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& Quality of Life

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Echoes of Japan: An Interpretation of Fernando Távora's Approach to Design

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LUSÍADA UNIVERSITY, FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE AND ARTS | CENTRO DE INVESTIGAÇÃO EM TERRITÓRIO, ARQUITECTURA E DESIGN – CITAD | LISBON, PORTUGAL

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Fernando Távora (1923–2005), a Portuguese born in Porto architect with an ample understanding of the world, became interested in Japan and its culture early on. He viewed Japanese architecture in the various books he was to acquire from the late 1940s onwards. He paid particular attention to traditional architecture, establishing a process of gradual rapprochement. In 1960 he had the opportunity to visit Japan, attending the WoDeCo conference in Tokyo. He was not very well impressed by contemporary Japanese cities and architecture. On the contrary, his fascination for traditional architecture was confirmed, particularly for the harmony that comes from its unity. In many of the drawings he then made of the spaces he visited, one recognises a gaze that takes delight in the minute detail, revealing a desire to understand that unique unity of traditional Japanese architecture. Interior spaces are looked at as large pieces of furniture. Távora's interest in traditional Japanese domestic space is confirmed in the unpublished text he titled "Reclusão numa habitação" [Reclusion in a House], most likely written in the late 1960s or early 1970s. In the text, Távora proposed reflection on the essence of the Japanese tearoom. Távora's contact with Japan is reflected in some of the buildings he was working on at the time. Less obvious, but no less significant, is the possibility of discerning that reflection in a more abstract – less formal – way.

This paper proposes reflection on the echoes of the relationship that Fernando Távora established with Japan and with its traditional architecture, in particular that of its interior spaces. The object of observation will be the new wing of rooms at the Guimarães Monastery Pousada, in Guimarães, Portugal, crossing the reflections in some of the texts he wrote, of which "Reclusion in a House" is a stand-out, with his design practice.

1. Introduction

"I keep a photograph of my parents taken in the cloister of the Convent of Santa Marinha da Costa in 1915 before I was even born. // Relationships, fatality."

Fernando Távora (1923–2005), a Portuguese architect who was born in Porto, Portugal and graduated from the Porto School of Fine Arts (EBAP) in 1950, brought to Portuguese architecture the challenge of seeing tradition as a fundamental element for achieving modernity. As early as 1945, the year in

which he began his higher training in Architecture, he wrote the essay "O Problema da Casa Portuguesa" [The Problem of the Portuguese House],² in which he formulated the connection between Modern Architecture and the traditional house. Throughout his life as an architect, pedagogue, traveller and active participant in the national and international debate on modern architecture, he at all times revealed a desire for continuity with tradition. He became a decisive figure for understanding Portuguese architecture in the latter half of the twentieth century.³ Távora became interested in Japan and its culture early on. He observed Japanese architecture in the various books he was to acquire from 1945 onwards. He paid particular attention to traditional architecture. In 1960 he visited Japan, attending the World Design Conference (WoDeCo) in Tokyo.⁴ The contemporary Japanese cities and architecture did not make a good impression on him. On the contrary, he found his fascination for traditional architecture validated, particularly for the harmony that comes from its unity – the unity that permeates the design of the interiors of this architecture, integrating all the elements necessary for the unfolding of daily life. Távora's contact with Japan is reflected in some of the projects he was working on when he visited the country in 1960 – the Tennis Pavilion in Quinta da Conceição, Leça da Palmeira, Portugal, for example, as he himself confirmed. Less obvious, but no less significant, is the possibility of discerning that reflection in a more abstract, less formal way, at the level of the unity and integrative quality that was at the root of the designs for some of his works.

This paper proposes a reflection on echoes of the relationship that Távora established with Japan and with its traditional architecture, in particular its interior spaces. The object of observation will be the new wing of rooms at the Guimarães Monastery Pousada, in Guimarães, Portugal, crossing the reflections contained in some of Távora's writings with his design practice.

