

THREE BUTTONS ON THE SLEEVES

United States 1960 and Távora's strangeness

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Abstract

Fernando Távora, an architect and a teacher from northern Portugal, won a scholarship to visit a set of architectural education institutions. He left on the 13 of February of 1960, America was dealing with the crude consequences of post-war territorial strategies.

The set of drawings, texts and other chartaceous resources that form the diary of Távora's journey constitute a composite work of essential value to a greater understanding, not only of his career as an architect, professor and thinker, but also to a reframing of the paths threshed by architecture in the modern turn.

From this document, I propose to reflect on some of Fernando Távora's considerations regarding what he will demarcate as a cultural difference between his European/Portuguese context and the condition of North-American life at the time, particularly in what concerns the city and urban culture.

The pertinence of this study will be centred on how the object of analysis permits the recognition of a contemporary urban phenomenon in Europe – the hegemony of North-American cultural models of suburbanization – spectacularly reproduced from the colonial city that the Europeans themselves emitted as a model from the XVI century onwards.

Keywords: cultural models, urban processes, hegemonies, suburbanization, post CIAM generation.

In 1951, Carlos Ramos (1897-1969), professor of the chair Architecture at the School of Fine Arts of Porto and a prominent enthusiast of the pedagogy of the Modern (Moniz, 2011), invited Fernando Távora to be his assistant. Fernando Távora, who was 28 years old at the time, thus began to teach architecture, and his pedagogical activity would from then on permanently and uninterruptedly articulate the exercise of project.

During this period he also developed some contacts that allowed him to keep abreast of the intense international debate around modern architecture. He actively participated in several CIAM: Hoddesdon in 1951, Aix-en-Provence in 1953, Dubrovnik in 1956, and Otterlo in 1959. In the last two, he had the chance to present some of his works. In Dubrovnik Távora presented a collective project along with CIAM-Porto, Viana de Lima (1913-1991), João Andresen (1920-1967), Arnaldo Araújo (1925-1982) and Octavio Lixa Filgueiras (1922-1996). In Otterlo he presented his most recent individual projects, Vila da Feira Market and Ofir House.

However, Távora has always challenged that external, internationalist vision, with the deepening of his self-knowledge about his own identity matrices, rooted on an interior, northern Portuguese experience. The *Inquérito à Arquitectura Popular Portuguesa* had a great significance for the architectural culture Távora had already anticipated about ten years before. Francisco Keil do Amaral (1910-1975) had published this idea in 1947, and in 1955 the Government finally gave them green light to advance. In the mid nineteen fifties, Távora was thus totally devoted to studying different ways of spatial occupation in Northwest Portugal. His deep knowledge of our material culture would continuously allow him to deduce the most alluring connections between those spatial settings and the rationalist élan, as well as between those spatial settings and the Portuguese way of being.

Távora recognized that the dialectic confrontation with the generic circumstance of a chaotic world strengthens and deepens our knowledge of our own specific circumstances. And he knew that we do not need to fear this confrontation. Furthermore, he argued that the generic internationalised scientific culture could only thrive when contaminated with the local specificities. That was, indeed, an essential contribution to the regeneration of the Modern Movement and to the international architectural culture.

In 1959, Fernando Távora applied for a Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Scholarship for a study trip to be held in the following year, to some US universities, which were particularly notorious for their Architecture programs. With the auspicious good word of his master, Carlos Ramos, Távora was

granted the scholarship not only to go to the US, but also to participate in the World Design Conference, WODECO, in Tokyo, on May 1960 (Mesquita, 2007).

Távora departed to the United States on February 13, 1960. He also visited Mexico and crossed the Pacific Ocean with a stopover in Honolulu. After visiting Japan, he departed to Karachi, Pakistan, stopping in Bangkok on his way. He then went to Lebanon, where he visited Beirut and Balbek, and left from there to Cairo. From Egypt he went to Athens and then he finally returned to Portugal, on June 12.

But he went above and beyond the obvious reasons to travel. Távora transformed this personal journey around the world – literally - in a true expedition of cultural encounters and inverted reunions with his own matrix identity. Távora was doubtlessly fascinated by the diversity of relationships between built space and humanity. However, he was mainly captivated by each community's human and cultural specificities, always absorbing them from his own cultural perspective, the Portuguese perspective.

Távora eventually contacted some universities, analysed their methods, learned about their programs; he was especially interested in urbanism and planning issues. He used the same lenses to carefully observe ancestral and contemporary architecture. He used the same critical acuity, approving and reproving with the same constant ethical and cultural criteria, slaked by the same intense emotional excitement he often used to express his ideas. But he also did a thorough self-examination in the cultural confrontation with human habits, with each person's way of being. Távora's own perspective was sovereign, in a conscious and straightforward way, but it also revealed an extreme empathy, a deep desire to learn more and more about the contingent reasons for different behaviours. Lifestyles, conventions, and architecture were one and the same thing. For him, to know about one of them was to learn more about the other. The interconnections were natural and simultaneous. There was not a time for one and a time for the other.

