

## **THE TECTONIC SHIFT IN FERNANDO TÁVORA'S WORK IN THE POST-CIAM YEARS.**

**Eduardo Fernandes**

LAB2PT, Escola de Arquitetura da Universidade do Minho / LAB2PT, School of Architecture of the University of Minho, Guimarães, Portugal.

### **Abstract**

*Between 1955 and 1960 the Portuguese architect Fernando Távora (1923-2005) designed an important group of buildings: the municipal market of Vila da Feira, the house in Ofir, the tennis pavilion of Quinta da Conceição in Leça da Palmeira and the primary school of Cedro in Gaia.*

*These buildings are landmarks in the history of Portuguese architecture; in their design, Távora employed traditional materials (stone, timber, tile) and reused vernacular construction techniques (bearing walls, wooden beams and pitched roofs) within a modern approach. This attitude is directly related to the results of the Surveys on Portuguese Vernacular Architecture, promoted by the Union of the Portuguese Architects between 1955 and 1960 and conducted by some of the most renowned Portuguese architects; Fernando Távora was responsible for the work in 'Zone 1' and learned how to recognize the presence of a certain kind of 'modernity' in the Vernacular Architecture of the north of the country.*

*However, after 1960 his language changed and the direct influence of the vernacular began to be less obvious.*

*In order to understand the evolution of his work at this time, it is important to remember that Távora was present at the main international architectural meetings, where he had the opportunity to contact the key names of the worldwide architectural community: he integrated the Portuguese representations present in the last CIAM Congresses and also participated in the Royaumont meeting of the Team Ten. Besides, in 1960 Távora made a three-month journey to the United States and participated in the World Design Conference in Japan.*

*These international contacts and experiences were important to the rethinking of concepts that led to the different languages we can find in the buildings he designed after 1960.*

**Keywords:** Távora, CIAM, Team Ten, Vernacular, Modern.

## Introduction

In the 40s, Portugal lived in a context dominated by the conservative vision of the dictatorial regime of Salazar, in which the State imposed on the architects a set of guidelines inspired by alleged national values.

After the end of World War II, the new generations of architects trained under the influence of Carlos Ramos and Keil do Amaral began to challenge this reality, defending the use of a modern language. This reaction against the conservative view of the State reached its highest point in the Congress of Portuguese Architects of 1948, dominated by the opposition between those who defended an archaic idea of Portuguese values and those who proposed an architecture directly influenced by the different expressions of the modern movement.

In this context of a confrontation between two antagonistic positions, Fernando Távora (1923-2005) proposed a third way, which marked the Portuguese architecture in the post-Ciam years. However, when we analyse the evolution of Távora's work, it is evident the existence of three quite distinct phases.

The first, between the publication of the text 'The Problem of the Portuguese house' ('O Problema da Casa Portuguesa', 1945) and the beginning of the design process of the municipal market of Vila da Feira (1954), is a period marked by an important theoretical production, but also by the difficulty of concretizing in practice the ideas presented in his texts.

In fact, before 1954 we cannot recognize in his work the ideas presented in the cited text (Távora, 1945) and in the set of written reflections published in *Cadernos de Arquitectura* (Távora, 1947),<sup>1</sup> in the newspaper *Comércio do Porto* (1953) and in the magazines *Panorama* (1952a), *Lusíada* (1952b) and *A Arquitectura Portuguesa, Cerâmica e Edificação* (1953).

---

<sup>1</sup> The 1947 publication of *The Problem of the Portuguese House* in *Cadernos de Arquitectura* is similar in the global sense, but presents some differences of wording, rephrasing the text of the same name published two years earlier in the magazine *Áleo*; it is this second version (improved by its author) that is usually quoted by those who study the theoretical production of Távora.

The projects Távora started in 1952 (the block of Avenida do Brasil, the Ramalde economic housing complex and the Grocery Wholesalers residential unit, all built in the city of Porto) are respectable works of a young modern architect, but they do not yet show an idea of 'modernity' manifested 'in the quality and accuracy of the relations between the building and the life that surrounds it" (Távora, 1952b). In other words, it was an architecture design according to its time (modern), but not according to the cultural conditions of its place (Portuguese).

This idea of a new Portuguese Architecture only appeared in the work of Távora in a second phase, in the projects began after 1954, mainly in the Municipal Market of Vila da Feira (1954-59), the Ofir House (1957-58), the Tennis Pavilion of Quinta da Conceição (1956-59) and the Cedro Elementary School (1957-61).