2. The discovery of japanese architecture

Távora's first contacts with Japanese architecture took place through books when he was still a student at the Porto School of Fine Arts.⁵ He sought to widen the architectural references that dominated at the time at the school. One such book, *La nouvelle architecture*⁶ by Alfred Roth (1903–1998), included the Japanese Pavilion at the International Exposition in Paris of 1937, a design by Junzo Sakakura (1901–1969). It was a modern work that incorporated values of traditional architecture. Távora was sensitive to the fact that the pavilion presented the fundamental characteristics of Japanese tea houses. Two other books, *The Modern House in America*⁷ by James Ford (1884–1944) and Katherine Morrow Ford (1905–1959) and *Built in USA: 1932–1944*⁸ edited by Elizabeth Mock (1911–1998), included the House in Fellowship Park in Los Angeles, California designed by Harwell Hamilton Harris (1903–1990) in 1935, a work that was clearly influenced by traditional Japanese architecture. These initial contacts with Japanese architecture were not premeditated. However, both Sakakura's pavilion and Hamilton Harris' house represented a meeting

of modern architecture and tradition that Távora formulated in his essay of 1945. His interest in Japan was consolidated by his meeting with Japanese architects at CIAM conferences. In 1951 he got to know Junzo Sakakura, Kunio Maekawa (1905–1986), Kenzo Tange (1903–2005) and Takamasa Yoshizaka (1917–1980) at the CIAM VIII event in Hoddesdon, England. He met Tange again in 1959 at the last CIAM in Otterlo, Netherlands and also at the WoDeCo event in Tokyo. In the late 1950s, Távora purchased *Japanische Architektur*⁹ and *The Japanese House and Garden*,¹⁰ by Tetsuro Yoshida (1894–1956) and *The Lessons of Japanese Architecture*¹¹ and *Japanese Gardens*¹² by Jiro Harada (1878–1963). Harada, and Yoshida in particular, saw in traditional architecture a means of nourishing modernity. Távora acquired these books around about the same time as his involvement in the Survey of Portuguese Regional Architecture, for which the republication in 1947 of his text on "The Problem of the Portuguese House" proved to be fundamental.

During his stay in Japan, Távora purchased more books, including *Houses and People of Japan*¹³ by Bruno Taut (1880–1938) and *Japanese Architecture*¹⁴ by Hideto Kishida (1899–1966). From WoDeCo he received a copy of *Nature and Thought in Japanese Design*¹⁵ by Teiji Ito (1922–2010). Taut's book was a sort of Western counterpoint to Yoshida's Japanese approach in *Das Japanische Wohnhaus*. Both books were decisive for the dissemination of traditional Japanese architecture in the West. Távora continued to purchase books on Japanese architecture during the 1960s. Amongst these books was *The Japanese House: A Tradition for Contemporary Architecture*¹⁶ by Heinrich Engel (1925–2013). Engel wrote a "treatise"¹⁷ on the traditional Japanese house, conducting an exhaustive study of its forms and their reasons for being. His book is a modern counterpoint to the works by Yoshida and Taut.

3. The trip to japan

Távora's visit to Japan was to be a crucial moment in the confirmation of his appreciation of traditional Japanese architecture.

Távora arrived in Tokyo on May 11, 1960¹⁸ and stayed in Japan for 17 days. Besides Tokyo, he visited Kyoto, Osaka and Nara. The reason for his visit to Tokyo was his participation in the WoDeCo event. However, he really focused on the "physical and human landscape of Japan."¹⁹ Tokyo proved to be a "disastrous"²⁰ city, but it did have peculiarities that enchanted him, the majority of which had to do with ancestral Japanese culture. Távora sought to dive into the city. He met with Toshihiko Ota (1928–2008) and his wife, Kyoko, with whom he ventured into small restaurants, bars and a Sumo wrestling show. Távora and Ota most likely met in Portugal. The observations he made in his travel diary tell of his delight at the small details in interior spaces, particularly those that were most impregnated with Japanese culture. "We have gone to heaven, which is the same as saying a pure Japanese

restaurant.”²¹ He took a particular interest in the interior spaces. About getting to know the house of his friend Ota’s father, he wrote:

