

# TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE INTERVENTION IN PORTUGAL: FERNANDO TÁVORA AND THE REFURBISHMENT OF THE CASA DA IGREJA OF MONDIM DE BASTO (1958–1961)

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## ABSTRACT

The Casa da Igreja of Mondim de Basto (1958–1961) is a pioneering work of architectural renovation in the career of the Portuguese architect Fernando Távora (1923–2005), where he applies the theoretical approaches of conciliation between the values of tradition and the advances of the Modern Movement directly on the historical pre-existence. The design was at a time of extraordinary intellectual density and great architectural production of the author, coinciding with his attendance at the last CIAM and conduction of the “Inquiry into Popular Architecture in Portugal”. Though little investigated previously, Casa da Igreja can be considered a paradigm of the so-called “third way” and an experimental work in search of personal criteria of heritage intervention. The project reveals careful analysis of pre-existence, supporting sensible introduction of contemporary language in respectful continuity with the forms and atmospheres of the past. This design strategy shows the key points of an emerging *modus operandi* to be developed in later interventions with strong repercussion and pedagogy in the Portuguese context.

*Keywords: intervention on architectural heritage, restoration criteria, Modern architecture, Baroque manor house, Third-Way, Fernando Távora, Portugal.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The career of the Portuguese architect Fernando Távora, one of the mentors of the “Oporto School”, was closely linked to the intervention in architectural heritage. Távora had important refurbishment works in his career. Also, he was very interested in history of architecture, vernacular construction and Portuguese art. His ambition of modernity in continuity with tradition (summarized in the motto “to continue innovating”), the dialectic imbrications of contemporary language with the forms of the past, or the respect for the previous scales and atmospheres of the buildings were some of the features that characterize his particular way of intervening in built heritage; a quite personal, widely praised and influential method.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Távora’s innovative *modus operandi* had been drafted at the end of the 1950s, in the renovation of the *Casa da Igreja* in Mondim de Basto. This work, although hardly previously studied, can be considered an experimental project of intervention on historical pre-existence and, in addition, a paradigmatic case of the “third way”, made in a period in which the architect tried to syncretize multiple influences: vernacular and contemporary, erudite and popular, national and international.

## 2 BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNISM: THE COMMITMENT WITH A VERNACULAR ROOTED CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

The publication in 1945 of the essay *O problema da casa portuguesa* and the celebration in 1948 of the *I Congresso Nacional de Arquitectura* opened a stage of search for a contemporary architecture capable of integrating the advances achieved by the Modern Movement with the values of history and tradition. This essay pointed out the consequences



of a political situation of Portugal, a country leaded by a conservative, nationalist and traditionalist dictatorship, which blocked the proper development of avant-garde architecture.

The proposal of a “third way”, formulated among others by the young Fernando Távora, was a possible alternative to conciliate the modernity of the International Style with the traditional Portuguese architecture, in such a way that it was possible to update living standards without renouncing the national identity. Architects such as Távora, Keil do Amaral, or Januário Godinho sought, theoretically and through experimental projects, a critical and contextual implementation of the Modern Movement principles.

Fernando Távora’s attendance to some of the latest CIAMs allowed him to become aware of the change of direction taken by the European architectural avant-garde. The youngest attendees, founders of the Team X, advocated recovering the consideration of the specific conditions of the context, namely the cultural, historical, geographical, climatic, etc.

On the other side of the ocean, in Brazil, an exuberant modernity was being developed; an architectural production with distinctive and genuinely national characteristics that decisively influenced the progress of a modern architecture in Portugal, adapted to its own regional singularities. Brazilian modernism, although directly inheriting Corbuser’s modernity, unlike this one, was able to establish a close link with the preexisting cultural tradition through the creative reinterpretation of elements and materials taken from popular construction, such as *brise-soleil*, *cobogós*, latticeworks or tile mosaics [1]. These influences arrived in Portugal through the catalog of the exhibition *Brazil Builds: architecture new and old, 1652–1943*, shown in the MoMA [2]. The new sensitivity to tectonic and vernacular traditions is reflected in works such as the tennis pavilion of the *Quinta da Conceição* and in *Casa em Ofir* (1956). In both, Távora managed to materialize the much-sought-after synthesis in a complex and harmonious combination of contemporary and vernacular references, national and international, using traditional and modern materials simultaneously, with great exquisiteness and attention to detail.

