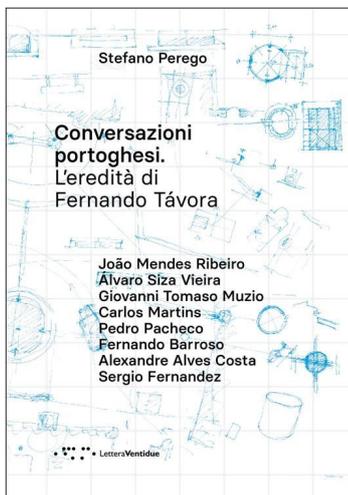


Valerio Tolve
**Learning from the Masters.
 Notes on Stefano Perego's 'Portuguese Conversations'**

Author: *Stefano Perego*
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The book *Conversazioni portoghesi. L'eredità di Fernando Távora* by Stefano Perego, part of the 'Alleli/Research' series by LetteraVentidue, stems initially from the author's elective (and personal, as it could not be otherwise) affinity towards the thought and work of the Porto-based master, and more generally towards Portuguese architectural culture. It therefore represents the will of a militant architect and teacher to seek elsewhere the root of his education, contributing to feeding the millenary chain of *correspondences*¹ between experiences distant only in time and space, as they share the same intention. For Stefano, this affinity has over the years become almost an obstinacy² that has remained unaltered in all his work, without yielding to other temptations: each time his mind and hand instinctively returned to the same point, following an almost cyclical, or circular trajectory, as always happens for the best traditions. And it is for this reason that Stefano, in a period of profound critical, intimate and personal reflection, rather naturally returned in his thoughts to the first moment of his architectural education, to that 'original', pure and uncorrupted instant, free from excesses and conditioning, in which problems and solutions are expressed with the greatest possible clarity, with the utmost rationality. Equally natural was the place of arrival of this long mental journey that led him back to Portugal, to Porto and to Távora: places that became mythical on the benches of the Politecnico di Milano, or rather the School of Civil Architecture in Bovisa. Only later did the decision mature to translate this research into a publication, generously offering it both to the Master – as a tribute on the occasion of the long celebrations for the centenary of his birth – and to the public, both the loyal and expert, but above all to those who are taking their first steps towards architecture, thus approaching the knowledge of one of the most decisive figures for the history of 20th-century architecture.

Travel is one of the fundamental themes of Távora's work and was also adopted by Stefano to guide his research program, conceived from the beginning as a long itinerary carried out between Porto, Coimbra and Lisbon from the summer of 2020 to the summer of 2022, collecting «testimonies from the direct voice of those who shared moments of life with Távora in the professional and teaching fields».

