] and the FC Porto training centre [Fig. 7] - that still fascinate me the most today, because of the author's ability not to be authorial, to lend his skills to two works of social service, entering into harmony with a complex and unusual programme, dominated by unusual functional specificities. Both share another peculiarity: they are not on display. They are accessible mainly to internal staff and are revealed to the public from a distance and discreetly through a few signs, elementary geometries that mark the landscape.

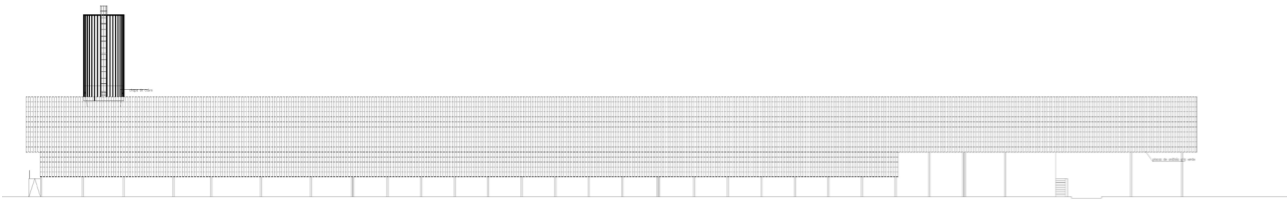
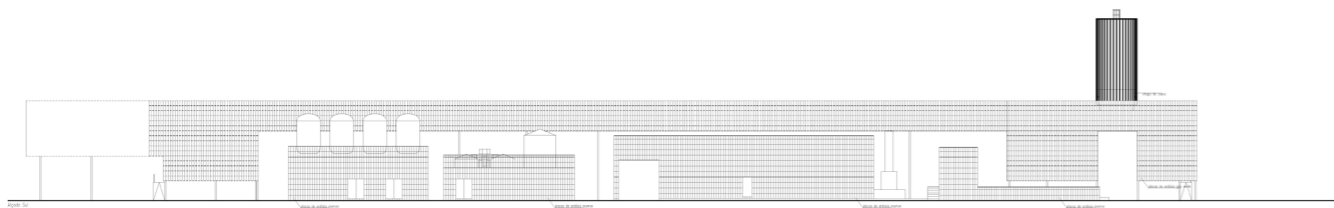
They are located a short distance from each other, at the eastern end of the municipality of Vila Nova de Gaia, although they belong to two distinct landscapes. The power station stands on the banks of the Douro, and rather than attempting to camouflage the large machinery and warehouses with natural elements, Soutinho embraces their mechanical language and tames it by placing a large visual shield over the geometric embankment in a long curve that traces the bend of the river. The sports centre, practically invisible from the surrounding area, occupies a plateau above the Douro, managing the differences in height with terraces and embankments between which low, long buildings similar to substructures are nestled.



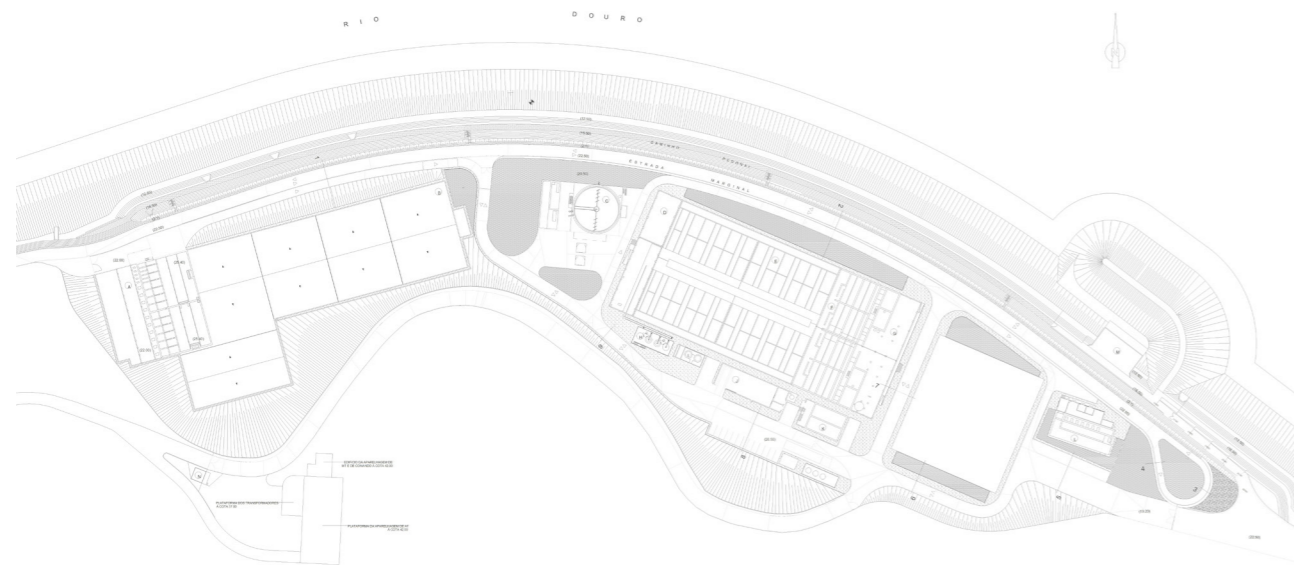
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Fig. 6a-6b
Drinking water treatment plant in Vila Nova de Gaia (2000) (photo from the Soutinho Studio archive)