This second phase of Távora's work occurred in parallel with the work process of the Surveys on Portuguese Vernacular Architecture (1955-60), a large program promoted by the Union of the Portuguese Architects and conducted by some of the most renowned architects from Porto and Lisbon. These Surveys allowed the reinterpretation of the traditional tectonic systems of Portuguese vernacular constructions in the light of modern principles of rationality, functionalism and truthful use of materials.

In the book *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal (Vernacular Architecture in Portugal)* published in 1961 as a direct result of the research carried out between 1955 and 1960, the report of 'Zone 1'<sup>2</sup> (coordinated by Távora) confirms some of the ideas already written in the abovementioned text 'The Problem of the Portuguese house': 'Man and Earth' are the two fundamental elements that condition vernacular architecture, which is realized 'within the Portuguese truth', and the ancient rural house is 'the truest, most functional and less fanciful' (Távora, 1945).

---

<sup>2</sup> The 'Zone 1' of the Surveys on Portuguese Vernacular Architecture covered the geographic areas of Minho, Douro Litoral and Beira Litoral; Távora was the coordinator of a team which also included Rui Pimentel and António Menéres.

So, in this second phase of Távora's work there was a very clear tectonic shift, which was visibly influenced by the vernacular tectonics studied in the Surveys, which were reinterpreted with a modern design.

However, after a brief period of time his language changed again; Távora sensed that the formal influence of vernacular architecture symbolized an attempt to crystallize a reality that was, in fact, rapidly disappearing and could not translate the contemporary times.

So, from this moment on, we can talk of a third phase in Távora's work, in which the influence of vernacular tectonics is not evident.

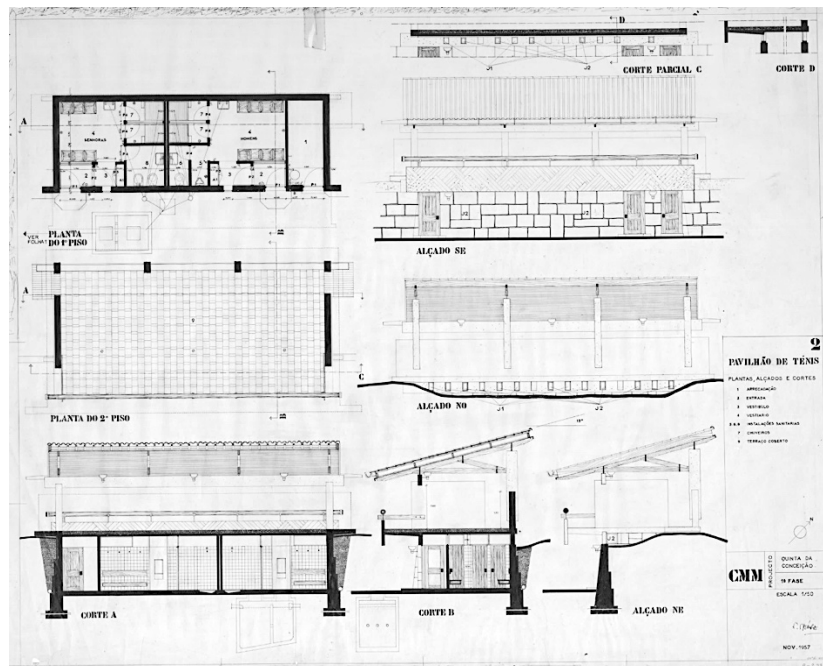
### **The discovery of a third way**

During the years of the Survey, in the abovementioned second phase of his work, Távora finally managed to achieve the practical realisation of the ideas previously presented in his texts. His intentions are clearly synthesized in the words he wrote about the holiday house of Ofir, which can also characterize all the other buildings he designed in this period.

One of the most elementary notions of chemistry teaches us the difference between a compound and a mixture; such a notion seems to us to be perfectly applicable, in essence, to the particular case of a building. In fact there are buildings that are compounds and buildings that are mixtures (...) and in the present case of this dwelling (...) we tried to build a true compound, a compound in which an infinite number of factors, of varying value, came into play. (Távora, 1957, p. 11)

In fact, the work designed in this second phase shows that Távora finally understood how to combine his particular interpretation of the modern movement and his unconditional love for Portuguese vernacular construction, in a compound of foreign influences and local character he managed to apply in Vila da Feira, Gaia, Ofir and Leça da Palmeira, almost at the same time.

