

Giuseppe Di Benedetto
Space, shape, material, context
The perpetual lesson of Távora

Author: *Fernando Távora*
 Edited by: *Carlotta Torricelli*
 Title: *Dell'organizzazione dello spazio*
 Language: *italian*
 Publisher: *nottetempo srl, Milano*
 Characteristic: *24x14 cm, 192 pages, paperback, black and white*
 ISBN: *978-88-7452-915-5*
 Year: *2021*



Fernando Távora is certainly the initiator, the founder and the creator of what is recognized as the School of Architecture of Porto. A School that is the expression, today, of a palingenesis of contemporary Portuguese architecture and, perhaps without exaggeration, of a worldwide architectural neo-renaissance at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. The *magister* par excellence, the one who traces the first furrow of the road that will be, later on, travelled by the Descendants – the architects Alvaro Siza Vieira and Eduardo Souto de Moura - but with the dual and antithetical vision of one who knows that the goal is reached by constantly looking forward and, at the same time, backwards, to his own formative experience and to the legacy of the perpetual lesson of the Master.

All these topics makes Carlotta Torricelli's curatorship particularly interesting, allowing, for the first time in Italy, the translation (by Torricelli herself) and publication of Fernando Távora's 1962 essay *Dell'organizzazione dello spazio* (*Da Organização di Espaço*) in its first printed edition of 1982. And despite the warning expressed to the reader by Nuno Portas, in his preface to the 1982 edition itself, not to consider Távora's essay as the expression of the outcome of "a research work" or "the systematization of a didactic modality" or, even more so, "the moment of maturation of the theoretical and practical aspects of the profession", it certainly cannot be reduced to a text "of circumstance", linked to the mere contingency of an academic competition, or the «dissertation for the competition for associate professor in the Higher School of Fine Arts in Porto»¹.

It is not a coincidence that from the title chosen for her introduction to Távora's book, "The Encounter between Life and Form in Architecture. Actuality of Távora's thought", Carlotta Torricelli intuits the 'Maieutic' role of the Portuguese master's work. A maieutic, that of Távora, which, however, rather than Socratic and unidirectional appears marked by that reciprocity approach later defined by Danilo Dolci². A posing of questions generated by self-knowledge and the contextual reality that surrounds and pervades the individual. The pedagogical value of Távora's writing, appears, as repeatedly emphasized by Carlotta Torricelli, evident and aimed at the transmission of the logic of making architecture, according to a conception of architecture itself in its only possible dimension: that of a "humanistic" and "holistic" expression, in the broadest sense. In this meaning,

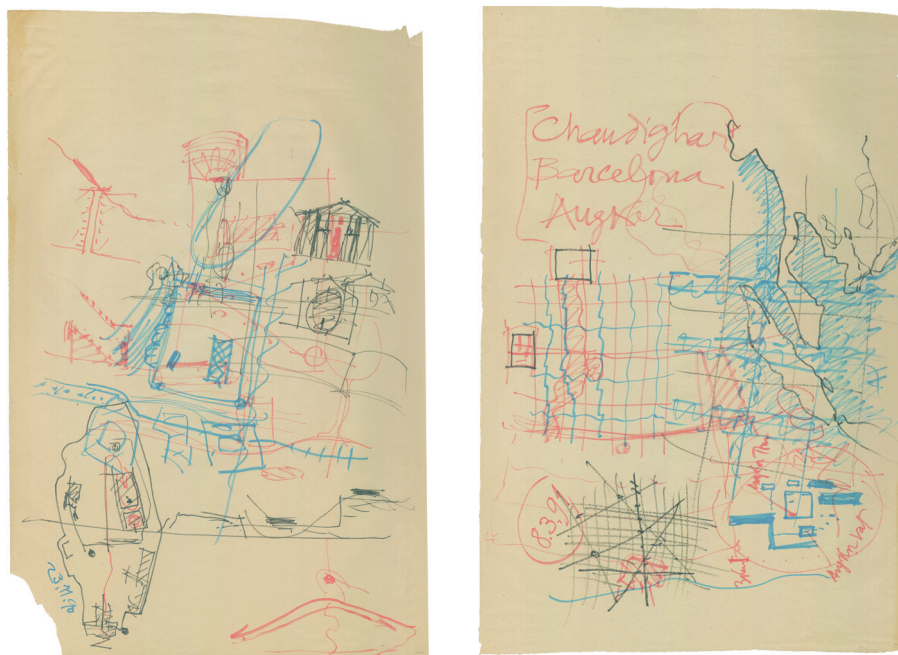


Fig. 1

Fernando Távora, Three sacred places: Delphi, Acropolis of Athens, Olympia. Sketch elaborated during the *Teoria Geral da Organização do Espaço* course, FAUP, 23/11/1990. [FIMS/FT/A 00026] ©Fundação Marques da Silva, Arquivo Fernando Távora

Fig. 2

Fernando Távora, The spontaneous city and the designed city; historical references. Chandigarh, Barcelona, Angkor Wat, Sketch elaborated during the *Teoria Geral da Organização do Espaço* course, FAUP, 08/03/1991, [FIMS/FT/A 00035] ©Fundação Marques da Silva, Arquivo Fernando Távora.