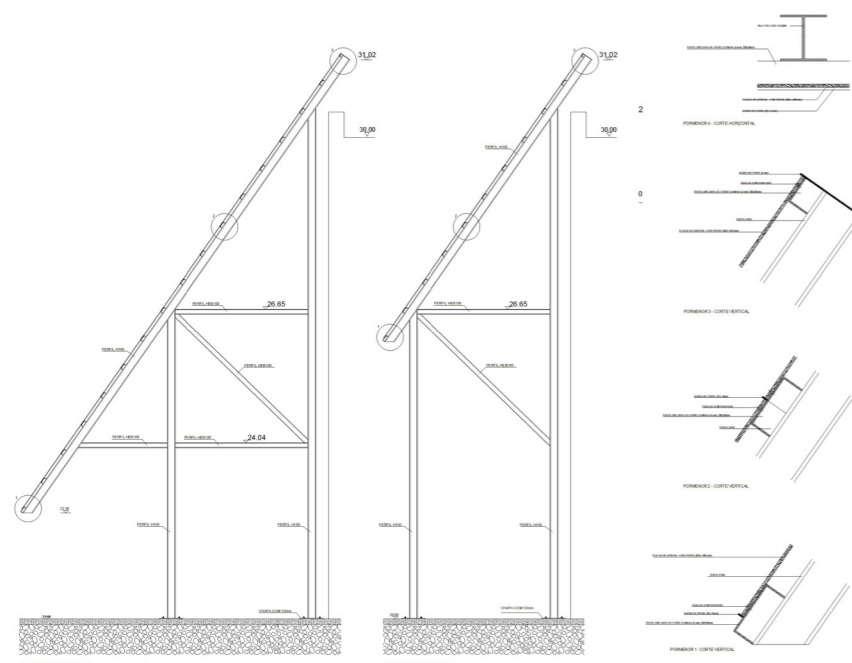
Fig. 7
FC Porto's training and sports development centre in Vila Nova de Gaia (2000) (Photo by Giovanni Leoni)



6c



6d



6e

Fig. 6c-6d-6e
Drinking water treatment plant in Lever (Vila Nova de Gaia) (2000), general site plan of the facility and drawings of the steel and stone wall enclosing the building

