

THE FUTURE OF MEMORY: THE ‘HOUSE OF THE XXIV’ BY FERNANDO TAVORA

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to develop a critical reflection on the design approach of the ‘House of the XXIV’ – one of the last works of the Portuguese architect Fernando Tavora – as example of the search for a balance between the pursuit of continuity with history of places and the affirmation of the contemporary conditions. This approach, based on a deep understanding of the context of intervention and its history, is characterized by a strong integration between the new and the old, testifying with great force a dialectic ability that is away from temptation of camouflage or, on the contrary, of total estrangement from the context of the project. The ‘House of XXIV’, realized in the oldest part of Porto, next to the cathedral, affirms the value of architecture as a vital resource not only to introduce the contemporary values in the urban discourse but to consolidate and enhance the inherited patrimony. The work of architecture is configured as an act, at the same time, critical and creative: the analysis of the transformation events and the physical and symbolic relationships with the existing places at different scales leads to the definition of contents for the recovery of the ancient ruin, for the reaffirmation of values lost but essential for the collective memory and the urban identity.

The contents of the project, based on careful analysis of the history and character of the existing buildings, inform all the choices, reaching to characterize functions, constructive solutions, languages, themes, technologies and materials.

Keywords: design approach, integration new/old, languages, technologies and materials, themes.

1 INTRODUCTION

The work under review is located in the old part of the city of Porto, a place full of meaning and values: the area of the Cathedral, the main religious monument of the city.

The medieval hamlet the Romanic cathedral used to be a part of, characterized by a densely built environment and by narrow and winding roads, was enclosed within the Swabian fortification; the cathedral related to its context through the monumental stairway without any additional mediations.

In the 1930s, the culture of the time was oriented to isolate the monument, and the Directorate General of National Buildings and Monuments (Direcção-Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais) carried out a remarkable activity of demolition of the existing buildings in the area opposite and by the side of the cathedral in order to achieve such a configuration as to isolate and value the architectural unit of the Cathedral and the Episcopal Palace on a panoramic terrace facing river Douro (Terreiro da Sé) [1].

For the determined transformation – according to a spatial concept cut off from the memory of the place and to intervention criteria still far from recognizing the value of the historical built environment in a chorus of major or minor voices and within the context of the sedimentation of the signs over time – the demolitions of the medieval fabric affected a remarkable vestige of the civil and political memory of the city, just 7 m away from the main façade of the cathedral: the tower of the ‘Casa da Câmara’, or ‘Paço do Conselho’, better known as the ‘House of the XXIV’. The latter name originates from the representatives of the 24 trades which existed in the medieval age in the city.

The role of the 24 was representative in the Chamber assembly, the first symbol of the city’s autarchic power (Figs. 1–4).

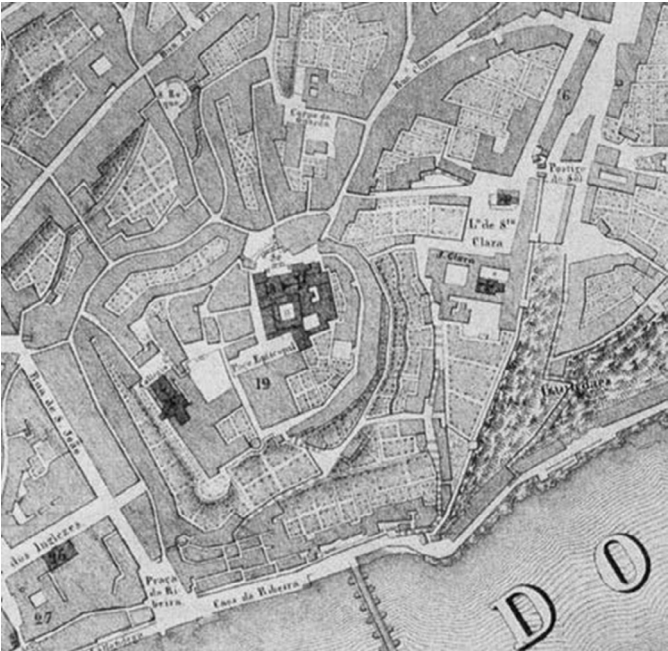


Figure 1: The medieval structure. Detail of a map dated 1939 [2].



Figure 2: Demolitions made until 1948 [2].



Figure 3: The space in front of the Cathedral before the demolitions [2].



Figure 4: The space in front of the Cathedral after the building [2].

2 THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE URBAN SETTING AND THE LANDSCAPE

The theme of the relationship with the urban setting and the landscape, together with that of historical memory, represents the fundamental dimension of interpretation of the architectural work the 'House of the XXIV'.