Távora's educational action seems to be aimed at encouraging an active attitude towards knowledge, according to a method that does not impose its thinking, but predisposes others to think autonomously and, above all, to search for answers in themselves.

As Carlotta Torricelli points out in her introductory essay, Távora's work, from its structuring in four parts - 1. *Dimensions, relations and characteristics of organized space*; 2. *Contemporary man and the organization of his space*; 3. *The organization of contemporary Portuguese space*; 4. *Around the role of the architect* - is profoundly marked by the idea of a theoretical reflection that, starting from an overall vision, ends up entering the merits of the architectural culture that that reflection, in inductive terms, generates. And this also with the intention of unhinging the isolation, with respect to the international scenario, that the condition of the dictatorial regime in Portugal in those years imposed. Távora highlights, through the assumption of an evaluative, propositional and connective role, his ability to critically, analytically and operationally penetrate the relations between the different aspects of theoretical reflection and the action of building through the "organization of space". And, in this, never neglecting the role of influence exerted on the present by history and the physical, cultural and social contexts of intervention. It is no coincidence that Souto de Moura has stated how Távora, a forerunner, in his own way, of the "critical regionalism" of Framptonian memory, succeeded in founding «a Portuguese school based on the foundations of modern architecture, but using elements from the past»³.

There are then two other central aspects dealt with by Távora in his writing - almost in terms of 'oracular' prescience - in relation to the organization of space: the dimension of time and the emergence, as early as the 1960s, of the "barbarism of specialism", as Távora himself defines, borrowing the words of Ortega y Gasset⁴, the emergence, in architectural design, of a tendency towards sectorialisms and disciplinary specialisms that in fact prevent «the organization of space from taking place, but rather its pure and simple occupation»⁵.