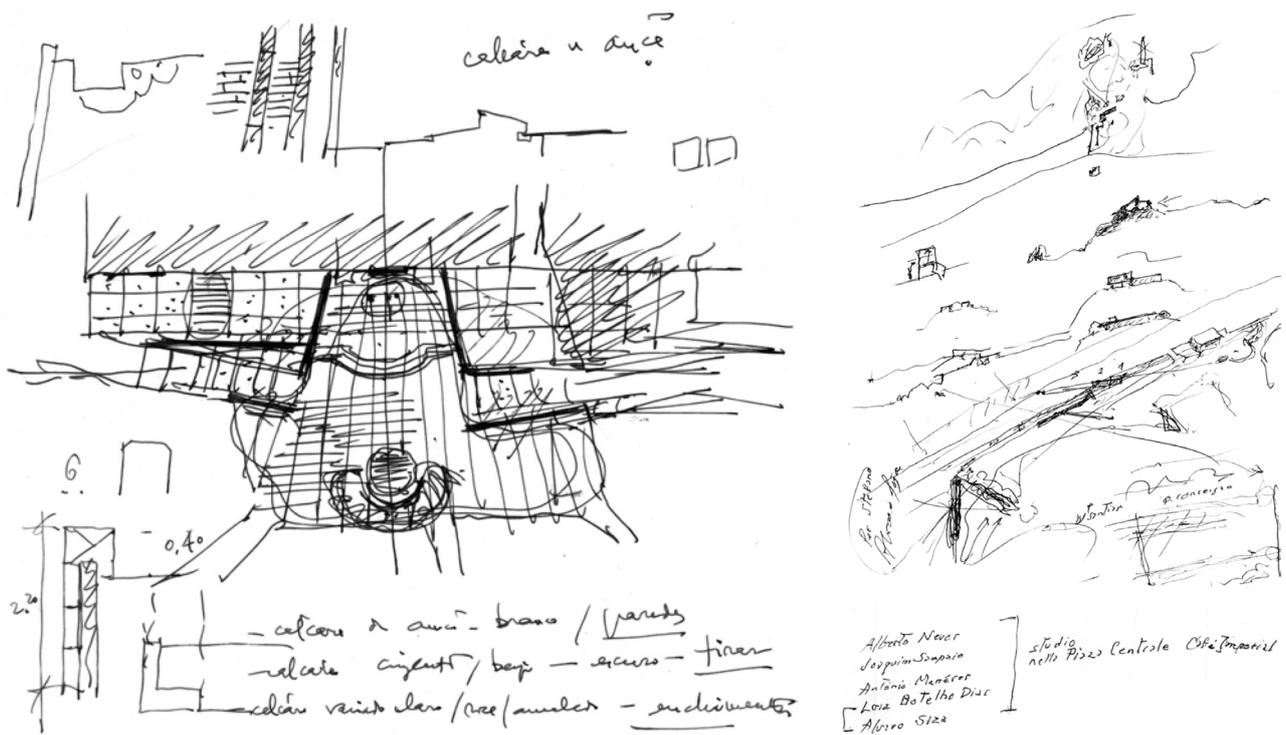


Fig 1
Praça 8 de Maio (1992-1997), Sketch by Fernando Tavora donated to João Mendes Ribeiro (João Mendes Ribeiro private collection).

Fig 2
Description of the design process of the Casa do Chà in Boa Nova and the project for the Piscinas das Marés. Sketch by Álvaro Siza, 2020.

Eight testimonies were collected, allowing «the actors of this journey as much freedom as possible, giving them the liberty to follow the flow of memories through a freehand path, without a predefined route, starting from a project, a reflection, or a consideration». Practically ‘a stick book’, and it could not be otherwise when dealing with Távora, his figure and his work in which the *arquitetura de bengala*³ is a consolidated and recurring practice, borrowed from the ancient tradition of transmitting the project to the construction workers by tracing it with a stick on the bare and living ground, a true initiatory moment of construction. Once again, a testament to the role of tradition and memory that resurface strongly in contemporary times, affirming their precise identity but above all offering their contribution to guide the debate of our discipline, even in moments when this appears increasingly heated and less inclined to refer to experience but, on the contrary, more and more accustomed to the consumerism of forms and thought, to the immediacy of response. This book by Stefano, the latest – but only in chronological order – of a long series of studies on Távora’s work, and the work itself of the Porto master, in this sense, seem to offer a possible support – a *bengala* or a stick, *ça va sans dire* – to try to get out of the quagmire of a debate that too often trespasses into other themes that do not strictly pertain to our disciplinary field and instead denying the role of the architecture project as a critical process of questioning and interpreting reality.

In defining the structure of his book, Stefano intended to exactly confirm the chronology of the meetings, as well as the colloquial structure of the texts, to the point of consciously choosing the term ‘conversations’ even in its final title. The result is a collection of memories that attempt to reconstruct the trajectories of Távora’s thought and reread in strongly operational terms – therefore aimed at discovery, learning and transmission, in one word at teaching – some of the most significant works of the Porto master, with the support of archive drawings and photographs, to shore up the memory of those same relived moments, as well as sketches, some of which were made by the same witnesses during conversations with Stefano.