### 3 FERNANDO TÁVORA: THE PROPOSAL FOR NEW APPROACH ON HERITAGE INTERVENTION

The “third way” approach sustained by Fernando Távora was a decisive contribution for the *ex-novo* Portuguese architecture, but it was no less relevant the proposal of an innovative way of approaching the intervention in the historical heritage. The relationship between “new” and “old” raised by Távora moved away from the traditional dichotomy between the Romantic principles of non-intervention and stylistic restorations. Nor did he exactly conform to Boito’s and Giovanonni’s scientific restoration approach (minimum intervention and distinguishability of the additions), which sustained the 1931 Athens Charter and the 1932 Italian Principles for the Restoration of Monuments, subsequently largely taken over by the Venice Charter (1964).

Until then, the prevailing praxis in Portugal, strongly conditioned by the nationalist ideology of the *Estado Novo*, was the repristination. The guidelines provided by the *Direção-Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais* (DGEMN) usually prescribed a mimetic language, with the aim of restoring an idealized primitive forms in the monument [3], [4]. Távora was totally opposed to the predetermined and banal use of formal elements taken from historical styles, a common practice that gave rise to clumsy falsifications of ancient buildings, contemptuously described as “pastiche”. However, neither did he assume the codes pre-established by the international recommendations, nor did his attitude of relationship with the pre-existing remained invariable throughout his career. In fact, Távora developed a very personal method of intervention in heritage, case by case, strongly influenced by his own life experience and wide-ranging education. His deep sensitivity



to traditional Portuguese culture, his vast knowledge of history and art, receptivity to multiple contemporary influences and desire for architectural modernization of the country converged synthetically in a very particular way of approaching the intervention in pre-existences.

Távora's attendance at CIAM was also a decisive experience at a theoretical level; in several ways. On the one hand, he could be a direct witness of the new direction of modern architecture; and, on the other, he was able to interact with other colleagues, likewise interested in issues related to the contemporary creation in the historical heritage. Although his anthropological concerns coincided with those of Aldo van Eyck, however, he established a much stronger personal and intellectual affinity with the members of the "Italian current". Necessarily he had to share with E.N. Rogers the ideas on the dialectical continuity between the new and the old and the specificity of each case, that later assumed as fundamental pillars of his stance on heritage renovation. Numerous reflections by the Italian theorist on the need to establish continuity between personal creation and the presence of tradition left a strong imprint on the Portuguese architect.

It should also be considered that the publication of Rogers' essay *Esperienza dell'architettura* [5] is coeval with the renovation project of the *Casa da Igreja* (1958).

In line with this conceptual framework, Távora affirmed that there is no difference between designing new buildings and the refurbishment of preexisting constructions: "I like to intervene in existing buildings; but not in the sense of recovery or restoration, but with a broader vision of architect. All projects are, in fact, refurbishment" [6]. According to his position, problems that concern both the new architecture and heritage interventions would not be different problems, but "a problem of creation" [7].

At the same time, the powerful Brazilian influence also bequeathed valuable lessons in heritage matters. In fact, with the *Museu das Missões* (1937), Lucio Costa had anticipated several decades the approach of some concepts that would be recurrent in post-war Europe. Despite its apparent simplicity, this project presents polyhedral readings on the relationship between pre-existence and contemporary addition: analogy, contrast, transparency, the reuse of fragments, the evocative capacity of ruin, etc. Some project mechanisms of intervention are also raised here, later assimilated by Távora, based on the simultaneity of vocabularies, which in this case is reflected in the recreation of the traditional alpendre (free interpretation of the concept of anastylosis) and, in parallel, the introduction of a glass volume as a silent expression of modernity [8].

