

## THE INTERPRETATION OF THE SITE AS A REPOSITORY OF ACTIVE MEMORY THE LESSON OF A MASTER AND SOME APPLIED DESIGN EXPERIENCES/

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**Abstract.** Thinking about the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings and sites, the importance of the figure of the “father” of the Porto School, Fernando Távora, emerges, both in terms of theoretical thinking and in terms of design experimentation. In his thinking, the search for consonance between forms and circumstance should be practiced through knowledge of the contemporary context, of different geographical realities and of the past, with the aim of recognizing the relationship between forms and life. The continuity of the space is an important value to be developed; space is in “permanent transformation”, therefore the design of the new should continue, seeking to innovate. The paper begins by identifying Távora’s attitude in the field of rehabilitation, based on the principle of reciprocity, and proceeds to illustrate a sequence of interventions on the built environment carried out by the TA Lab section (composed by Sara Riboldi and Carlotta Torricelli) of the Torricelli Associati architectural practice over the last fifteen years, all dedicated to the theme of heritage reconversion. Through these experiences, the principle of the imagination of the new is affirmed in the continuous confrontation with the reality of the present and with history as an active matter of design, through a conscious process of rewriting that defines new relationships between site and theme, between artifice and nature.

**Introduction.** The paper aims to identify a specific attitude in the field of rehabilitation, which is rooted on what we use to define as “the principle of reciprocity”.

The work of the Portuguese Master Fernando Távora (Porto, 1923 - Matosinhos, 2005) is key to clarify the interpretation of the idea of transformation in architecture as a necessary and continuous process. This short manuscript starts by illustrating practice of coexistence between new and old experimented by the Portuguese architect and then continues by illustrating some reconversion design experience and a sequence of interventions on the built environment carried out by the TA Lab architectural practice (composed by Carlotta Torricelli and Sara Riboldi) over the last fifteen years.

For every architect, references to the Masters are fundamental, especially to root their practise in the field of a tradition and to verify their own poetics. We take the opportunity of this conference to reflect on the role that Fernando Távora’s work and thought have played in our way of teaching and transmitting architectural action and in our way of designing in relation to the existing heritage.

Particularly the paper focuses on three concepts:

- the sense of history as active design material;

- the continuity of space, in permanent transformation;

- continuing by innovating.

These concepts lead us, more generally, to reflect on the relationship between architecture and time and the notion of heritage. We use the words of the Italian art historian Tomaso Montanari to emphasise the topicality of this reflection on the theme of time and the possibility of affirming its value as an antagonistic thought to current culture:

«And that is exactly what it is: every fragment of what we call cultural heritage testifies, with the power of matter, that another time really existed. And that our present, which devours everything and dominates everything, is therefore not an absolute: it is only one of many presents. It is, it is easy to understand, a subversive testimony, because it unveils from the foundations the annihilating power of a present that, more than ever before, repudiates history, and therefore cannot give birth to a different future. [...]

Yes, because that other time lives within our time, that other world is an integral part of the world we live in: there is no dimensional leap, there is continuity. It is all here, now.» [1]

**Time according to Fernando Távora: in permanent coming.** In his book *Da Organização do Espaço* [2], Fernando Távora tackles the conformity between old and new in architecture, overturning the problem of time over the reality of space, through the search for coherence with the place, as depository of memory: «it seems that a fundamental characteristic of organized space can be deduced: its continuity. Space is continuous, cannot be organized with a partial view, does not accept limitations in its organization. And in the same way that continuity forms space, both are so closely linked that one is negative from the other, and vice versa, so they cannot separate; the visually seized shapes, thus, maintain close relationships – harmonic and inharmonious – but evident in any case [...]

Everything is important in space organization – shapes themselves, the relationship between them, the space that limits them. And this truth that results from space being continuous has been largely forgotten. [...]