The simple volume of Tavora's tower confirms its presence and essence in the relationship with the architectural unit of the Cathedral and Terreiro da Sé.

Nearing the side of the Cathedral the building is configured as a solid structure; while in the facade facing the Douro, the presence of the volume is mitigated to make room for a relationship with the urban landscape included between the Cathedral and the river.

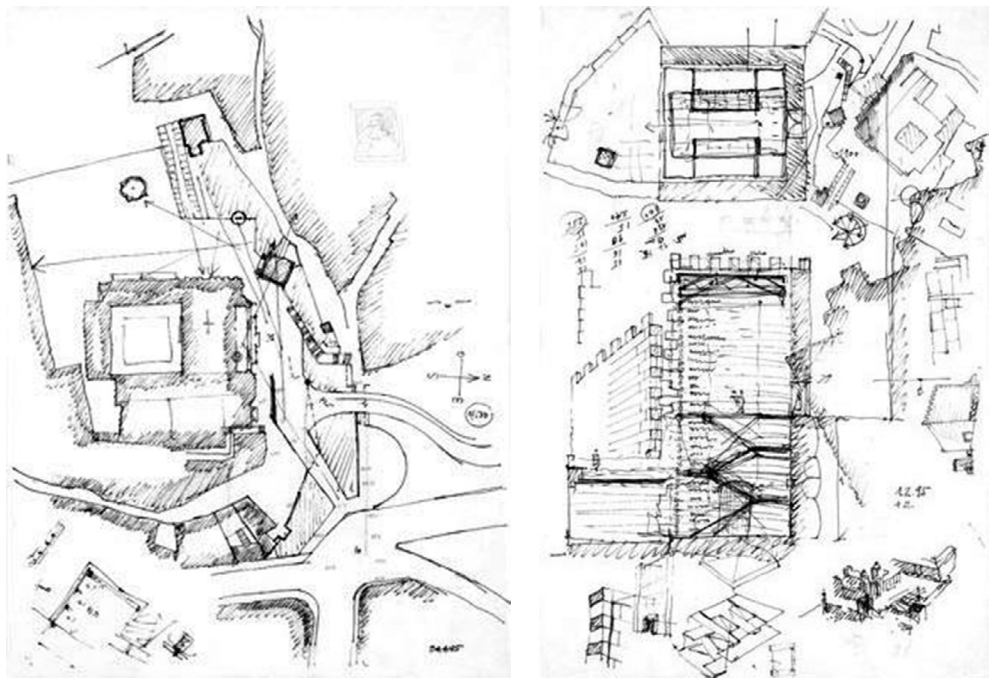
It is not possible to understand the work separately from the intense relationship with its setting: here and now, the new building proposes a method of perception of the Cathedral that refers to the one prior to the grand demolitions of the Estado Novo resolving the trivialization of the fruition of the resulting urban void [3].

The volume with its monumental nature, in its contiguity to the Cathedral and in the relation with the urban landscape, proposes methods of fruition of the space in whose perception moments of wait and of unveiling alternate.

Walking from Calçada Vandoma to Terreiro, the gaze, first attracted to the landscape on the side of the San Bento station, runs the body of the Cathedral, lingers on the Baroque shapes of the Nasoni loggia; it detaches from the side to observe the naked volume of the tower. The House of the XXIV asserts itself as the background of this space determining a moment of break, of wait. The portion of landscape rejected by the solid presence of the building is recovered in its interior thanks to the generous window facing northwest [4].

The gap between the Cathedral and Tavora's tower, through the proximity between the two buildings, creates a great spatial tension which determines a second moment in the perception: the unveiling of the space of Terreiro da Sé and the landscape of the city on the side of Rio Douro. Here the volume of the tower with its solid and naked side accompanies the steps and the gaze towards the generous beauty of the landscape (Figs. 5 and 6).

The monumental intervention expresses itself with extraordinary simplicity but determining careful, refined relationships with its surroundings recalling the glimpses and the views of the Athens' acropolis. From the design sketches a careful study of the definition of the alignments and visual angles emerges. Eduardo Souto de Moura claims:



Figures 5 and 6: Design sketches of the House of the XXIV [5].

“The external arrangement, the placement of the various elements, like the statue, the glimpses and the alignments he obtains demonstrate a knowledge of the Athens’ acropolis. The definition of the axes and the twists are masterfully calibrated; no other architect, having the chance, would be able to organize the space in that way. [5]”

The urban scale, therefore, expresses itself as an essential dimension to return – in the void determined by the demolitions – the fundamental elements of organization of the space obliterated by the lost volumes which will not be rebuilt.