However, in order to understand this important evolution of his work at this time, it is essential to remember that Távora integrated the Portuguese representations present in the last CIAM<sup>3</sup> meetings (Hoddesdon, Aix-en-Provence and Dubrovnik), where he had the opportunity to contact with the key names of the worldwide architectural milieu and witnessed the confrontation between the young future members of the Team Ten and the older (and more orthodox) members of CIAM. In some architects of the new generation, he recognized a theoretical position that was close to his ideas. Thus, in these CIAM meetings he could confirm the pertinence of the 'third way' he defended, as an alternative to the harsh nationalism of the State and the strict internationalism of most of his colleagues.



**Figure 1.** Project for the Tennis Pavilion of Quinta da Conceição. Távora, 1957. Archives of Marques da Silva Foundation (FIMS/FT/0036-pd008).

<sup>3</sup> The CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) were the most important forum of architectural debate in the first half of the twentieth century; between 1928 and 1956, ten meetings were held in eight different countries.

The reinterpretation of traditional values in modern architecture was a theme very present in the Japanese architecture of the time, namely in the work of Kenzo Tange. Távora met him in 1951, in Hoddesdon, where he presented his drawings of the Hiroshima Peace Center and Memorial Park; they shared the same principles and became friends, as Távora refers when he remembers (in his diary) their reunion in Tokyo, in the World Design Conference of 1960 (Távora, 1960a, p. 305).<sup>4</sup>

The particular approach of Tange's first works was very similar to the ideas Távora was trying to implement in his own architecture. Thus, the resemblances between Távora's tennis pavilion in Leça da Palmeira (fig. 1) and the house Tange designed for himself in Tokio (1951-53) are not surprising: both works are an intentional compound of modern design and traditional values.

Therefore, the ideas and the work of Tange (and of other CIAM participants) were very influential in the new character his architecture showed, in this second phase. Távora finally discovered how to relate the formal and conceptual influences from architects of the modern movement (Corbusier in Vila da Feira, Kenzo Tange in the abovementioned tennis pavilion of Quinta da Conceição, Marcel Breuer in the house of Ofir, Alvar Aalto in the school of Cedro) with his knowledge of the vernacular heritage, reinforced by the lessons he was learning in the Surveys.

However, the study of the work of foreign architects and the intentional use of their principles and forms, adapted to the Portuguese reality and cultural values, was a philosophy already expressed in the aforementioned first text of Távora.

A new character of new conditions arises and it is there that the Portuguese Architecture must be connected without fear of losing its character. If we have individuality today, the study of foreign architecture will not cause us any evil; if we do not have it, then it will be useless to have the pretension to speak about Portuguese Architecture. (Távora, 1945)

Therefore, this philosophy (expressed in writing ten years before) became a methodology of design in this second phase and gave rise to the works mentioned

---

<sup>4</sup> Távora and Tange were also present at the 1959 meeting of Team X, in Otterlo.

above, milestones in the history of Portuguese architecture of the twentieth century.

However, after 1960 the architecture of Távora changed again.

### **From Seia to Guimarães, from Chicago to Taliesen**

We can establish the beginning of Fernando Távora's third phase as a consequence of a second language shift, between 1958 and 1959. In that period, he designed two fuel stations in the north of Portugal, for the same client (the Sacor fuel company) and with the same type of location, a national road on the outskirts of two medium-sized cities, Guimarães and Seia. There seems to be no reason that can justify any substantial differences in their design; yet, the tectonic options of Távora were quite distinct (Fernandes, 2016).

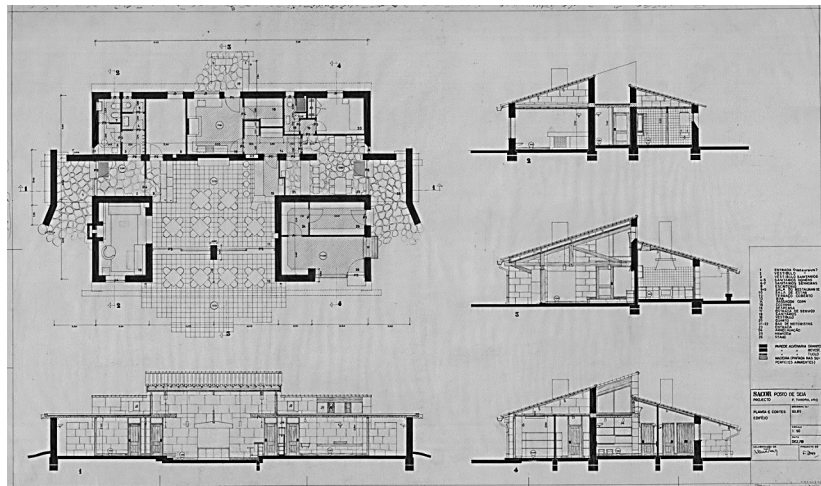
The project for the Sacor fuel station in Seia was initiated in 1958; the preliminary proposal presented to the clients in June of the same year establishes the solution that will be presented in the project, with minor changes, in December 1959. However, 8 months before the delivery of the Seia project, Távora had already submitted to Sacor the preliminary proposal for the petrol station of Guimarães (in April 1959), commissioned the previous year; as the first proposal for Seia, this preliminary proposal for Guimarães presented great resemblance with the final project (September 1960).<sup>5</sup>