Alcino Soutinho. Architecture, Identity and Collective Knowledge

Until recently, the term 'Porto School' was used in international architectural debates to summarise certain experiences in Portuguese architecture, but it is now used more sparingly and circumstantially. This term was often used in an attempt to frame the work of a group of architects, whom we have come to know over the last two decades, within a unified context, emphasising their homogeneous characteristics at the expense of their individual peculiarities and thus delineating a compact cultural phenomenon. In those chronicles and critiques, Alcino Soutinho was often referred to as an anomalous and dissonant element of the group, and sometimes this adjective was loaded with ambiguous and controversial meanings, while at other times it consciously emphasised the richness of the individual positions that emerged from a panorama of distinct events, yet linked by a marked family resemblance that made them close and recognisable to the outside observer. Years ago, Álvaro Siza, his close friend since they were both architecture students and the first admirer of his work, lamented the lack of a systematic analysis of his work, which would certainly have helped to raise awareness of the man himself and spread his valuable lesson on how to work by building an autonomous and conscious line of research, with the courage to make minority choices and without the support of great public success, thus contributing to enriching the wealth and strength of that cultural enclave that revolved around the Faculty of Architecture in Porto, diversifying its themes and research, allowing it to avoid falling into the ranks of stylistic and mannerist academia. Even when it spilled over into the teaching of Design and Construction, the autonomy of Soutinho's research had a significant beneficial effect on the diversification of viewpoints and research objectives.

Alcino Soutinho's work is much more important in the history of Portuguese architecture than its limited dissemination beyond the country's borders would suggest. I believe that both supporters and detractors of his merits agree on this. Yet there is a reason for the limited dissemination of his work, which can perhaps be traced back to his endemic distance from everything that satisfies the media appeal of architecture, namely the personalisation of languages and the extreme conceptualisation of the work. These characteristics make him a difficult figure for the international public to understand.

From a comprehensive and articulate observation, one characteristic perhaps emerges more than any other: the conviction that a personalised stylistic signature is not necessary to build a strong identity for one's work over the years, one that emerges clearly in every project, in every node of a logical network built



8a



8b

day by day; the conviction that a personal and recognisable way of approaching a project can be formed naturally over time, without the burden of affectations and personalism, allowing oneself instead to be permeated by the suggestions that intellectual life offers us, bringing them back into the realm of one's own underlying logic. However, many of those who have commented on Alcino Soutinho's work in the past have often seen in it the characteristics of eclecticism or linguistic pluralism, while recognising an autonomous internal coherence within each of his projects.

In order not to fall into the trap of a reductive interpretation, which would not do full justice to the importance of his work, I believe that Soutinho's architecture should not be approached from the perspective of linguistic analysis. If we simply change our perspective and re-evaluate the role of language in architectural criticism, directing our analysis towards the other components of the project, it immediately becomes clear that his projects reveal a tight and coherent authorship, capable of rendering his work legible within a unified panorama, at least the more mature part of it, which began with the renovation of the convent of São Gonçalo in Amarante [Figg. 8a-8b] in the mid-1970s.

It is necessary to reposition the linguistic and figurative aspects in a proper relationship with the other aspects that make up the disciplinary knowledge of architecture, such as construction, urban relationships, expertise in the formation of spaces, in attributing qualities to them and in relating them to each other, as well as in establishing a meaningful relationship between interior spaces and open space. After all, a recurring feature of Porto's cultured architecture is that it has been able to maintain the linguistic concerns of composition in the right position as a secondary element among the many that contribute to the definition of the project. Consider the work of Távora, the programme he himself theorised with conviction from a very young age, to find a third, autonomous and authentic way in the linguistic controversy between modernism and traditionalist and localist expression. Consider Siza and his ability to escape the linguistic

Fig. 8a-8b
São Gonçalo Convent in Amarante, interior and exterior of the new wing separating the two cloisters (photo by the author)



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quarrel over the use of history, opened up by postmodern theories, while sharing their critical assumptions about the 'narrative' of the modern. Finally, consider the evolution of Souto Moura's research towards an increasingly processual and 'anti-linguistic' architecture.

In his work, Alcino Soutinho seems to have focused on the collective and subterranean aspects of disciplinary knowledge at the expense of the subjective and expressive ones, ensuring that the latter were defined naturally as consequences of the former. Thus, in the principles that give rise to each of his projects, adherence to a shared research programme in which these aspects are measured according to objective criteria becomes paramount, in contrast to what happens with language, where personal expression, the ability to impress the public and to characterise production are what count.