It does not linger on nostalgia for the past but critically creates a relationship with history by creating refined plots of relations with the place and among the elements which add value to the group and enhance the qualities of its landscape. It is not the practice of a virtuoso but ‘a work which impresses for the density of knowledge and goes beyond itself, offering new meanings to its surroundings’[5].

Tavora’s tower expresses different systems of relation with the urban setting: it operates both at the city scale, in terms of relation, valorization, of the urban landscape, and at the context scale, for the reconfiguration of the monumental space in which it determines new relations in order to return elements which had characterized the methods of fruition in the ages before the demolitions.

3 THE RELATIONSHIP WITH PRE-EXISTENCE, HISTORY AND MEMORY

The House of the XXIV is configured as a significant work for its ability to establish a thorough relationship with the place and history through the language of contemporaneity.

The author evokes the ancient memory through a new structure that is based on the vestiges of the pre-existing memory; the work overlaps, or better, is erected on the ruins of the ancient work, visible in the bottom part of the elevation facing north, with a powerful symbolic and formal charge.

There is no concession to imitation of the shapes of the past, the tower is revealed – far from any past-imitating rhetoric and any desire of assimilation with the old building – as manifestly contemporary, the approach is in clear conflict with the manners proposed by Rogério de Azevedo for the building of the ‘Casa da Torre’, a few metres away, where the ruins are used for an ostensibly historical building [6].

Tavora reconnects with the local memory through his reference to the themes and dimensions of the lost building. He interprets and creatively reworks with an apparently simple design the set of data and layered knowledge on the location, giving them new meaning and value.

The descriptions of the old building are taken as themes of the design, the history, the evolution of the places, the universe of meanings and symbols represent the subject of the design which is configured as a process of choice, selection, valorization, fruit of a thorough knowledge of the place as well as erudition.

“With the tower Tavora shows that the themes of the history and recovery, of the modern and the ancient, are not independent; he shows the possibility to erect a modern building that must be filtered by historical research. [5]”

3.1 The spatial articulation

The tower shoots up on top of the walls of the pre-existing ruin designing in the plan view, with solid walls, a ‘U’ closed by a glazed wall.

The archaeological surveys had not allowed to exactly establish the location of the fourth wall: in this condition of uncertainty the architect adopts the square plan for its charge of abstraction and for the possibility to match the typology of the medieval tower; but here, in the volume, the fourth wall is replaced by a clear glass surface [6].

The descriptions of the old House of the XXIV mention a multi-storey building, erected in granite rock, for a 'height of one hundred spans', adorned inside by valuable artistic elements, and having, in the main hall at the top level, a golden ceiling.

Tavora uses and interprets the historical data to define the themes to compose his building. The height of the one hundred spans, as reported by the ancient documents, is expressly adopted as a fundamental reference to the history of the place and the human dimension. Internally, the width of the adjacent walls to the large window expresses such a reference through the representation – in relief on the granite – of a human palm. The palm-span is the dimension on which all the measurements of the design are proportionate, down to the smallest detail, in terms of multiples or sub-multiples of 22 cm (1 span) [7] (Figs. 7 and 8).

The internal space, at the level of the entrance from Terreiro, is a storey-length hall whose dimension restates the importance of the place; the great void recalls, reports, the absence of the ancient memory.

At the mezzanine the floor extends beyond the window to an external metal walkway at the centre of the facade; it is supported by thin columns and almost reaches the limit of the walls of the ruin on Rua de São Sebastião. The horizontal element allows us to observe up close the historical landscape and the glazed facade that here is configured as an element of mediation, dialogue, between the new monument and the old vestiges. The relationship between old and new here is accomplished as a spatial tension in the relation of proximity and distance between the elements of the composition [3].

On the floor at the level of Rua de São Sebastião the ruin with its presence dominates the reading of both interiors and exteriors.

The new building relates to the courtyard bordered by the ruins: here the glazed window, matted by the passing of time, softly reflects the shades and the colours of the old walls



Figures 7 and 8: The palms stamped on the facade [3].



Figure 9: The external walkway [3].

mitigating the contraposition between the volume of the building and the uneven structure of the old wall panels (Fig. 9).

3.2 The materials and the language

The building of Tavora is a square prismatic covered by sawn granite slabs in the same colour of the cathedral; it is perceived as a solid mass seen from the side of the Cathedral, walking the side of the colonnade; while the adjoining side to the edge of the Terreiro da Sé dematerializes in the extension of the glazed facade (Figs. 10–12).