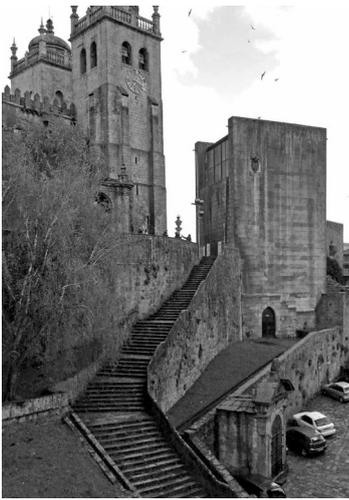


Fig 3
House of the Twenty-Four, Porto.
Photography by Stefano Perego.

The journey begins with João Mendes Ribeiro – *Coimbra rises, Coimbra falls* – primarily discussing the urban reform project of *Praça 8 de Maio* in Coimbra and bringing out precisely the nature of the ontological interpretation of the project that rediscovers the value of the ancient orography of a large part of the historical fabric of the centre, in addition to the role of drawing within the project process – absolutely decisive even in the Coimbra project, at various scales – and the value of didactics and teaching.

With Álvaro Siza Viera Stefano «begins a long chat about Távora, about friendship, about the profession, a story made of anecdotes and advice, lasting eight cigarettes of Siza, the equivalent of an hour and forty-five minutes». Many projects are discussed, but above all many possible references emerge from the ‘smoky’ (only for Siza’s immoderate consumption of tobacco, certainly not for the themes and contents) conversation that ends with Stefano’s departure from the mythical studio on Rua do Aleixo: «I leave the studio and inevitably imagine all three together, Távora, Siza and Souto de Moura, leaving that building which is not just the place of their respective studios but a place that guards the Porto architectural culture of more than half a century».

The conversation with Giovanni Tomaso Muzio – *May, 1991* – is the only one that does not take place in Portugal but in the Milanese studio on via Barbavara where Muzio’s grandson works and keeps his grandfather’s archive. Here Stefano has the opportunity to discuss with Giovanni his arrival in Porto and his work in Távora’s studio, which lasted about two years, until May 1993. A long and articulate dialogue, on many themes and projects, which also addresses the story of his arrival in Portugal and the meeting with Távora revealing a fortuitous coincidence that greatly amused Távora himself: Giovanni Tomaso’s arrival in May 1991 followed that of his grandfather who, exactly fifty years earlier, was called by the Porto Technical Office (in which Távora worked, ed.) to replace Marcello Piacentini in the assignment for the Regulatory Plan project.

The *Casa sobre o Mar* and the *Casa di Ofir* are recurring works in the various conversations, including that with Carlos Martins – *Facing the Atlantic Ocean, looking towards Boa Nova* – particularly focused on the residential theme and for this reason with some references also to the *inquérito*⁴. Some methodological themes also emerge that characterize Távora’s work transversely, such as the role and value of topography, certainly matured following the investigations on the traditional house and developed in progressive sublimations in future projects: the same *Casa sobre o Mar*, perhaps still too modernist in forms, represents a first attempt at openness in this sense, seeking a primordial relationship with the ground by wanting to elevate above it to protect the remains of an ancient granite wall.

In the conversation with Pedro Pacheco in his small *Porta 14* atelier, the discussion returns to the house but especially to the school, the teaching of architecture and the value of history beyond chronology – in a fundamentally more chronological and transversal atemporal dimension compared to the sequential ordering of events along a linear axis –, the studio work – without a clear separation from the teaching activity – and the long lunches during which discussions, confrontations and drawings never ceased.

Again, houses are at the centre of the conversation with Fernando Barroso – *Every house is a case* – a historical collaborator of Távora’s office, for this reason also necessarily very focused on the master’s workspace itself in the *Rua do Duque de Loulé* studio right in the centre of Porto, before moving to the new studio in *Rua do Aleixo*: «around Fernando’s (Barroso,