*of course, we took our shoes off immediately when we entered and then moved to a gallery with sliding doors that overlooked a small but beautiful garden. Because the house is raised about 40 or 50 centimetres off the ground, the threshold is an ideal place to sit. Later we found ourselves in a room with no chairs and with a low table which also opened onto the garden. Sliding doors feature all through the interior spaces, and function impeccably... without any type of hardware.*²²

Távora showed attention to detail and awareness of the relationship between the body and the elements that make up the space. It was that attention that caused him to highlight something that makes no sense to him in the dining room fitted out with Western furniture: “Japanese houses are made for people to sit or kneel on the floor, meaning Western furniture does not fit into that ambience at all.”²³ The traditional Japanese space, and the way in which it is used, essentially horizontally, entered into conflict with Western furniture, which is essentially vertical in nature. Here, Távora saw signs of a world that was gradually being lost, being open to the new development that was so little informed by the wider Japanese identity.

In Kyoto he found a Japan that had changed less. The city made a deep impression on him. For example, in the various types of construction, above all the temples, “wood is explored to the maximum of its physical and plastic possibilities.”²⁴ He had the opportunity to spend the night at a Japanese inn. In Tokyo he had stayed at a contemporary hotel. His first contact with the inn caused a “certain feeling of weirdness”,²⁵ under which one finds his fascination for the space and the way in which the space was experienced – taking off one’s street shoes when one entered and changing into “house shoes”; then taking off the house shoes to walk barefoot on the tatamis; the courtesy of the people; the room proportions; the lack of furniture and sleeping on a futon on the floor; the different toilets; bathing and the respective ritual, so different to what was normal in Western countries. Távora made a number of comprehensive drawings of his room, seeking to register all the details (**Fig. 1**) – the proportions of the space, which was small and had a low ceiling, the sliding door, the floor covered with tatamis and “of course, its tokonoma.”²⁶ It was a small interior world that opened “onto a small ‘cour’ with its lantern, always running water and its red fishes”.²⁷ In its austerity, the room itself could be understood as an item of furniture.

4. Echoes of Japan

After his trip to the country in 1960, Távora continued to show an interest in Japan and its culture. That interest was confirmed by the unpublished text he titled “Reclusão numa habitação” [Seclusion in a House] (**Fig. 2**), which most likely dates from the late 1960s or early 1970s.²⁸ It is a translation of

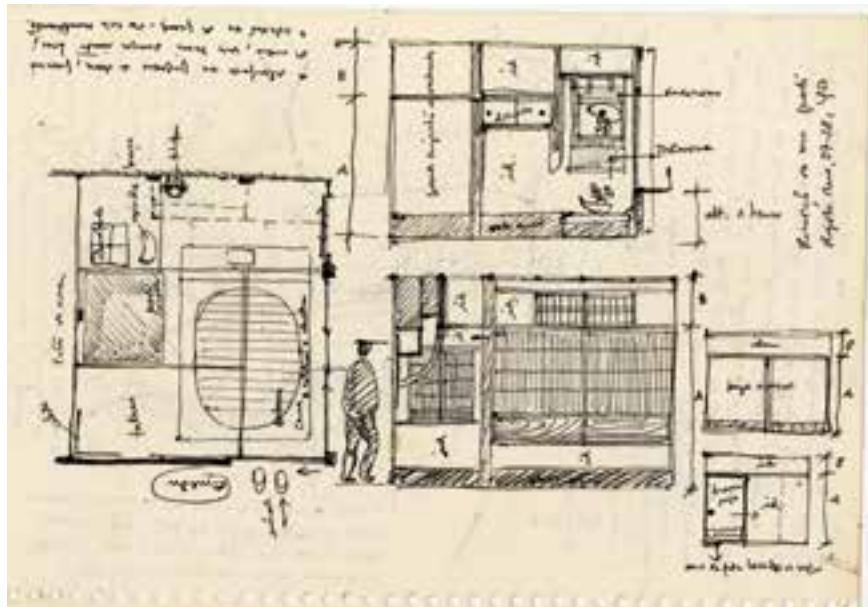


Figure 1. Fernando Távora, Hotel room in Kyoto, Japan, May 27–28, 1960. © Fundação Instituto Marques da Silva, Porto, Portugal, Fernando Távora collection, FIMS/FT/VJapão.

some parts of the sub–chapter titled “Seclusion” from *The Japanese House: A Tradition for Contemporary Architecture*²⁹ by Heinrich Engel. It is possible that this text was meant for a conference or a class Távora was to give.