Without ever adhering to a pre-established figurative programme, Soutinho conducted his research with the aim of maintaining a solid coherence in the underlying structure of his projects, allowing himself to be guided by different suggestions in the definition of the expressive aspects. Due to a sort of expressive modesty, not uncommon in Portuguese cultural history, individual expression is nullified in a plurality of figurations and in the experimentation of expressive modes, which, however, never take centre stage, presenting themselves in subdued tones and reduced to essential signs. The figuration in his work is, in fact, absolutely and deliberately dry, completely immune to possible concessions to marked accents. It is never the product of a linguistic problem and never represents itself; on the contrary, it is always the representation of a design, settlement, construction, housing and even decorative problem – or its solution. His architecture is made of substance: matter, light, colour, robustness, relationship with the ground. Although form is at the heart of all his design work, it is never extreme, never becomes a manifesto of itself; there is never any temptation to exaggerate it to make it more expressive, either in the work as a whole or in the details. Instead, there is always a clear desire to speak a plain,

Fig. 9
Office building and Derivatives Exchange on Avenida da Boavista in Porto (1994) (photo by the author)

composed and clear language that is, above all, accessible and understandable to everyone. [Fig. 9]

Alcino Soutinho offers us architecture made up of real events, whose research is expressed in a language free from ideological flaws, firmly rooted in the control of the factual elements of the project. His architecture stems from real issues, and the restlessness that underpins his poetics is generated by the attempt to provide concrete answers to the concrete questions posed by the project. The relationship with the physical location where the work will be built, with the materials and construction techniques it requires and that the objective conditions offer; the relationship with its own history and culture and with architectural history and culture; the response to the requirements of the proposed programme; the control of space and light inside and outside the building; to the point of touching on issues usually considered more venal, such as the control of economic resources. The harmonious synthesis of all these relationships is the subject of his poetics, which, however, is expressed in physical signs that can, indeed must, also be analysed in terms of language because, after all, they are generated and defined by obeying an expressive will. Soutinho is clearly aware of this when, in a speech he gave in 1986, at a time when architects in Portugal were still on the margins of the building process and cultured architecture even more so, he warns of the risks of identifying architectural design with the sum of neutral and technically objectifiable factors, criticising what he calls the 'technical interpretation' of construction. However, semantic concerns never take precedence, and architectural language never takes centre stage in a design process in which the playful, subjective and poetic elements possess the magic of measure, consisting of a hidden thread that supports the project itself and pervades it without overwhelming it.

His work is marked by a great sense of construction, by great pragmatism, with all the consequences that this implies. All design intentions (compositional, constructive, formal...) are filtered through a sort of 'common sense' of execution, linked to the availability of technology, materials, economies, cultures and the ability to skilfully balance them in the design work. Everything is conducted as if there were no desire to impress anyone; as if one always had to reckon with a balance of costs and benefits, not only in economic or construction terms but also, or above all, in figurative terms. This aspect reflects the strong ethical component of Porto's contemporary architecture. Ultimately, Soutinho argues, design is a challenge to make those for whom it is intended happy, without harming architecture. This means designing architecture with a fundamental focus on its ability to accommodate the acts of daily life, on people's ability to feel good in its presence, without seeking to convey strong emotions but only pleasant and controlled sensations. Above all, it means designing architecture that allows people to manage and maintain it easily and that therefore ensures its long-lasting and simple permanence. In this sense, we can say that we are faced with a strongly humanistic architecture, linked to the events of the world of life, linked to the actual reality of human affairs, the product of a design idea

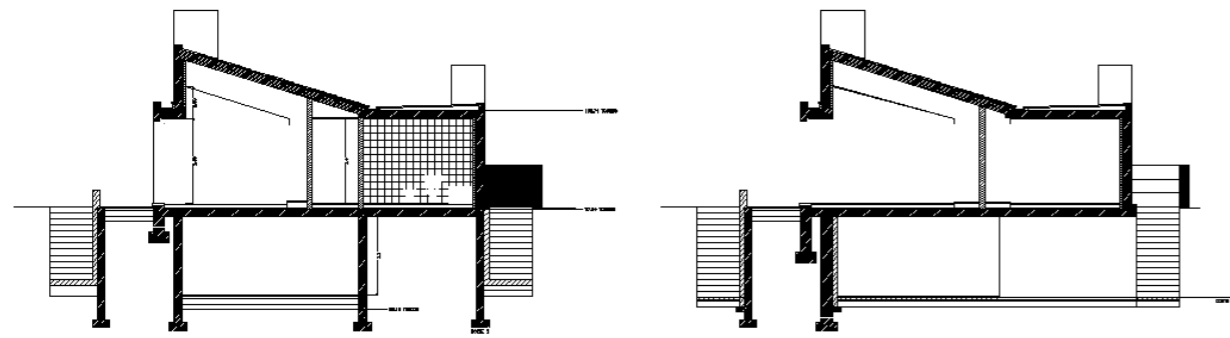
that tends to fill the progressive loss of meaning that has been generated in so much contemporary architecture due to the disconnect between appearance and substance.