Like in his abovementioned work in Vila da Feira, Leça da Palmeira and Ofír, Távora achieves in Seia (fig. 2) a perfect combination of local materials and traditional

---

<sup>5</sup> In the archives of Marques da Silva Foundation (where Fernando Távora's legacy is kept) we can find all the interactions with the Sacor company documented. The first commission was a study for the location of petrol stations in the city of Porto and its environs; the proposal was submitted in November 1957. The project for the fuel station in Seia was designed between 1958 and 1959, with the collaboration of Alberto Neves and Augusto Amaral; some additions were designed between 1961 and 1965 (unbuilt). In June 1959 Távora designed a prototype project for the Sacor petrol stations, with the collaboration of Vasco Cunha, and presented the first studies for the Gaia station; a second study for Gaia was presented in July 1960. Between 1959 and 1961 Távora designed the petrol station of Guimarães (with the collaboration of Augusto Amaral), commissioned in the previous year. There were some small adjustments designed in 1963 and 1965, and the reformulation and enlargement of the building, proposing a Restaurant, was designed with the collaboration of Joaquim Sampaio and presented in 1966 (unbuilt).

construction techniques (using stone bearing walls, timber beans and tiles) with modern ones (big glass windows and reinforced concrete slabs) which, according to the 'spirit that presided to the design', intended a 'good integration in the environment' (Távora, 1960b, p. 3). However, although it was designed few months after,<sup>6</sup> the Guimarães Fuel Station presented different tectonic options. Although it is still possible to recognize the influence of the Vernacular Architecture of the north of the country, it is materialized in a less obvious way: the bearing walls in granite stone are combined with flat roofs in reinforced concrete and metal pillars, as the concern for showing the possibilities of contemporary techniques replaced the direct references to traditional construction.



**Figure 2.** Project for the office, store and restaurant of the Sacor fuel station in Seia; Távora, December 1959. Archives of Marques da Silva Foundation (FIMS\_FT\_0101-pd0018.02).

This was the beginning of a second tectonic shift in Távora's work, which is clearly embodied by the difference between the sloped roof in tiles of Seia and the flat slab in reinforced concrete of Guimarães (fig. 3). From this moment on, the direct formal influences of vernacular construction will not be recognisable in his work,

<sup>6</sup> As stated above, the preliminary proposals for Seia and Guimarães were presented in June 1958 and April 1959; in both cases, the preliminary design establishes the tectonic options of the final project.



although his architecture maintains the connection to the essence of Portuguese traditional values.

To understand this second shift we must consider some different but interrelated factors. First of all, the success of the Surveys. Since the mid-fifties, there was a growing trend in Portuguese architecture, which started immediately after the beginning of the field work of the Surveys and was substantially increased by the publication of the book *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal* (Amaral, 1961); this was a regionalist style, in which traditional techniques and building materials were used (often, but not always, articulated with new materials and modern construction techniques), with the intent of seeking formal references in vernacular culture.



**Figure 3.** Restaurant of the Sacor fuel station in Seia; Sacor fuel station in Guimarães. Photos by the author.

This regionalist trend was inspired by the Surveys; however, in the north of the country, it was also clearly influenced by the example of Távora's work in Vila da Feira, Ofir and Leça da Palmeira.

Unintentionally, Távora had created a style; but he did not identify himself with the attitude of many of the architects who were applying it, in buildings where the program or the context should imply other options. He believed that the new Modern Portuguese Architecture was not a style, but the result of an attitude which should 'translate exactly, in a perfect relationship, the reality that surrounds it' (Távora, 1952a).