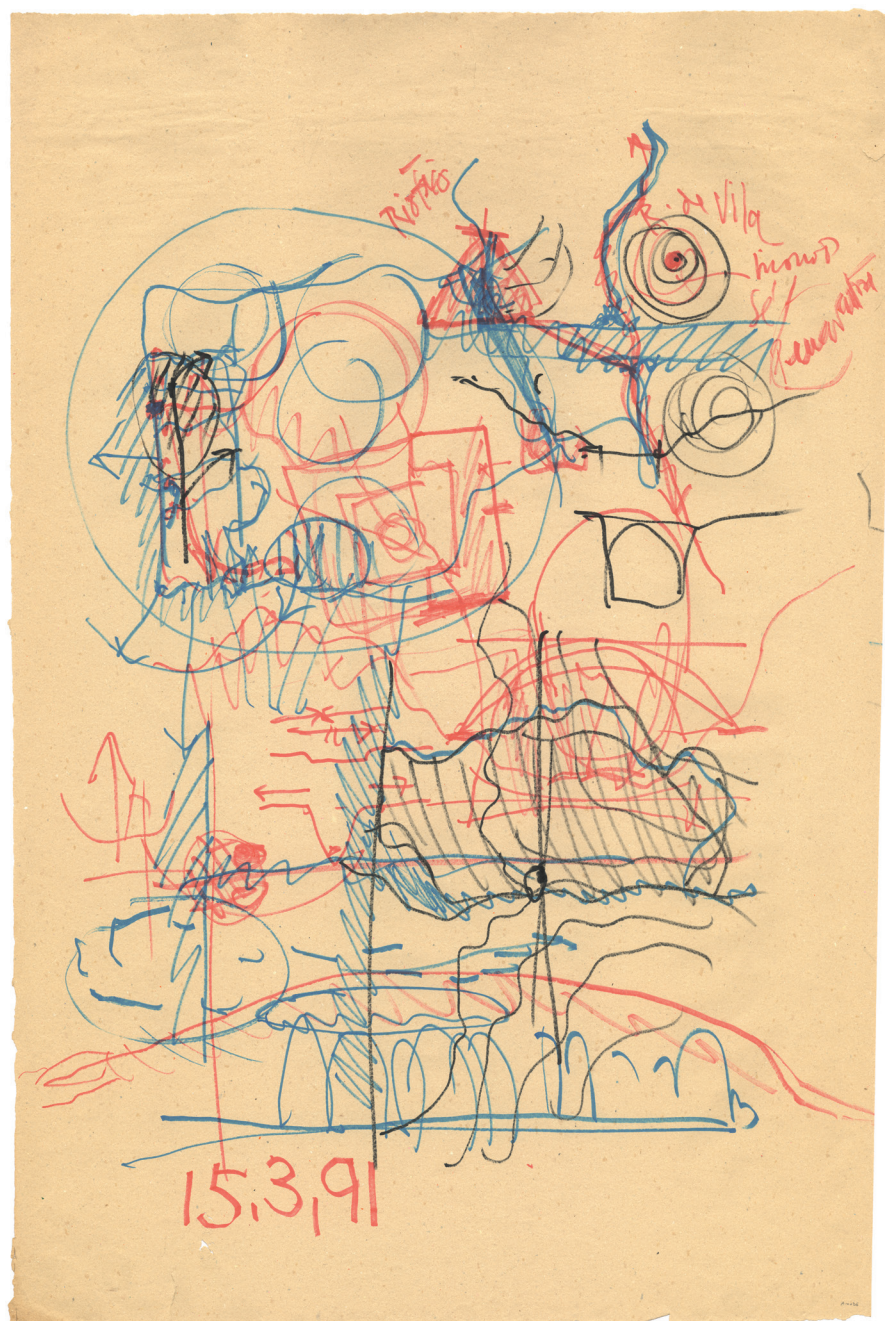


Fig. 3

Fernando Távora, Plan and schematic section of the city of Porto. Sketch elaborated during the *Teoria Geral da Organização do Espaço* course, FAUP, 15/03/1991, [FIMS/FT/A 00036] ©Fundação Marques da Silva, Arquivo Fernando Távora.

And “since space is continuous and time is one of its dimensions, space is also irreversible. Reason being [...], an organized space can never go back to being what it has already been and therefore we can say that space is in constant becoming»⁶.

The “time” to which Távora refers is the “time” that in architecture is by not means innate, but the object of learning and elaboration processes that occur in parallel with those of space. And by analogy - albeit with all the caution that analogy requires - it can be said that the temporality of architecture, does not coincide with the condition of the work itself, but springs from it, from its form, of which temporality is an integral part and helps to define it.

Távora even writes: «space itself is form, because what we call space is also made up of matter [...]. This often forgotten notion [...] is a fundamental notion, since it allows us to become fully aware of how we do not give isolated forms and how there is a relationship, either between the forms we see occupying space or between them and space itself»⁷.



Fig. 4

Fernando Távora, Barcelona, 1998, [FIMS/FT/Foto0029].
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This reflection on the ‘genesis’ of form and its organization described by Távora is what traces, as Vittorio Ugo would say, the «relationship between history and *bioσ* constituting a *principium individuationis*»⁸.

But to fully understand the fundamental importance of this inescapable relationship, Távora reminds us how, the term ‘shape’ designates the fundamental element that, united with material, determines the organizational existence of space. But “shape” is also the “figure” or “exterior appearance” of something, it is a particular way of expressing oneself in an artistic activity such as architecture, it is architecture’s own exterior way of being and appearing “in relation to human existence” that constitutes its main purpose. In any case, it denotes a tangible mode of existence, that is, it expresses a “property” in the sense of what is proper, specific, appropriate. In even deeper terms, ‘shape’ may not even refer to the image of a thing, but may be ‘idea’ (*eidos*), structure, mode. Architecture itself, as Távora states, will consist, then, in being ‘shape’ and the architect’s task will have to be the ability to give ‘shape’ to material in relation to the complexity of the ontological processes of relationships established between physical, historical and social events.

Is it perhaps this often current inability to “be shape” of space and to “give a shape” to space that connotes the cultural *impasse* of our times? The answer to this question - of existential value for contemporary architecture - is provided, indirectly, by Carlotta Torricelli at the conclusion of her introduction to Távora’s book when she states how reading the Porto architect’s essay «exhorts us to the ethics of taking a position, to recognize the values that characterize the organization of space and to commit ourselves collectively - as men, and not only as architects - to their survival and full affirmation»⁹.

Notes

¹ Távora F. (2021) – *Dell’Organizzazione dello spazio* (tit. orig. *Da Organização di Espaço*, 1962) edited by Torricelli C., notttempo, Milan, p. 47.

² Danilo D. (1996) – *La struttura maieutica e l’evolverci*. La Nuova Italia, Scandicci.

³ Esposito A., Leoni G. (2005) – *Fernando Távora. Opera completa*, Mondadori Electa, Milan.

⁴ Távora F. (2021) – *Op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

⁸ Ugo V. (1991), *I luoghi di Dedalo. Elementi Teorici dell’architettura*, Dedalo, Bari, p. 37.

⁹ Torricelli C. (2021) – “L’incontro tra la vita e le forme in architettura. Attualità del pensiero di Távora”. In Távora F. (2021) – *Op. cit.*, p. 37.