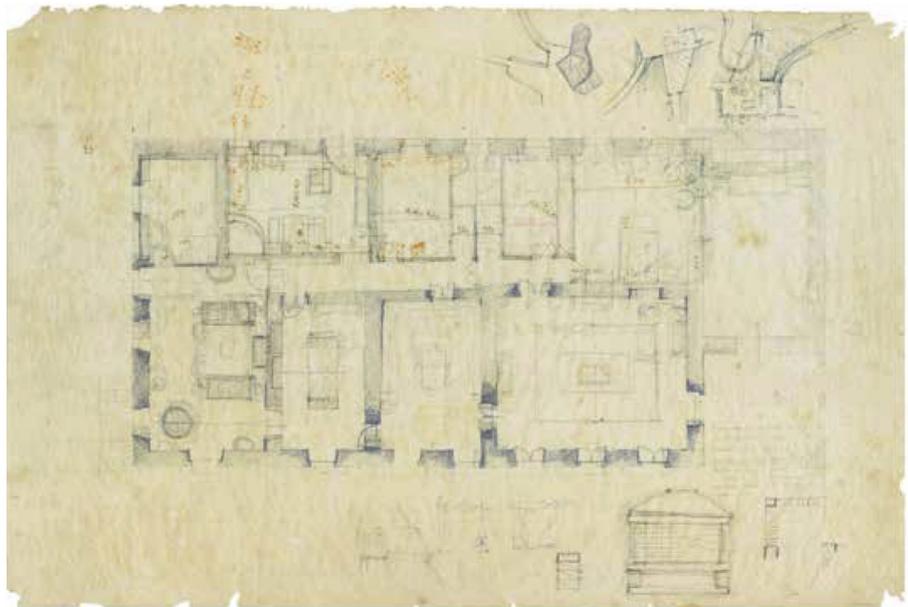


Fig 4
Covilha House, 1973-1988. Fundação Marques da Silva, Arquivo Fernando Távora (PT/FIMS/FT/0191-pd0042).

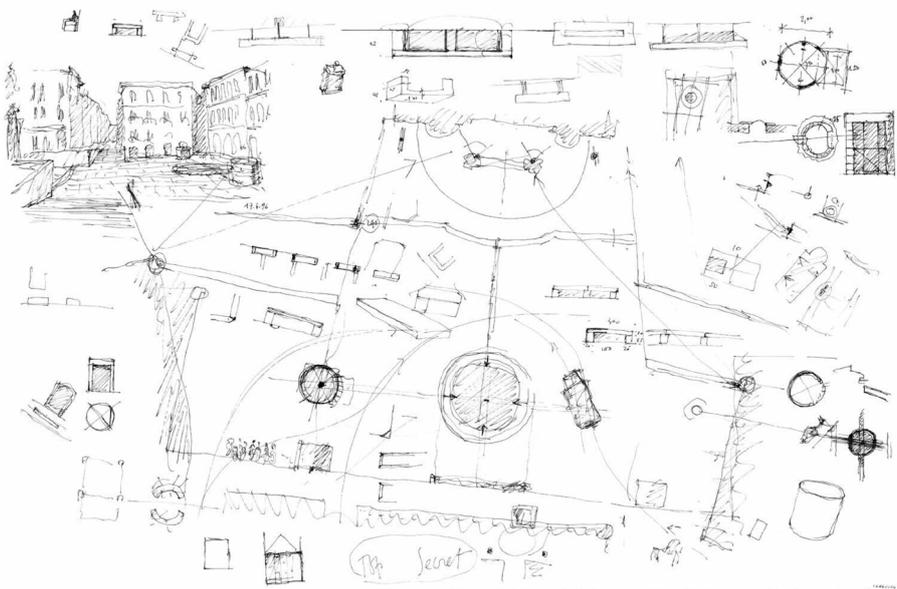


Fig 5
Praça 8 de Maio, 1992-1997. Fundação Marques da Silva, Arquivo Fernando Távora (PT/FIMS/FT/0266-pd0026).

ed.) workstation, many objects tell of his passion for the past. Tools, photographs, a milestone in granite. A passion, I think, passed down by Távora as he himself confirms to me shortly after». In the *estirador* of Alexandre Alves Costa's studio, «a pleasant chat takes place about the role of history in Fernando Távora's thought» – *Architecture is like papas de Sarrabulho* – and it could not be otherwise given the context – «a studio that is a step back in time. Two drawing tables, paintings and large drawings hanging on the walls» – and the interlocutor, with Alves Costa having held the chair of History of Portuguese Architecture at FAUP.