The result of a cultured and thoughtful professional practice that leads to genuine architectural research free from preconceived notions, but above all capable of remaining between the lines, renouncing sensational gestures, Soutinho's architecture suggests a rigorous way out, impervious to the clamour of surprising and loudly proclaimed architecture, a low-key way out to which we are unaccustomed today, immersed as we are in the noisy congestion of ostentatious languages and manifesto architecture. Rather than linguistic inventions, his poetics are based on typological innovations, on compositional themes that are continually experimented with in forms that are constantly updated and replaced, true figurative manifestations of personal design themes that constantly recur over the years and make the authorship of his works clearly recognisable.

The double façade, the elevation composed of two more or less independent parallel planes, is, for example, a device used in various forms in many of his projects from the 1980s, both realised and unrealised. The elevation of the building becomes the place where the relationship between two distinct compositional logics coagulates, that of the private and intimate interior space and that of the public exterior space. Soutinho himself, for example, speaks of this relationship when he describes the Pinto de Sousa house in the Ofir pine forest as 'aggressive on the outside - in colour and form; welcoming on the inside - in colour and space'. In some more recent projects, such as the Quinta das Sedas housing block or the Matosinhos Library, this device is simplified and condensed, continuing to mark precisely the boundary and otherness between open and closed space and gaining in synthesis and effectiveness. The double façade disappears, but the boundary between interior and exterior retains a certain thickness and complexity of functions, never reducing itself to a simple surface.



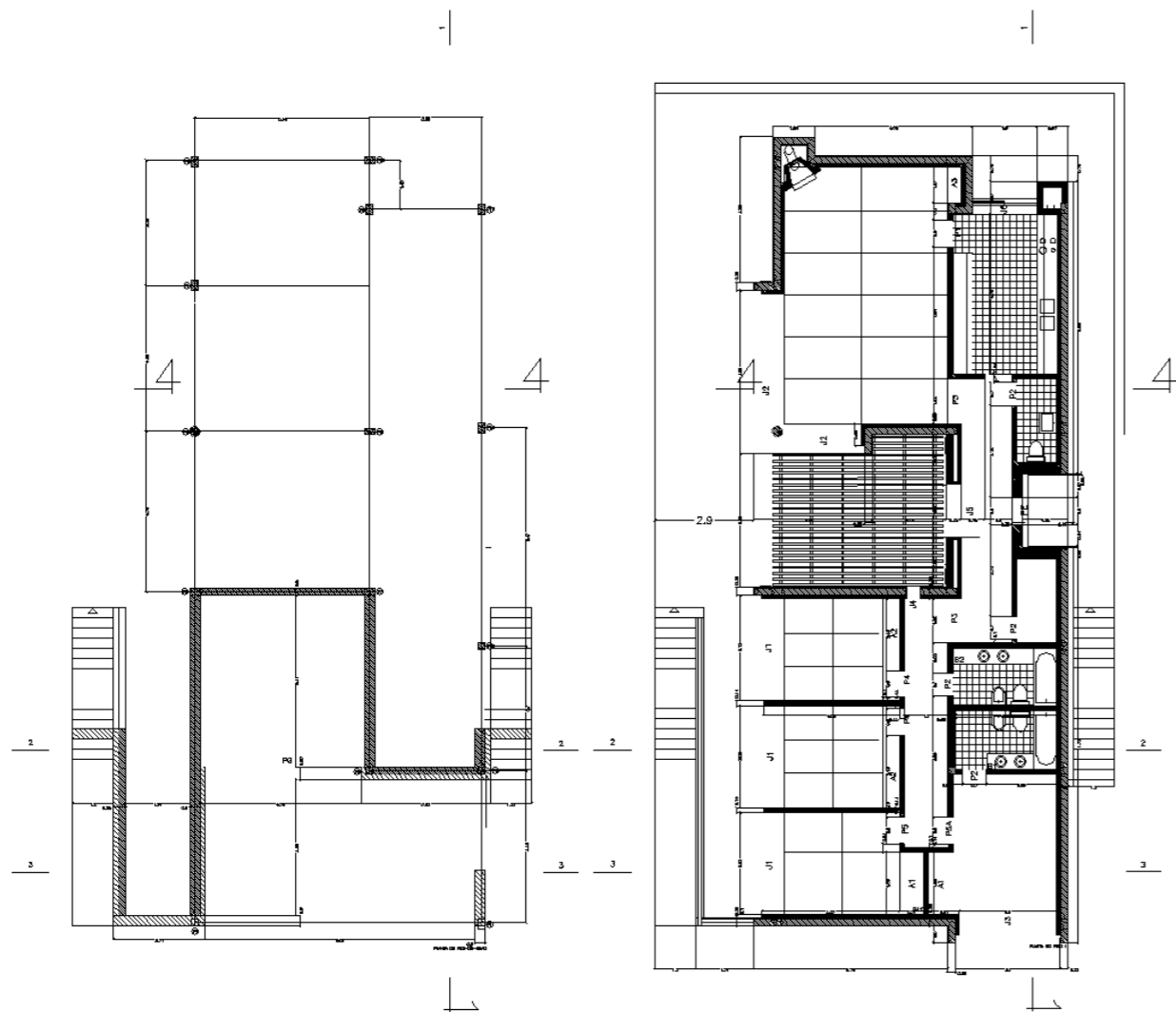
Fig. 10
São Gonçalo Convent in
Amarante, view from the road
upstream (photo by the author)