Távora proposed reflection on the essence of the Japanese tearoom. The text confirmed his interest in the possibility of crossing traditional architecture with contemporary architecture. The rewritten parts and what was omitted from Engel’s work revealed the relationship Távora had with Japanese architecture. Engel begins the sub–chapter by listing the underlying concepts of seclusion in a building. He established as the first of said concepts that seclusion “is both the state of and the place for being in solitude within the house. It is the physical and psychological isolation of the individual from both his fellow man and his environment.”³⁰ In Japanese architecture, seclusion materialises in a particular situation: the tearoom. In contrast to traditional architecture – house, palace, temple – where the spaces open up successively to the exterior, in a tearoom the relationship with the outside takes place in a more isolated way. The tearoom “shuns external experience other than bringing the microcosm of the room into precise relationship to the macrocosm of the universe by a limited picture-like glimpse of a small tea garden or by a simple flower in a vase.”³¹ The exceptional interiority of this space derives from that deliberate distancing from the exterior world. The isolated views of the tea garden confirm that interiority. Guests enter by means of a small door that is approximately 70 cm high and 65 cm wide and

positioned on the elevated flooring of the tearoom. The body is forced to bow to enter, thus assuming a gesture of modesty and exalting the aesthetic experience inherent in experiencing this space.

Távora does not linger on the meaning of seclusion. He limits himself to highlighting the defensive nature of seclusion in the West. He also omits the importance of the tea garden. Thus he focuses on the physical and material characteristics of the tearoom. Távora emphasises the space's tight dimensions – four and a half tatamis, which corresponds to a square with a length of 2.70 m on one side and which offers space for 5 persons at the most. The walls are made of dark clay and contain few apertures. Such spaces house the tokonoma, an alcove that can be home to a floral arrangement and sometimes also a picture scroll. Both allow for purification of the gaze. The fire, an element that connects to earth, is slightly off centre. All the elements that make up such spaces come together to create a peculiar sense of unity. They are unified spaces, void of all furniture. The minute details in describing the space reminds one of the drawings Távora made of his inn room in Kyoto. The tearoom is a small piece of architecture that functions as a large item of furniture.

Távora seems to have been particularly sensitive to the interiority of the tearoom, perhaps more so than to the conceptual meaning behind such spaces. The omission of the importance of the tea garden confirms his interest. The interiority is observed on the basis of its materiality and the relationship with the place. Interiority and seclusion are, ultimately, values that have to do with Portuguese architecture.

This understanding of the tearoom as a unified object, as a large item of furniture, opens up a new reading of the new wing of rooms in the Guimarães Monastery Pousada, in Guimarães, Portugal. Távora worked on his design between 1972 and 1989.³² The wing is L-shaped in plan, opening up to the south and west. It is inserted between the former monastery and the local topography, and almost disappears. The arms of the L receive a large-dimensioned piece, a horizontally distended body that is homogenised by the



Figure 2. Fernando Távora, "Reclusão numa habitação", undated typewritten draft with handwritten notes, first page. © Fundação Instituto Marques da Silva, Porto, Portugal, Fernando Távora collection, FIMS/FT/ 5090-0001.

brick-red colour. It contains the room window openings. There is a succession of panels – creating a calm and long repetition (Fig. 3). In the interior of each room the effect is one of counterlighting. The slight elevation of the floor level next to the windows accentuates the horizontality of the space.

This large piece made of wood can be associated with a reading of vernacular Portuguese architecture. However, in its crossing of tradition and contemporaneity, it is also possible to find here echoes of Japan. As Távora wrote of Sanjūsangen-dō Temple in Kyoto, which dates from 1164:

the building, which they say is the longest wooden structure in the world, is very beautiful, particularly on the interior [...]. It is a composition that repeats similar (not identical) elements throughout the whole building. I believe the principle is not very common and it impressed me greatly.³³



Figure 3. Fernando Távora, Guimarães Monastery Pousada, Guimarães, Portugal, 1972–1984, new wing © Photo by Maria João Moreira Soares, 2022.