Nonetheless, because space is continuous and time is one of its dimensions, it is also irreversible; that is, given the constant march of time and all that it entails and means, an organized space can never be what it once was, hence the fact that space is in permanent coming» [3]

The book was published in Porto in 1962 and was written as a contest exam for teaching at the Escola Superior de Belas-Artes do Porto (ESBAP). The context in which it is written, therefore, is necessarily specific, yet the author uses the academic circumstance to bring to synthesis a series of reflections on which he also focused during his travels and experiences abroad. As an invited member of the ODAM (Organização dos Arquitectos Modernos), he was among the Portuguese architects who took part in the CIAM (International Congresses of Modern Architecture) in 1951, in 1953, in 1956 and in 1959. The peripheral condition from which he observes the architectural debate allows Távora to cross-fertilise the teachings of the various masters of the Modern Movement. At the same time, he has the opportunity to get to know the critical attitude of those figures who, in the post-war period, questioned functionalist dogmatism, reconnecting the

threads of the memory of places. In this context, memory means that form of dynamic knowledge, thanks to which the coherence of the constructive act is substantiated not in a self-referential way, but through the relationship with the circumstantial elements.

Furthermore, in 1960, a scholarship from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon gave Távora the opportunity to undertake a four months journey around the world, visiting United States, Mexico, Japan, Thailand, Pakistan, Lebanon, Egypt and Greece.

At the time of this book's writing, Távora has already realized a number of important architectural works that have found their way into both national and international contexts, albeit on the limited occasions allowed by a country oppressed by dictatorship (Estado Novo that lasted from 1933 to 1974, which followed the military coup in 1926). It is worth mentioning the project experience of the Quinta da Conceição Municipal Park in Leça de Palmeira (Matosinhos, 1956), which can be read as a diachronic and polysemic rewriting of an itinerary in the material and immaterial memory of a place.

From the two main characteristics of space – continuity and irreversibility – derives two key concepts in the Távora's thinking. On the one hand, the idea that the organization of space is a collective work, the result of collaboration between all men – understood both in a “horizontal” sense, between contemporaries, and in a “vertical” sense, between men of different epochs animated by a common feeling. On the other hand, the great responsibility that architects have, since, by trade, they have a greater involvement in the management of the problem. Indeed, they must be aware that the space they are going to organize is conditioned by circumstance, but in turn will be conditioned by future transformations. This is why the act of organizing space carries within itself an important pedagogical role.

«For organized space to be harmonious, we said, participation must be transformed into collaboration, and of both horizontality and verticality, there are magnificent examples from the past.

Let us cite, regarding vertical collaboration, which means as mutual continuity, understanding and mutual respect, one space organized over centuries, as St. Mark's Square in Venice, Italy». » [3]

This idea of a collaboration between different generations to the construction of a heritage which represent the permanent memory of a community is clearly expressed by the Italian architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers.

It is necessary to recall in this regard the influence of the Italian debate on the training of Portuguese architects in those years. The writings of Bruno Zevi are well known in Portugal, and are among the fundamental study texts, as is the thinking of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, whom Távora had the opportunity to meet in 1951 in Venice (on the occasion of the International Congress of Artists promoted by UNESCO, where he also attended a lecture by Zevi) and with whom there are many affinities. [4]

Another point of contact between the thoughts of these two architects and intellectuals is the fact that for Rogers, too, talking about the theme of introducing the new into the old means both reasoning in relation to monumental emergencies and to the historical building fabric, as well as to

a landscape, since it represents the intrinsic value of the place.

More generally, the two share the idea of history as a concept that is not static, fixed, but dynamic, constantly becoming. In 1958, Rogers wrote:

«Considering that history has never been definable in a static system and that it has always been resolved in a succession of mutations that have gradually transformed one present into another present, it is logical to conclude that not only can we not impede the expressions of contemporary society, but that we must be able to affirm our temporal presence with our natural settlement into space.