11b

Special attention is always paid to the roof of the building, its completion towards the sky, made up of pitches, volumes and skylights. The temptation to reserve the building the chance of a 'fifth façade', to be seen in reality - as in the museum in Amarante [Fig.10] located at the foot of a hill - or only to be intuited and perceived from below - as in the two houses in the Ofir pine forest - is combined with the need to guide sunlight into the interior spaces, to tame it and use it as a primary element of the design. Even the control of rainwater in the same two houses, starting from the functional need linked to the limited care and maintenance usually attributed to holiday homes, becomes a real design theme, with collection concentrated in a single point on the roof and the always-open channel that shapes the volumes and appears in the elevations with granite slabs on which the rainwater flows.

Rooting in the ground is another constant feature of his projects; the search for a stable image of the building, the denunciation of its telluric character, as Soutinho himself likes to repeat, of volume rising from the earth, is very evident in some of his works, even at the cost of emphasising it, as in the Vidal house in Albergaria and the Pinto de Sousa house. In more recent projects such as the Soares house in Porto, the Pina Vaz house in Ofir [Fig. 11a-11b], and the buildings for the cultural services of the municipality of Matosinhos, while reaffirming the intention never to visually contradict the force of gravity, the relationship with the ground has become more precise and subtle; the less repeated supports show the right weight of the construction, without however compromising the idea of an object firmly planted on the ground or, in Távora's words, well seated, imperturbable like the sphinxes. In the Matosinhos Library, the negation of the wall's connection to the ground that protects the emergency staircase, achieved through a static device, should be interpreted as the exception that serves to reinforce the rule.



11a

Fig. 11a
Plan and sections of the Pina Vaz house in Ofir (1995-99)

Fig. 11b
View of the Pina Vaz house from the entrance (photo from the Soutinho Studio archive)

The classical idea of architecture belonging to the earth is strongly confirmed in his latest projects, including the Town Hall of Seregno, where, in keeping with the tradition of Lombard broletto, the building is detached from the ground, giving rise to a covered square, and has a direct connection with the basement where the council chamber is located. But the work in which this sense of the form emerging from the ground is most evident is certainly the F.C. Porto training centre [Fig. 12a-12b-12c], one of his best works, in which the architecture is defined with great naturalness in the folds of the landscape, shaping the slopes with excavations and substructures, with fillings and containments. In a composition made up of horizontal lines and pure geometric elements, the buildings are arranged to complement the modelling of the ground, contributing themselves to the artificial topography of the site, from which the suspended horizontal plane covering the public grandstand of the central field stands out clearly, yet without any emphasis.