The conversation with Sergio Fernandez closes the picture of the eight testimonies collected by Stefano during his two years in Portugal: *In the presence of the masters. A young student at CIAM in Otterlo*, because Fernandez – at the time a student of the *Escola das Belas Artes* and an apprentice in the studio of Viana da Lima – had the opportunity to participate as a listener at the final act of CIAM. In Otterlo, Távora presented two works, the Vila da Feira Market – much appreciated, and the Casa di Ofir which, on the other hand, didn't receive great favour, certainly misunderstood for a supposed historicist regression: moreover, one must also frame the deli-

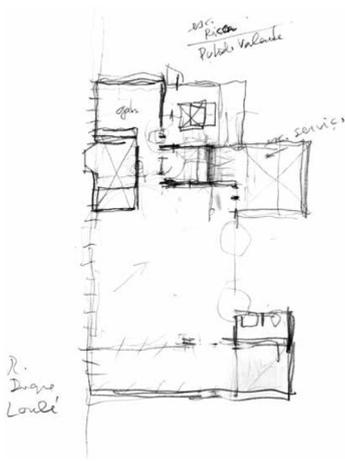


Fig 6
Plan of Fernando Távora's studio drawn by Fernando Barroso during the conversation in December 2021.

cate historical and cultural context of the 1959 Congress which definitively marked the end of CIAM and opened to the radical revision of the Modern Movement. For this reason, a large part of the conversation with Sergio Fernandez focused on the role of history in Távora's work and the relationship with Italian architectural culture.

The conversation with Fernandez ends with a pivotal question, which certainly represents a warning to readers and those who intend to make use of the master's remote teaching: «what teaching do you take from Távora?» Sergio's answer is frank and concise:

The teaching of modesty. He taught me to be simple and at the same time as profound as possible, and this depth refers to history, to the life of people. [...] And it is precisely this that Sergio learned from Távora: humility. His accounts of the CIAM experience in Otterlo as a listener – an aspect he emphasized several times – make him a witness of the time, of that time so dense and foundational for Portuguese architecture and for Fernando Távora's architecture. His story is devoid of emphasis, of protagonism, but instead filled with the desire to pass on the memory by clearly recognizing the roles of history.

The same qualities that much of contemporary Portuguese architecture still knows how to express, and that we can continuously renew by referring to those who still practice it, drawing inspiration precisely from Távora because, as these Conversations have shown us, Távora was the Master of Masters.

Notes

¹ «I was struck by the phrase in which Baudelaire states that there are correspondences». See Aldo Rossi, *Autobiografia scientifica*, Pratiche Editore, Parma 1990.

² «The first principle of a theory, I believe, is the persistence in certain themes, and it is precisely the artists and architects in particular who focus on a theme to develop, to make a choice within architecture, and to always try to solve that problem. This persistence is also the most evident sign of an artist's validity and autobiographical coherence; just as Seneca stated that the fool is the one who always starts over and refuses to continuously follow the thread of their own experience». See Aldo Rossi, *Architettura per i Musei*, in Aa.Vv., *Teoria della progettazione architettonica*, introduction by Giuseppe Samonà, Edizioni Dedalo, Bari 1968.

³ Literally 'stick architecture'.

⁴ The *Inquérito à Arquitectura Popular em Portugal* is an inquiry into Portuguese popular housing promoted by the National Union of Architects starting in 1955 and published in two volumes in 1961. The research is organized by geographical zones, with Távora being assigned zone 1 of Minho ('a region made of granite'), which he developed together with Rui Pimental and Antonio Menéres. Fernando Távora, born in 1923, was just over thirty years old at the time of the *Inquérito*. Already in 1947, Távora had published *O problema da casa Portuguesa*, an essay that concludes the anguished season of the forties, seeking to find concrete answers to the many uncertainties he saw in the profession of the architect and in his own approach to the project, in comparison to the Masters.