By drawing the maximum energy from everything that surrounds us, we will favour the creative process of our works, which, in addition to not negatively conditioning the existing, will strengthen it by building a bridge between the past and the future: the future depends in part on us, just as we depend in part on the past: tradition is this perpetual flowing and being modern and consciously feeling that we are participating, as active elements, in this process». [5]

**It is always architecture.** When we look at the realized work by Távora, particularly the ones dedicated to reconversion of existing building with a domestic purpose, we can understand and see applied two other main concepts: circumstance and empathy.

«I am interested that the work appears at the end with a certain density; if it has no density, architecture is like a bird feather. So I like to intervene in existing buildings; but not in the sense of restoration or conservation, but with a broader vision: the architect vision. All projects are, in fact, conservation.

If there is an opening, we conserve the opening; and if there is a building, we conserve the building: it is always architecture». [6]

The project for the House in Rua Nova (Casa na Rua Egas Moniz, n.º 11) in Guimarães (1983-85), 'Figure 1', responds to the municipality's request to save the building - a valuable 17th / 18th century bourgeois residence, possibly dating back to medieval times - in a serious state of degradation. The idea was to make this reconversion work a pilot project for the approach to the local residential heritage.

This architectural design is part of a larger scale reflection that concerns the entire historic centre; it aims to establish a paradigm for work on the preservation of typological characteristics and the use of traditional building techniques: the granite load-bearing masonry structure on the basement floor is progressively lightened as it rises to the upper floors, through the use of a timber-framed structure, with lighter masonry fillings (taipa). The idea is to generate “a showcase of solutions and good practices that citizens could get to know in situ”.

«The inscription of the Historic Center of Guimarães in the UNESCO World Heritage list (2001) was strongly determined by the policies of urban rehabilitation conducted by the Local Technical Office (GTL) under the advice of the architect Fernando Távora. This is an exemplary experience in Portugal of intervention in old nuclei, namely for the maintenance of the resident population, the renewal of public space, the respect for

the urban cadastre and the recovery of traditional building materials and technologies, using local labour. In this way, a unity is preserved not only constructive but also social, spatial and environmental». [7]

Távora's respect for the relationship between structural design and space conformation is absolute. In this project, it is evident how it is possible to work in continuity with building techniques, without the need to superimpose redundant technological systems, but obtaining the necessary requirements for contemporary use. At the same time, the relationship between spatial configuration and traditional typological articulation (the plot is long and narrow and the building develops in length, stretching out from the street, interspersed between other dwellings, the vertical distribution is central) is confirmed as the most appropriate, as the most logical, even in contemporary times.

To show the layering of different times in a single place is therefore to show the density that substantiates architecture as a collective work. For this reason, Távora decided to create a sequence of circular windows on the internal surface of the walls, for the observation of the traditional constructive systems.

**Applied Design Experiences.** The continuous exchange between theoretical reflection and practical experimentation gives rise to the design experiences described in this section, conducted from 2009 until the present time.

In the work on the existing heritage, the principle of the imagination of the new is affirmed through the search for original forms, taking note of the opposition between old and new through a conscious process of rewriting that defines new relationships between site and theme, between artifice and nature.

**Tuscania.** The territory in which the Church of Saint Peter in Tuscania stands is an ancient soil. Sacredness is in the place, topography is the matrix. The visual and symbolic relationships are made up of distant landmarks and cross-references. The geological characteristics of this area of Tuscany are translated into the monomateriality of the built landscape, where the tuff, with its different colour gradations, gives shape to the different needs of dwelling.

Here there is no need for new landmarks.

There is a need to descend into the depths of stratification, to understand lost relationships and connections, to follow the diachronic narrative, thanks to a new sequence that orients the traveller's gaze and actions.

The plateau from which the Church, the former Bishop's Palace and the defence Towers are detached is a void that imposes silence, suspending time. The wide grassy clearing is the negative of the monument's strength. It asks to be left free.

The project 'Figure 2' is articulated in distinct parts, held together by the design that guides the emotional journey of the users. The new parts work together with the existing monumental complex to define the different atmospheres necessary for the pilgrim on his itinerary. With this understanding, and aware of the vast heritage of studies and research conducted around this place and its architecture, we have worked in continuity with

the tradition of precision and patience that has defined the face of these monuments and that characterises the work of the institutions responsible for their preservation.