So, the Seia fuel station shows the last traces of the direct formal influence of vernacular architecture in the work of Távora. At certain point, during the design process of the gas pumps at Guimarães, Távora felt the need to distance himself from this stylistic view of his ideas; mainly because he soon understood that this was an attempt to crystallize a reality that was, in fact, rapidly disappearing and could not translate the contemporary times.

The recognition that this could be an inadequate path was reinforced in September 1959, in the Oterlo meeting of the CIAM/Team Ten,<sup>7</sup> where Távora had the opportunity to witness the criticisms of Peter Smithson to Ernesto Rogers and Kenzo Tange, accusing the projects of the Velasca Tower, the Tokyo City Hall and the Kagawa Prefectural Office of formalism and historicist revivalism (Newman, 1961).

Later, in 1960, in the end of his three-month journey to the United States,<sup>8</sup> Távora participated in the World Design Conference in Japan. His interest in the work of his Japanese 'friend' led him, in the days following the congress, to visit some of Tange's works. On his diary, he recalls the aforementioned Otterlo debate about the Tokyo City Hall, where 'everyone criticized the expression of wood in the reinforced concrete'. Távora's comments show he identified himself with Tange's options: 'it is a good building (...) much more Japanese than the Diet Building or

---

<sup>7</sup> The meeting of Otterlo (Holland, 1959) culminates in the dissolution of the CIAM. This, however, is considered by some authors as a Team Ten meeting; Kenneth Frampton (1997, p. 330), for example, classifies the previous Dubrovnik meeting as the "last meeting of the CIAM".

<sup>8</sup> In April 1959 Távora applied to a Scholarship Grant for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, proposing a study trip to understand the methods of teaching Architecture and Urbanism in the United States of America. The scholarship was granted in January 1960 and the journey was completed between February and June 1960, mostly in American territory (but also in Mexico, Japan and Greece). The diary that he wrote during this trip was recently published (Távora, 1960a).

the Tokyo Tower' (Távora, 1960a, p. 310-318). The 'expression of wood' dilemma is mentioned again when he visits the Toshogu Shrine, in Nikko: 'The door of the shrine is in granite which represents the stone translation of a wooden form. The «Tange case» has antecedents in the seventeenth century!' (Távora, 1960a, p. 320).

These personal thoughts, expressed in a private diary that Távora had no intention of seeing disclosed, show his identification with Tange's methodology, which is very similar to his own, in the second half of the 1950s. For example, in the abovementioned Tennis pavilion of Quinta da Conceição (fig. 1 and 4), the connection between the lintel and the walls of the first floor clearly reveals a concrete translation of a wooden form, with its wedge fittings of juxtaposed elements, inspired by vernacular constructions.



**Figure 4.** Tennis Pavilion of Quinta da Conceição, Távora, 1956-59. Photo by the author.

However, this was a time of doubt for Távora; although he did not necessarily agree with the criticism to Tange's language, he considered that the same kind of

negative judgement could be applied to his recent work. He was looking for answers to these doubts in his trip to the USA, and the reading of his diary shows that he was especially interested in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe.

During the journey, his impressions on Mies work suffered a subtle evolution, between the unrestrained admiration for the Seagram building (Távora, 1960a, p. 121) and the ambivalent feelings in the Chicago IIT: he described the Crown Hall as a work of 'impeccable proportion and certainty' but considered that it showed 'no mystery' and could 'be very hot inside'; the IIT chapel was described as 'scientific, rational and comfortable like most American churches' but criticised because of its 'two identical façades, in the front and in the back' (Távora, 1960a, p. 245-7).<sup>9</sup> This slightly disillusioned discourse contrasts vehemently with the enthusiasm he shows when visiting Frank Lloyd Wright's work, reaching the peak in his visit to Spring Green (Távora, 1960a, p. 229-39) and in his lapidary conclusion: 'after seeing Taliesin, the Gropius house seems like a refrigerator on the top of a hill.'

Thus, at the end of his 1960 trip (which was intended to be enlightening) Távora returns with more doubts than when he left. While on the one hand he confirmed in Wright's work his personal conviction that the harmony between 'Man and Earth' should be the main ingredient for an 'integral architecture' (Távora, 1945), on the other hand he understood that the world was changing, precisely in the sense of breaking this harmony. Therefore, he did not find answers in America, only the conviction that there is a path that should not be followed.

I believe that America is a splendid Laboratory; it is indispensable to visit it, exactly and especially to know what should be avoided at all costs. The great fortune of Europe (...) was to have realized in America this experience of civilization (...). You can now look at this child and give perhaps different orientation to your grandchildren. (Távora, 1960a, p. 252).