Thus, Távora forged in the years after CIAM a complex heritage intervention methodology and criteria, characterized by the sensitive insertion of contemporary language in respectful continuity with the forms and atmospheres of the past, operations preceded by a deep historical study of pre-existences, their understanding through observation and drawing, as well as an intense intellectual process to reconcile different times and influences in a fluid and natural way. Among other renovation projects, the expansion of the *Pousada de Santa Marinha da Costa* (1972–1985), the *Escola Superior Agrária de Refóios do Lima* (1987–1993) and the *Casa da Rua Nova* (1985–1987) can be highlighted; works that have had great impact and pedagogy in the Portuguese context. According to Távora's statement for the first of them, "the general criterion adopted in the project [...] was 'continuing inovating' or, in other words, to continue contributing to the long life of the building, by conserving and strengthening its most significant spaces or creating qualified spaces determined by the conditions of its new function. The intention was to create a dialogue, highlighting the affinities and the continuity rather than the differences and the break from the past" [9]. However, a few years before the aforementioned renovations, he had already developed a conceptual and methodological approach in the refurbishment of the *Casa da Igreja* in Mondim de Basto, a revealing design since it is the architect's first architectural

renovation work, in which he applies the conciliatory theoretical approaches of the “third way” directly in the historical pre-existence.

#### 4 THE CASA DA IGREJA AS AN EXPERIMENTAL WORK OF HERITAGE INTERVENTION WITHIN THE “THIRD WAY”

##### 4.1 The pre-existence: The Casa da Igreja of Mondim de Basto

The *Casa da Igreja* is a manor house located in the city of Mondim de Basto, in northern Portugal. It is settled next to the parish church, in a former farming land, isolated from the medieval urban core. Although documented since 1575, the current building dates from the last quarter of the 18th century, according to the preserved historical documentation and its morpho-typological characteristics.

The house is arranged in an L shape on a plot with a certain slope, so it has a semi-basement and a noble floor which is climbed by a staircase from the main access. This façade faces the street and exhibits and harmonious formal composition, following the patterns of the Portuguese Baroque (Fig. 1). The rhythmic configuration of the balconies and the horizontality of this elevation (emphasized by the eaves) are interrupted in the center by the access arch, which is topped by a pediment and preceded by the stairway. This portal gives access to the main halls and to the chapel, which is the core of the house and acts at the same time as separation and connection between the two wings into which the house is divided (each one with its own characteristics and able to operate with a certain independence).



Figure 1: Main façade of Casa da Igreja, seen from the street.

The backyard was originally dedicated to different domestic service activities and other agricultural works, undergoing diverse alterations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, as functional needs arose. The front yard, on the contrary, has a representative status, standing out several specimens of camellias (*camellia japonica*).

##### 4.2 The general criterion adopted for the intervention

In 1958, Mr. Antonio Lage entrusted Fernando Távora with the renovation project of the *Casa da Igreja* (see Figs 2 and 3). The state of conservation of the building at that moment

is currently unknown. Anyhow, the architect undertook an in-depth reform. The final project, dated February 1959, presents slight changes with respect to the preliminary draft regarding the distribution of some spaces, although the general criterion of the intervention was maintained. The construction works had to extend for a year approximately (1960–1961).

As previously mentioned, this project can be considered an essay of Távora's *modus operandi* of heritage intervention, characterized by the skilful integration of the new spaces and functions within the continuous and temporally extensive formal process of the old buildings. The architect himself acknowledges to be exploring a model of intervention different from the usual one: "what was important in this work was to establish a restoration criterion different from that which was currently being used [...]. I tried to use a 'healthy' restoration criterion: neither denying the past, nor attempting to rehash it"; statement that he himself deepens: "the switches were not patinated as they were in some place in Guimarães, the carpentries do not try to reproduce others, sometimes even nonexistent, the stone cornice converges at a certain height with another one of bush hammered concrete, etc." [10]. This statement can only be understood in the context of the "third way", in a moment of rejection of the artificial use of the forms and elements of tradition. That is, what is being built *ex novo* must intensely express its contemporaneity, making use of new materials but seeking, simultaneously, the best possible relationship with the forms of the past. What was intended, according to the architect, was "a dialogue with our heritage by means of current day style, obtaining in this synthesis of styles a fresh and cheerful work" [10].