Opacity and clearness alternate to define the architectural volume – opacity determines the exterior of the building, the clearness determines its interior.

On the side of the entrance the top of the building, in the top third of the height at entrance level, is also characterized by a large horizontal window that on the outside relates to the galley of the Cathedral da Sé, while inside it allows the ceiling to be brushed by the light from the two opposite sides of the volume giving it levity and lightness.

The treatment of the ceiling at the top of the entrance hall is a clear reference of the old House of the XXIV in its division into coffers and the use of the golden colour.

Going downstairs, in the relationship with pre-existence, in addition to the reference to memory, the relationship with the materials of the old vestige is added. Continuity of the new and old



Figure 10: The space of the patio.



Figures 11 and 12: Opacity and clearness in the architectural definition.

Figures 11 and 12: (*Continued*)

building is accomplished without any stretch: the bright experience of the first room, the homage to the landscape of Porto, gives way to the intimate, progressive relationship with the ruin.

In the transition between the new and old building, the relationship becomes denser: in addition to the memory of the old tower, the incorporation of its material is added through the continuity of the walls. In this relationship, the old walls reveal themselves as a live matter, as root, reason, of the present, instead of a relic of the past.

“There are no doubts that these vestiges are the most precious asset which legitimates the entire building and they are treated as such – all their preciousness is recognized and evoked. [3]”

The continuity between old and new walls is basically symbolic; there is no constructive continuity between the two parts. The new building – made of reinforced concrete with parallel ribbed slabs, the vertical elements as thick as the underlying bearing brickwork ruin, 1.10 m – is expressed in the language and techniques of contemporaneity in continuity with the old walls but its weight does not burden them. A system of micro-piles transfers the weight to the underlying ground [5].

The relationship between old and new, between the new building and the existing ruin, is resolved through the adoption – in the new building – of the same texture and stone as the ruin, with the new building only standing out for the finer treatment of the stone surfaces (Fig. 13).

The old bearing stone of the pre-existence gives way to the slab covering of the new House of the XXIV 6 cm thick and of 2 × 4-span wide (44 × 88 cm) (Fig. 14).



Figure 13: Opacity and clearness in the architectural definition.



Figure 14: The relationship between the horizontal and vertical surfaces.

The internal structure of Corten steel reinterprets the wooden beams of the old constructions. The wooden floors, with boards running on the steel structure, as a further reference to the old, are made without skirting for a seamless perception of the continuity of the perimeter wall panels. On the floor at the level of Rua de São Sebastião the flooring also moves back from the vertical walls. The asymmetrical stairs, the steel structure, feel lightweight in the granite volume [3].

4 CONCLUSIONS

The work relates to the context, the places, the systems of values orbiting around them to return the object of the intervention to the dimension of contemporaneity by expressing a clear position in relation to the fundamental themes of the relationship with the architectural heritage, memory, history.

Tavora measures himself against the symbolic dimension burdening the location of the 'House of the XXIV', a historically identified space and time as the basis of the identity of the urban community. The intervention he proposes refers to the old monumental work whose ruins are only left, is configured as a critical action of re-proposition, in the language of contemporaneity, of a lost memory.

The historical data is filtered by a critical process and used as design theme: the relationship with history is mediated by the culture and the criticism of the designer against the processes of transformation of the places. A process of processing and creative synthesis of the set of data and knowledge burdening the place is implemented, returning significance and value. Tavora uses and interprets the historical data to define the themes to base the composition of his building on.

In the flowing of time and in the constant mutations of spaces, without giving in to nostalgia for the past or leaps to the future, the relationship with the pre-existence, with the ruin, in the awareness of the impossibility to return the building to its past state, is, first and foremost, an opportunity to do architecture.

The intervention creates a dialectical relationship with pre-existence, driver of a content – the unavailability of a founding memory of the identity of the city – to offer a space that allows for the continuation of its life in contemporaneity in an architectural continuity that does not indulge in any imitation.

As concerns the constructive discipline, the relationship between old and new is resolved with absolute rigour through the control and simplification of the language of the elements: this is the fruit of sedimentation, settling and selection of the themes of the historical memory; the outcome of a simplification process leads to an extreme essentiality without turning into abstraction.

An additional evaluation can be made on the linguistic dimension of the intervention: the desire for adhesion, a grip on reality, leads to the control of the statement of a strong linguistic identity in the work. Fernando Tavora stated: 'I prefer the design to be recognizable because it is able to reflect a set position, a concept, not the individuality of a person' [5]. In fact here he expresses a language free of the concern of having to appear like the expression of an individuality and where technology is not shown off but subjected to the conceptual and formal intention.

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