---

<sup>9</sup> Távora did not understand why Mies chose not to emphasize the front of the chapel.

## Conclusion

The 1960 journey is a cornerstone in the evolution of Távora's ideas. If the Guimarães gasoline pump already showed a different path in the tectonics of his work, in the trip to the United States he understood that the times were inevitably changing and, two years later, in the Royaumont meeting of the Team Ten, he confirmed that these were times of great doubt.

There are times when it is possible for a group of men to come together to arrive at clear, lucid, schematic conclusions; there are others when, on the contrary, it is only possible to conclude that ... a conclusion cannot be found. (...) Times and dimensions have changed ... Reality is more diverse, richer and more varied. It is not possible, for now, to give recipes, to class with sovereignty, to rank with exactness. The World appears to our eyes and our spirit as complex, disturbing, unusual. (...) One feels that the moment is one of research and doubt, of reunion, drama and mystery. How therefore, to conclude with clarity? (Távora, 1963, p. 1)

Thus, the third phase of Távora's work (after his 1960 journey), can be characterized by these doubts, and by the awareness that there were multiple paths ahead, a multitude of possible answers to the different circumstances faced by the architects in each one of their different commissions.



**Figure 5.** Municipal building of Aveiro (1963-67), Fernando Távora. Photo by the author.

It is this understanding that each work is a different case that explains the different character of the municipal building of Aveiro (1963-67, fig. 5), the convent of Gondomar (1961-71), or the headquarters of the 'Assembleia' in Guimarães (1969-72), to refer just a few examples of public commissions. Thus, the challenge to the researchers in the study of this third phase of Távora's work is not to focus on the evidence of the differences, but to find points of contact between the diverse languages used.

## Acknowledgments

This work has the financial support of the Project Lab2PT - Landscapes, Heritage and Territory laboratory - AUR/04509 and FCT through national funds and when applicable of the FEDER co-financing, in the aim of the new partnership agreement PT2020 and COMPETE2020 - POCI 01 0145 FEDER 007528.

## References

- Amaral, K. (1961). *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal*. Lisboa: Sindicato Nacional dos Arquitectos.
- Fernandes, E. (2011). *The Choice of Oporto: contributions to update the idea of a School*. PhD in Architectural Culture. Guimarães: School of Architecture of the University of Minho.
- Fernandes, E. (2016). From Seia to Guimarães. Fernando Távora's tectonic shift in the Sacor fuel stations". In *ICSA2016 - 3rd International Conference on Structures and Architecture, July 27-29, Guimarães, Portugal*. Leiden: CRC Press/Bakema.
- Frampton, K. (1997). *História Crítica da Arquitectura Moderna*. S. Paulo. Martins Fontes.
- Newman, O. (1961). *CIAM '59 in Otterlo*. Stuttgart: Kramer Vlg.
- Távora, F. (1945). O Problema da Casa Portuguesa. *Semanário ALÊO*, 5(IV), 10.
- Távora, F. (1952a). O Porto e a Arquitectura Moderna. *Revista Panorama*, 4, páginas não numeradas.
- Távora, F. (1952b). Arquitectura e Urbanismo – a lição das constantes. *Revista Lusíada*, 2(1), 151-155.
- Távora, F. (1957). Casa em Ofir. *Revista Arquitectura*, 59, 10-13.
- Távora, F. (1960a). *Diário de "Bordo"*. Porto: Casa da Arquitectura, 2012.

Távora, F. (1960b). *Memória descritiva e justificativa. Restaurante e posto de abastecimento Sacor em Seia*. Typewritten document; in Archives of the Marques da Silva Foundation (FIMS\_FT\_0101).

Távora, F. (1963). O Encontro de Royaumont. *Revista Arquitectura*, 79, 1.

**Eduardo Fernandes.** ([eduardo@arquitectura.uminho.pt](mailto:eduardo@arquitectura.uminho.pt)) Born in 1966, Porto, Portugal. Assistant Professor, School of Architecture, University of Minho, Guimarães, Portugal. Researcher in the Landscape, Heritage and Territory Laboratory (LAB2PT), University of Minho. Architect since 1992 (Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto). Master in Planning of the Urban Environment since 1998 (Faculties of Architecture and Engineering, University of Porto). PhD in Architectural Culture (School of Architecture, University of Minho, 2011) with the thesis 'The Choice of Oporto: contributions to update the idea of a School.' Author of several architectural projects and published texts.