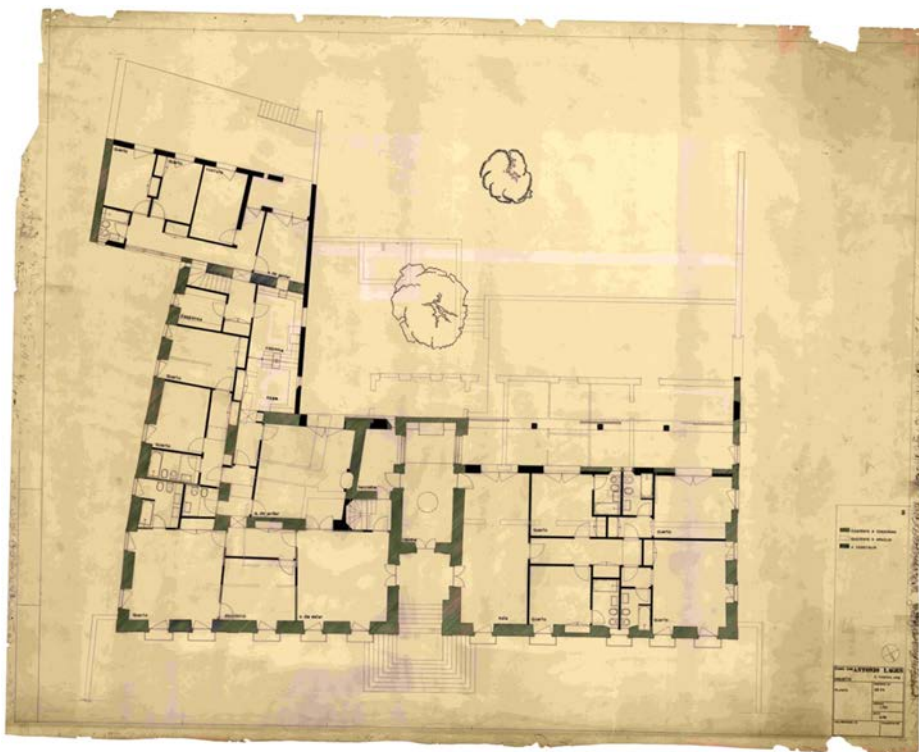


Figure 2: Plan of the renovation of the Casa da Igreja. Grey plot: to maintain; black plot: to build new; dashed line: to demolish. (Source: Arquivo da Fundação Marques da Silva [11]).