Upon his return to Portugal, Távora started some of his most striking works, where his cultural openness is present and can be deduced step by step, but without any concession to direct literal references.

Surprisingly naturally, Távora rediscovered architecture, the space as the raw material of an activity whose nobility he found in the constancy of everyday life, and not so much in the exceptionality of the gala: *'I believed then that Architecture was primarily an event like so many others that fulfilled the life of men and, as all of them, was subject to the contingencies that same life entails.'* (Távora, 1961)

When Távora returned, he found a school in permanent unrest, struggling for a more integrated and discipline-dedicated teaching (Fernandes, 2010). He always took the side of the students.

He succeeded in his initial purpose to visit a number of architecture schools in the United States. He systematically visited the universities of Washington, Pennsylvania, Columbia, Yale, Harvard, Illinois, Chicago, and Berkeley, as well as the Institutes of Technology of Massachusetts and Illinois. He talked to the most famous professors, Louis Kahn, Eduard F. Sekler, Robert Le Ricolais, Paul Rudolph; he visited those schools' most important buildings, and he commented in his *On "Board" Diary* written along the journey, on his impressions about the organization of curricula and subjects addressed.

Nevertheless, Távora was mostly intrigued not by schools, curricula, or teaching methods, but by the North American society itself, and most of all, by the spatialization of its *modus vivendi*. Távora was intrigued by the silent dialectic between rationality and mimesis, so perfectly described by Theodor W. Adorno (Adorno, 2013: 88-93). The rationality of the American production systems of the time led to a compartmentalization of human activity that isolated moments of that same activity:

On the one hand there's life — grimy, dirty, ugly, practical — on the other hand, the museum to be visited on Sundays "to raise the spirit" and increase our general culture. Well here the frenzy for museums is extraordinary. Too much money, the need to show off knowledge, life

compartmentalised | in sealed sectors — and here we are ↑ sunk ↑ in this story of the museums. The good Painters and sculptors making money like nabobs, as if they were gods, the museums fuller and fuller, more and more books, more conferences, more articles, more analysis, and life more and more stupid and ugly! (Távora, 2012: 226-227).

Távora was also intrigued by the extensive production of suburban space that the post-war period imposed as an exclusive model of land occupancy.

Right at the beginning of his trip, while traveling by Greyhound from Washinton to Philadelphia, after stating that the '*highway perfectly suits the landscapes and artworks are not out of place*', Távora wrote the following eminently pre-Venturian comment:

In general these buildings along the edge of the roads are chaotic, both in their layout and in the "taste" they express, aiming for a certain commercial sensationalism to attract clients to the cars, petrol, food or accommodation. A curious point: over the whole journey I didn't see one single piece of architecture despite having seen thousands of buildings. There is a certain "camping feeling" to a lot of these American things. (Távora, 2012: 59)

But Fernando Távora also visits the most renowned urban planning agencies and, just like with any other visit, he comments on his perceptions, which were always informed by his own circumstance, the Portuguese culture.

After visiting the City Planning Board in Boston, Távora met Professor John T. Howard, who was the head of MIT's City Planning Department. They talked about planning in a democratic context, about the evolution of concepts since the pre-war *laissez faire* period, about the preponderance of real estate men and, finally, about the suburb. Távora asked:

— Do you not believe that in the underlying principle of the suburb there is extraordinary waste? He looked at me, lowered his head, looked at one of the sleeves in my jacket and said: "[*cancelled word*] ↑ I ↑ have [*cancelled word*] ↑ three buttons ↑ on the sleeve of my jacket,

you have four, is that a waste? It is a very relative notion and depends primarily on the possibilities.” (Távora, 2012: 193)

So apparently it is a minor matter, one more or one less button on the sleeve of a jacket.

In 1960 in Portugal, the suburb was still a very strange entity. On the one hand, the so-called first industrialization was known to be very tenuous. On the other hand, despite all the efforts of the industrialist lobby and its political leader, Minister Ferreira Dias, in that post-war Portugal, ruralism was still the ideological matrix of an economy that insisted on the agricultural prices' inhibition. The delineation of energy policies for industrialization, the so-called Ferreira Dias Era, was still on its early stages. The production of suburbs was still reticent, unplanned and almost exclusively circumscribed to the capital, Lisbon.

This circumstance originated a very strong and highly discriminatory social dichotomy between the inhabitants of the cities and the inhabitants of rural areas. As clear as it is brutal, that social dichotomy is in everyway similar to today's situation in many of the global South's metropolises.