The project works on the idea of sustainability as the recovery of ancient and traditional lighting and ventilation techniques, by modelling the interior space from the section. The innovative choice lies in the construction technique conceived for the aboveground elements of the project: the structures located within the sacred enclosure consist of lightweight metal frames, supporting a continuous brick shell, characterised by its textile/material quality.

The project strategy is developed through a sequence of operations, which define as many attitudes that the design takes towards the existing heritage.

As in a work of rewriting, it proceeds by elementary actions, starting from the gap in the existing perimeter, which is maintained as the only point of access to the sacred enclosure: Dialoguing, Edging, Framing, Emptying, Contemplating, Connecting, Winding, Elevating.

**Peccioli.** The redevelopment project of the former Villa Susinno farm building provides an opportunity to reconfigure a key point in the municipal urban system, opening up a new view of the surrounding rural landscape of Peccioli (Pisa).

The design of the urban section of Legoli defines a sequence of panoramic views, into which the new project is grafted, through the reinterpretation of the topography of the land.

The design of the open space 'Figure 3' is defined through the modelling of the terrain of the Villa Susinno's garden: thanks to the difference in levels in the area, an open-air theatre is created, with its services inscribed within a volume that is grafted into the retaining wall of the land. The lower level of the garden is converted into teaching orchards.

The project works in the tension between inside and outside to guarantee a complete fluidity of the paths; the public space of the new square enters the building and shapes the access system. The architectural transformation project starts from the idea of substantially maintaining the morphological characteristics of the main building, aimed at enhancing the identity of the historical building heritage (despite the modifications that have taken place over the years) and its inclusion in the surrounding architectural environment.

From a compositional point of view, the choice is to emphasize the baseline of the first floor, extending it to the western end. A new exhibition terrace acts as a counter-field to the existing one, defining the two external poles of the Exhibition System. The new Civic Library is located in the annex, redefined through a continuous roof that emphasizes the building's longitudinal development. Starting from the preservation of the existing structure, the project works in section, through the insertion of a new system of internal mezzanines.

**Three rural heritage interventions.** Finally we present a sequence of three works for private commissions, in Piedmont, Italy, where we had the opportunity to tackle the theme of reconversion, but also the one of

the continuation through additions, looking for the missing words in an already written text, by listening to the place, always pursuing a dialogue between the existing and the new.

In the axonometric drawings, you can clearly identify the existing situation and recognize the operations of grafting, addition, subtraction, continuation, that we have performed on the existing buildings and open spaces.

In the first project, 'Figure 4', the farm house is located right outside the historical town center of Moncalvo, in the district of Asti. Here the landscape of the countryside is characterized by the presence of vineyards and hazelnut groves. The existing building is the sole construction which stands upon the highest part of the site, alongside the road and it is formed by the union of a two-story with a three-story one. With time, the building, originally dedicated to agricultural purposes, has been gradually modified towards a mainly residential use, except for a few parts, still connected to farming activities.

The intervention is arranged to obtain the complete renovation of the rural house and its property in order to transform it into a country estate. The work aims to conserve and safeguard the valuable elements of the building, while completely restoring some parts, which have been made unreadable by the succession of transformations that have occurred over time.

The new design of the building plan reorganizes its disposition, underlining the interrelation between the internal spaces and the surrounding countryside. Working with the existing typology, the project transforms the original layout of the rooms readapting them to modern living needs.

Here, the landscaping is achieved by the repartition of the slope among different levels connected: the upper level acts as the house's courtyard creating an expansion of the ground floor space; the middle level is built on a new stone platform, from which the swimming pool is carved into.

In the second project in Moncalvo, 'Figure 5', the typology of the building under intervention is similar to the previous one (in-line building placed parallel to the access road, developed on the east-west axis), but the dimensions and complexity are reduced.