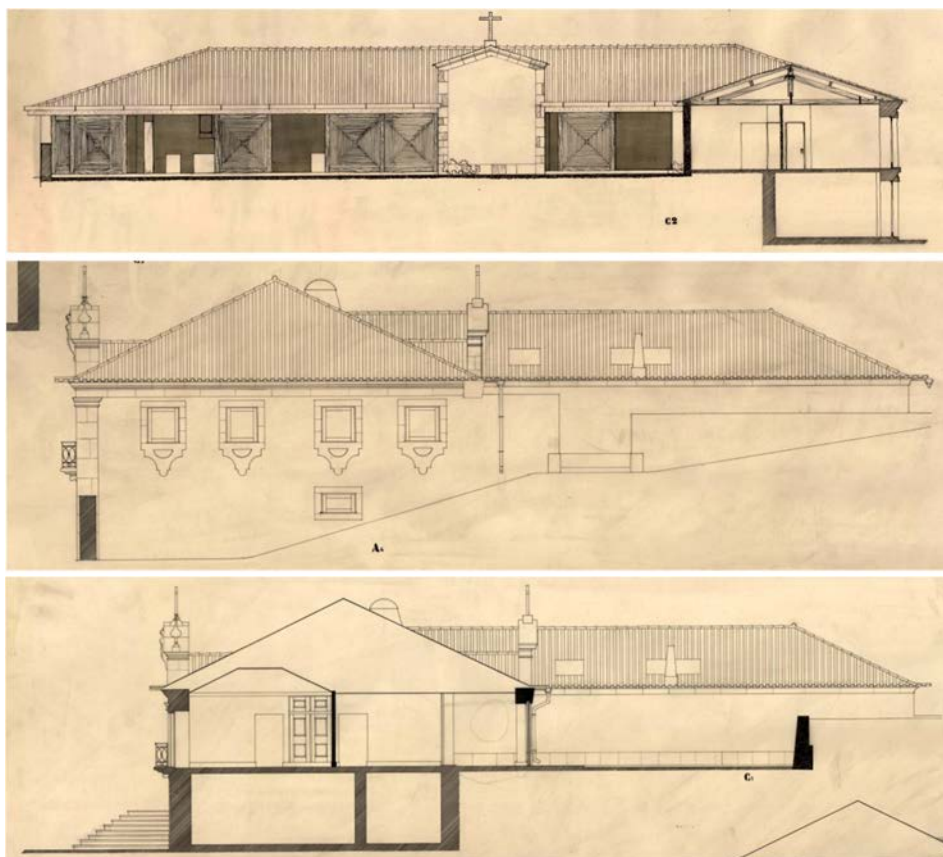


Figure 3: Elevations and sections of the renovation project of the Casa da Igreja. (Source: Arquivo da Fundação Marques da Silva [11].)

#### 4.3 Deep renovation but preservation of character and atmospheres

One of the main premises for the transformation of the house was the “conservation and enhancement of all its character, making it perfectly livable within a current concept of life” [11], a sentence that encapsulates the syncretism that this work possesses. On the one hand, Távora is concerned to preserve the historic values of the manor house but, at the same time, intends to create a contemporary domestic space, a concern latent since his essay *O problema da casa portuguesa* (1945), in which he calls to develop “a Portuguese architecture of today” [12], an updated domesticity adapted to the conditions and needs of a new era.

In the effort to strengthen the character of the house, the main elevation was not only fully preserved but the architect decided to give it a greater prominence thanks to the reform of the enclosure in the front yard, removing the fence and lowering the height of the wall to increase the visibility of the baroque façade and the garden from the street. Likewise, the singular arrangement of the house around the central chapel was respected. Moreover, the stately ambience of the most emblematic rooms of the residence was preserved, particularly in the main hall and in the master bedroom (see Fig. 4), which were also the only ones that maintained the old ceilings, possibly the most valuable element.





Figure 4: Rooms of the Casa da Igreja, currently. (a) Master bedroom; (b) Dining room; (c) Main hall.

In his own manor house in Covilhã, recovered a few years later, there is a similar concern for preserving the aristocratic atmosphere of the halls, where a repertoire of classic furniture and an extensive collection of pieces of art were placed: paintings, woodcarvings, porcelains, etc. As in Mondim, in those rooms that still retained a genuine “ritual” of historical value, Távora chose to intensify the character of preexisting ambiances.

This attitude, apparently archaizing, contrasts with the large transformations that *Casa da Igreja* underwent: “The work was total, keeping everything in the building. The work was total, keeping everything that really possessed character and that was not ‘pastiche’” [10]. Certainly, the work was of great magnitude (in that sense it was “total”), since the building was entirely renovated. These changes affected even the floor slab (rebuilt in reinforced concrete), the roof (new wooden frame and tiles) and, specially, the rear façade, which was deeply renewed. Although both the NE and the SE façades and the load-bearing walls of the manor house were maintained, the architect extensively modified the arrangement the interiors to achieve contemporary domestic spaces: corridors were introduced instead of the traditional enfilade, the geometry of the rooms was regularized (to get quadrangular rooms), new bathrooms with diverse sanitary ware were added as well as other modern facilities: electricity, telephone, heating, hot water, etc.

The transformations that were carried out did not alter, but rather emphasized, the singular organization of the house around the central chapel, which links and separates the two different parts into which the residence is divided. In the north wing, an area with permanent residential character, partitioning experienced notable changes, with the exception of the representative rooms. Here, in the central loading wall, several wardrobes and cupboards were embedded, thus clarifying the geometry of the spaces. At the same time, this central

wall nests and separates circulations and different functions, orienting the living rooms and bedrooms towards the exterior front and the kitchen and dining room towards the backyard. A new body for the service spaces was added at the end of the domestic wing, as an appendix. On the other side of the chapel, the south wing could be understood as a guest area or auxiliary residence, with a common lounge and four similar bedrooms, with private bathroom. The common living room and two of the bedrooms are connected by a new porch, conceived by Távora, that faces the back garden, closed by large wooden sliding lattices (see Figs 2 and 3).