5. Conclusion

In 1945 Távora wrote: “I am very open to things from outside, things that I have nothing to do with or never thought about; which is why I love new things, ideas I never had and knowledge that I ignore.”³⁴ Fifteen years later, Fernando Távora travelled to Japan. In that country, coming from the outside, with things from outside, he encountered a particular unity in another vernacular universe: small architectural objects conceived as large design objects – like items of furniture. It was a new “idea” for contemporaneity. Relationships, fatality.

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Notes

- 1 Fernando Távora, *Fernando Távora: As Raízes e os Frutos; Palavra, Desenho, Obra*, [Fernando Távora: the Roots and the Fruits; Words, Drawing, Work] ed. Manuel Mendes (Porto, FIMS, 2020) I:XXVI.
- 2 The text was published in November 1945 in the weekly publication ALÉO. Two years later, a revised and enlarged version was published in the first and only issue of the *Cadernos de Arquitectura* periodical. This is the version that is normally taken into consideration in the diverse works on Fernando Távora. See Fernando Távora, "The Problem of the Portuguese House", in *Fernando Távora*, ed. Luiz Trigueiros (Lisbon, Blau, 1993), 11–13.
- 3 For further discussion on Fernando Távora and his work, see José António Bandeirinha, ed., *Fernando Távora Modernidade Permanente / Fernando Távora Permanent Modernity* (Porto, Associação Casa da Arquitectura, 2012).
- 4 The visit to Japan was part of a four-month-long voyage that took Távora to USA, Mexico, Thailand, Pakistan, Egypt, and Greece.
- 5 See João Miguel Couto Duarte and Maria João Moreira Soares, "Fernando Távora's Japan Through Books: A Fascination with Tradition in Search of Innovation", in *Tradition and Innovation*, eds. Maria do Rosário Monteiro, Mário S. Ming Kong, and Maria João Pereira Neto (Leiden, CRC Press/Balkema, 2021), 179–187.
- 6 Alfred Roth, *La nouvelle architecture / Die Neue Architektur / The New Architecture*, 2nd ed. (Zürich, Les Editions d'Architecture, 1946).
- 7 James Ford and Katherine Morrow Ford, *The Modern House in America*, 2nd ed. (New York, Architectural Book, 1944).
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- 9 Tetsuro Yoshida, *Japanische Architektur* [Japanese Architecture] (Tübingen, Verlag Ernst Wasmuth, 1952).
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- 15 Teiji Ito, *Nature and Thought in Japanese Design* (Tokyo, World Design Conference Foundation, 1960).
- 16 Heinrich Engel, *The Japanese House: a Tradition for Contemporary Architecture* (Rutland, Tuttle Publishing, 1964).
- 17 Ibid., 24.
- 18 Fernando Távora, *Diário de "bordo"* [Log Book], ed. Rita Marnoto (Porto, Associação Casa da Arquitectura, 2012), I:304.
- 19 Ibid., I:306; translation by the authors.
- 20 Ibid., I:306; translation by the authors.
- 21 Ibid., I:307; translation by the authors.
- 22 Ibid., I:314; translation by the authors.
- 23 Ibid., I:314; translation by the authors.
- 24 Ibid., I:324; translation by the authors.
- 25 Ibid., I:322; translation by the authors.
- 26 Ibid., I:323; translation by the authors.
- 27 Ibid., I:323; translation by the authors.
- 28 Fernando Távora, "Reclusão numa habitação" [Reclusion in a House] (unpublished typewritten draft with handwritten notes by Fernando Távora), n.d. FIMS/FT/5090. Fernando Távora fonds. Fundação Instituto Marques da Silva, Porto, Portugal.
- 29 Engel, *Japanese House*, 278–301.
- 30 Ibid., 278.
- 31 Ibid., 279.
- 32 See Bandeirinha, *Fernando Távora*, 342–347.
- 33 Ibid., I:325; translation by the authors.
- 34 Távora, *Raízes e Frutos*, I:718; translation by the authors.