The same naturalness, the same straightforward manner, not prone to personal exaggeration, reserved but without excessive shyness, can be seen in his interventions on existing buildings. In the renovation and completion of the convent of S. Gonçalo in Amarante for the accommodation of the Town Hall and the Sousa Cardoso Museum – perhaps his best-known work on the international circuit – as well as in the Pousada of Vilanova de Cerveira, which reuses an entire ancient urban centre surrounded by walls, Soutinho rejects the pure and simple formal detachment between old and new, rejecting the antithesis imposed by modernist ideology and instead proposing the use of history as material for the project, without prejudice and without a priori reverence, according to a criterion of intervention that is found repeatedly in similar interventions in the recent history of Porto architecture. In the Amarante project, one of the first restoration projects of monumental complexes in Portugal not managed by institutions equivalent to our Superintendence, the design starts from the analysis and understanding of the laws that generated the building and its transformations, taking them as the rules governing the new intervention, which is expressed without fear according to the canons of contemporary architecture, yet without flaunting a condition of otherness. The result is a completely harmonious integration between old and new in the combination of techniques and materials, in the identification of the nodes and paths that structure the building and its parts, and in the way the spaces are opened and closed to the outside. The route through the museum spaces passes very naturally from the new structure, built to separate two of the three cloisters,

Fig. 12a-12b-12c
FC Porto's training and sports development centre in Crestuma (Vila Nova de Gaia) (2000)
(Photo by Giovanni Leoni)



to the monumental rooms of the old buildings, in a complete fluidity of spaces, light, materials and finishes.

The features that distinguish his work like a common thread make him, in a way, the heir to a long professional tradition that has developed in Portugal over a long period of time, with ample signs of nobility and prestige, enriched by local connotations. A tradition of architectural know-how that approaches design by following the natural evolution of common sense, offering a cultured interpretation that is sometimes conservative, sometimes innovative, but always open to dialogue with the times and ways of human life.

The reasons for his way of working are rooted in a complex educational background. From 1954 to 1964, Soutinho underwent a long apprenticeship working alongside some of the most acclaimed modern Portuguese architects, such as João Andersen, Januário Goudinho, Arménio Losa and José Carlos Loureiro, not to mention his non-professional but friendly relationship with Viana de Lima during those years, several occasions of collaboration with Távora and his collaboration with Octávio Lixa Filgueiras, a figure of considerable theoretical importance. He undertook a year-long study trip to Italy in 1961, coming into contact with the architecture of Gardella, Albini, Rogers and Quaroni, which certainly left a lasting impression on him, so much so that Alberto Sartoris, during a trip to Portugal in 1981, described him as an 'Italophile architect'. This wealth of experience added something personal to certain traits common to the training of other architects of the same generation who grew up needing to find their way in the complex landscape of the crisis of modernity. It also adds something to the decisive experience of many Portuguese architects of his age, who lived through the years of extensive research into the popular architecture of their country, which ended in 1961 with the publication of part of the material collected.

We need to focus on the object of his research in so many different youthful acquaintances in order to fully understand the coherence of his architectural career in maturity. His attention was probably focused on understanding and appropriating, with an omnivorous attitude, certain solutions and specific devices, rather than absorbing an attitude and a lineage. His projects retain, from this apprenticeship, the ability to manifest themselves in a spontaneous way, free from constraints, so much so that they convey a strong sense of everyday life, appearing in a certain sense 'natural', masking the effort of the creative process. They appear to us as the result of work that proceeds with natural gradualness, without giving in to the desire to argue about forms, in a process that we can describe by quoting Távora's words from memory, according to which in the initial phase the architect commands the project, guides its choices, opens up and resolves doubts and possible paths; the lines of the design are then uncertain, broad, leaving possible interpretations open. At a certain point in its evolution, however, it is the project itself that imposes the reasons for its own definition, guiding the hand within internal rules and laws that are now dictated; thus, the design takes on rigour and precision, no longer showing room for interpretation, each mark appearing necessary and the final form unavoidable.

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