#### 4.4 Materials and finishes: the ability of detail to reconcile tradition and modernity

In relation to the furniture and interior finishes, the architect detailed all meticulously, both in the project report and in the specifications, particularly, the materials to be used and their characteristics (treatment, application method, colors and qualities), according to the luxury and refinement character of an aristocratic house. Therefore, he stipulates the quality of the wood of the pavement (both exotic – macacauba, mahogany – and national – chesnut wood), its layout (two-tone design in the most representative rooms), the coating material for the bathrooms (hydraulic tile, ceramics, marble, etc.), the characteristics of the sanitary ware and accessories, etc.

It is interesting to note how Távora intends to combine respect for traditional environments and constructive systems with contemporary functions and a renewed plastic language in the choice of materials and in the definition of the details (“all the finishes will be taken care of not only to the function of each piece, but to an overall spirit that without denying the past must be perfectly contemporary”) [11]. This issue is evident in the choice and treatment of carpentry, coexisting interior doors of modern design (simple, stylized and painted white) with preexisting ones of Baroque aesthetic, opting choosing to preserve the old elements whenever the state of preservation allowed. This happens also with the two magnificent cupboards of beautifully carved wood, of historicist appearance (possibly made in the twentieth century), located in the kitchen and in the dining room, which remain in harmonious coexistence with the contemporary design solutions that Távora designs for the abovementioned rooms.

The (re)construction works were mostly handmade, barely prefabricated, using local labour and common materials (tile, stone, wood, concrete, etc., both vernacular and modern techniques that regional masons mastered) which contrast with the sophistication of some interior finishes. In addition, the lack of definition of the plans caused many doubts to the workers who, on several occasions, directed their queries to the architect’s office in search of precise instructions for the execution of the details. As was usual in other Távora’s works (who enjoyed talking with the artisans and receiving their suggestions), the final result differs in some aspects of the project, as consequence of unforeseen events and other changes decided during the works, without ever taking shape on paper.

#### 4.5 Modernity in dialogue with tradition: the new porch and the backyard renewal

Fernando Távora already knew *Casa da Igreja* a long time before carrying out the project, as shown in a meaningful photograph taken at the beginning of the 40s (when he was still an architecture student at the Escola de Belas Artes do Porto). In that snapshot (Fig. 5), he appears in the backyard, leaning against the wall, drawing in a notebook the disordered forms of the rear façade (which he later judged as “questionable”), successively added to satisfy agricultural and domestic needs, and built without any type of compositional criterion.







Figure 5: In the left picture Fernando Távora is in the backyard of Casa da Igreja, taking notes, at the beginning of the 1940s (more than ten years before the refurbishment project). In the right picture, the same place today. (Source: *Arquivo da Fundação Marques da Silva* [11].)

Távora was aware that the additions had distorted the original characteristics of the house, which at this point reached too much depth and height. Taking advantage of the predisposition of the owners to remove the additions, the purpose of the planner was to recover the previous profile of the building, highlighting the figure of the chapel as the heart of the house, and to give this façade a unitary image and its own identity within the whole. So, this attitude may be interpreted as an initiative to recover “the spirit of the building”, which, unlike the restorations of *repristino*, is enhanced by a vividly contemporary language. In fact, this façade concentrates a large part of the author’s creative efforts, since this is where the desire to reconcile the forms of the past with the language of his time is most radically expressed. This new front is designed according to modern compositional procedures: it is horizontal, abstract, geometric, vibrant and, nevertheless, deeply inspired by the typologies, materials and techniques of the vernacular construction.

Távora’s involvement in the *Inquérito à Arquitectura popular em Portugal* allowed him a deep knowledge to the popular architecture of the northern region of the country. Undoubtedly, when designing the new porch, the architect had in mind the functional and tectonic scheme of the vernacular house (*casa de lavoura minhota*), characterized by the *varanda*, a covered but open space, which was an essential frontier between the public outdoor space and the privacy of the interior rooms.