Here, there are no additions or subtractions to the volume of the main building; the design action consists in a rewriting of the interior spaces and in the recovery of the original character of façades. In this case, the project works on a new narrative entirely developed within the external spaces, through the addition of pavilions and a sequence of terracing and parterres in the garden.

The last project is still in Piedmont, but in a mountainous area, with different traditional rural building typologies.

In this case, the project, 'Figure 6' works based on two significant additions: a large new roof for the wine cellar and processing areas (following the local typology called "pendis"), and the insertion of a new distribution system (staircase and corridor) between the existing building and the mountain, intended as an autonomous and visibly new element.

**Conclusion.** Throughout his professional career, Távora designed the refurbishment of numerous country houses, adapting uses and spaces to

the new requirements without undermining their strong identity in the landscape and their historical and architectural values. Of all these works, the most significant for the meaning we want to give to this writing is the one for his family home. It is the decades-long work developed almost entirely through site work and supported by reduced drawing work in the atelier. The work is accompanied by an extraordinary text, a kind of love dialogue between two lovers (the architect and the house):

«We've known each other for a long time...

But I only got to know it better when together we began the romance of its - and ours - transformation.

I had to touch it and touching it was an act of love, long and slow, persistent and cautious, with doubts and certainties, it was a winding and flexible process, not a drawing board project, it was the method of a passionate man and not one of a cold technocrat, it was a gesture drawing more than a drawing on paper.

So, these were ten years of many long gestures and some paper, not much, ten years carefully fixing and deciding the transformations that both it and I were lovingly accepting.

So our lives crossed each other. And today it is still there in its space and in its time, and its design is also there, writing and remembering the story of our romance.

We'd known each other for a long time. But now we know each other better and we are both different» [7]

And this is the precise expression of the concept of reciprocity that we try to embrace in our work.

#### References.

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## Figures.

FIGURE 1 – Fernando Távora, Casa na Rua Egas Moniz, n.º 113 / Casa da Rua Nova, Guimarães: Charcoal drawing of the elevation towards the road c.1940, photo of the side towards the internal courtyard, photo of one of the internal windows and longitudinal section PT/FIMS/FT/0249-pd0001, October 1985 © Fundação Marques da Silva, Arquivo Fernando Távora.

FIGURE 2 – A Tale Of Suspended Time. International Design Competition\_2024. PILGRIMS HEAVEN, Tuscania

TA lab\_Carlotta Torricelli, Sara Riboldi, with Benedetta Badiali, Jacopo Basilico, Matteo Mornata. Finalist Mention.

FIGURE 3 – Valorization of the Historical Centre of Legoli, Renovation of the Former Villa Susinno Farmhouse and Outbuildings, in Peccioli (Pisa). International Design Competition\_2021.

TA lab\_Carlotta Torricelli, Sara Riboldi, with Benedetta Badiali e Diletta Gianfranceschi

FIGURE 4 – Conversion and Expansion of a Rural House in Moncalvo (AT). Private Commission\_2011/2015

Buffer Zone of the Unesco World Heritage: Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont: Langhe-Roero and Monferrato

TA lab\_Carlotta Torricelli, Sara Riboldi, with Carla Scotti Viganò and Federica Granata. Ph. Stefano Topuntoli.

FIGURE 5 – Conversion and Expansion of a Rural House in Moncalvo (AT). Private Commission\_2022/2024

Buffer Zone of the Unesco World Heritage: Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont: Langhe-Roero and Monferrato. TA lab\_Carlotta Torricelli, Sara Riboldi, with Diletta Gianfranceschi, Marianna Golfetto. Sculpture: C&C Studio - Abbado - Albertelli . Ph. Sara Riboldi

FIGURE 6 – Rustico in Val Bronda. Conversion Project for a Rural House and Wine Cellar in Pagno (Cn). Private Commission\_2020/23. TA lab\_Carlotta Torricelli, Sara Riboldi, with Diletta Gianfranceschi, Benedetta Badiali, Ph. Luca Caselli.