Undoubtedly, the sliding wooden latticework system is the focus of the new façade’s composition (see Fig. 6). The choice of these panels could be understood as an allusion to the light wooden enclosures in popular architecture, such as the ones in *espigueiros* and *sequeiros*, whose permeability allowed the ventilation and drying of stored cereals. However, a reference could also be made to the latticework that, coming from the Islamic tradition (*mashrabiya*), had been implemented in the popular architecture of northern Portugal between the 16th and 18th centuries, especially in cities such as Braga and Guimarães. This technology was taken to Brazil in colonial times, and there successfully incorporated by its effective adaptation to tropical climatic conditions. These traditional solutions, with an abstract design and great bioclimatic efficiency, caught the attention of the main architects of Brazilian modernity, among them, Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer. From the 1930s they recovered this element, creatively transferred from the colonial tradition to contemporary construction, taking advantage of its usefulness as a sunscreen and protector of the privacy of the rooms. These lessons, widely spread in Portugal (at first through the book *Brazil Builds*), were appropriated by Keil do Amaral and Januário Godinho in experimental works

in the 40s and 50s and, finally, by Fernando Távora. It is curious to see how lessons in popular architecture came back to Portugal, after being filtered by the modern reinterpretations of Brazilian architects.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 6: (a) View of the northwest wing, the wooden latticework facing the backyard; (b) Detail of the meeting between the baroque cornice and the beam of the alpendre; (c) Latticework of the dining room, facing the backyard.

Furthermore, the enhancement of the backyard, its conversion from agricultural and domestic workplace to space for contemplation and enjoyment, required a careful treatment of outdoor environments, with water, vegetation, pavements, etc. The reconditioning of the external garden was later directed by the prestigious landscape architect Ilídio Araújo. Távora's operation was limited to the enclosure next to the house, a small but sufficient area to verify some compositional attributes similar to those applied in the Municipal Park of *Quinta da Conceição*, started in 1956 and that at that time was still being executed (it was completed in 1962). The architect managed to enhance the backyard with few elements: an opening, a swerved wall, a change of pavement, a tree, a pond, enough to create figurative images, suggest enclosures and invite to tour the garden. The bare concrete walls, now covered by the patina of time, are integrated naturally into the spatial structure of the estate, in formal and chromatic continuity with the granite walls of the terraces, in that ambition of continuity, of timelessness, of seeming to have always been there.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The *Casa da Igreja* of Mondim de Basto is a key project to understand Fernando Távora's subsequent work on heritage intervention, in which some conceptual and methodological guidelines are already perceived, that will be strengthened, years later, in works such as the *Pousada de Santa Marinha da Costa* or the *Casa da Rua Nova*.

Távora was able to understand the compositional principles of pre-existence, as well as to diagnose its problems and lacks. This was achieved through the introduction of a new unifying geometry in the interior spatial organization and in the rear front, without thereby distorting the morpho-typological principles and the identity of the pre-existing construction. The new membrane, of wooden sliding doors, updates the rear elevation, using geometry as an abstract element that gives rhythm, harmony and balance to the façade. In a way, this is a classicist operational approach, introducing a new order in a pre-existing building (a syncretic operation that unifies its complexity, overlapping pre-existing layers), in a sense of *permanent modernity*: understanding the lessons of history and its constants to *continue innovating*.

Certainly, this project is an experimental exercise in which Távora explores diverse criteria of intervention in the search for a common thread between “new” and “old”: philological restoration, preservation of previous atmospheres, transformation of pre-existing elements and introduction of new ones in a markedly contemporary language. Hence, Távora assumed this work as an essay of methodologies and solutions, which would later be consolidated in works with more repercussion.

In its tectonic conception, this intervention also constitutes a small manifesto of the sought-after synthesis between tradition and modernity, in the sequence of the aforesaid works of Ofir or the Quinta da Conceição: the new wooden latticework and the concrete beam of the a coexist naturally with the molded cornice of stone and the covering in ceramic tiles of the baroque construction. It is also surprising how in this work some lessons later assimilated by the visits that Távora made, sometime later, to the works of F. L. Wright and to Japan already seem to be anticipated.

Some doubts remain regarding the scarcity of reviews and disclosure. It was barely published, despite its relevance as an experimental work; even Távora himself hardly refers to it, neither in interviews nor in his texts. This anonymity (the ignorance of its architectural values), may have contributed to its progressive abandonment, being currently in a state of degradation that puts at risk the conservation of this important testimony and manifesto of the affirmation of a modern approach in the intervention on historical heritage in Portugal.

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