And that was one of the fundamental reasons for Távora's strangeness.

Over the course of a century, about 30 million Europeans have crossed the ocean to the United States, almost all of them through Ellis Island, almost all of them thirsty and anxious for space and prosperity, abandoning the possibility of parsimonious and balanced management of urban territory. They rejected their home cities. They looked at the New World's territories, particularly in the Midwest, and they strongly believed that space was infinite, that it was no longer necessary to share it with anyone else. They established the cultural myth, and then the land market, the real estate and the automobile systems did the rest.

But the intrinsic hegemonic territorialisation model the Europeans had from the begging of this epic journey, was not a confined space that could

accommodate all the humans without land, like Walter Benjamin's Paris in 1933, on his second visit. As Hannah Arendt described:

“(...) There was the *nation par excellence* whose culture had determined the Europe of the nineteenth century and for which Haussmann had rebuilt Paris(...). This Paris [in 1933] was not yet cosmopolitan, to be sure, but it was profoundly European, and thus it has, with unparalleled naturalness, offered itself to all homeless people as a second home ever since the middle of the last century” (Arendt, 1969: 19-20).

This was not the adopted model. The adopted model was based on landownership and real estate development of the para-aristocratic suburb for the Victorian industrial bourgeoisie, which is now called Anglo-American suburb.

Moreover, British metropolises, particularly overcrowded London, were some of the main exits from Europe to the New World. Between 1820 and 1930, about 4,300,000 British and 4,500,000 Irish nationals arrived through the East Coast of the United States¹.

A town, such as London, where a man may wander for hours together without reaching the beginning of the end, without meeting the slightest hint which could lead to the interference that there is open country within reach, is a strange thing (Engels, 2009: 36)

The occupation of the interior territories of the United States was a process of constant colonization throughout this period. The European emigrants arriving from overcrowded cities sought prosperity. The idea of a new world and a prosperous future rested in the possibility of becoming landowners.

The very founding political spirit of this new nation, independent since 1776, expressed this ambition as the most legitimate possibility for those who fearlessly advanced over the inhospitable territories of the West.

¹ <http://libertyellisfoundation.org/immigration-timeline>

Those secluded houses in fertile lands, especially in the vast prairies of the Midwest, became the new villæ of the liberal spreading *centuriation*. This possibility lay the foundations for an individualism, which is sublimely portrayed by Alexis de Tocqueville, the aristocrat, political thinker and French historian who in 1831 travelled to the United States to study the penal and penitentiary system, and ended up by writing one of the most complete reflections on the political ideology of the young American nation:

No power on earth can prevent the increasing equality of conditions from inclining the human mind to seek out what is useful or from leading every member of the community to be wrapped up in himself. It must therefore be expected that personal interest will become more than ever the principal if not the sole spring of men's actions; but it remains to be seen how each man will understand his personal interest (Tocqueville, 1940: 620).

The issue of individualism in the United States is seen as one of the most striking features of its population, and its impressiveness impacts Tocqueville's thought: '*An American attends to his private concerns as if he were alone in the world, and the next minute he gives himself up to the common welfare as if he had forgotten them*' (Tocqueville, 1940: 621).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the immense crowds moving from Europe to the New World were mainly fleeing misery. But they were also pursuing a dream, an ambition, of building property, acquiring their *villa*, and becoming part of a new emerging aristocracy. The new settlements, the new *centuria*, spread throughout the continent, and the aspiration to be the first to find the best territories led to isolation and individualism.

These are the most direct formulations of an anti-urban political ideology. Besides, this ideology is also the political genesis of the new nation. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, this new nation debated and regulated its models partially using as a reference the opposite examples, meaning British

industrial cities, overcrowded and in extreme misery, were considered negative models for the future ².

A country of lively industrial and tertiary metropolises arose powerful and prosperous, as well as an immense urban network, with thousands of cities punctuating the territory. However, the myth of the isolated *villa* in the middle of a vast property would forever be the mould of the social and political ideology of the common American, or at least of the common American with European origins. *A Little House on the Prairie* ³ is much more than a soap opera, it is much more than a successful television series, it is the historical model of the life of the American colonizer's mythological foundation and, more importantly, it is a global expanded model for the whole world.

Perhaps this is why we are often led to conceive the American suburban way of life as the result of a successful formula from the standpoint of the so-called *free market*, just as if there was some kind of intrinsic nature that leads people to aspire for a secluded house in the suburbs.

The period after World War II created the perfect breeding ground for this idea, even in Europe, even in the wise opinions of the most unsuspecting thinkers and sociologists. Martin Heidegger (Heidegger, 1958), Gaston Bachelard (Bachelard, 1957) and Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1992), among others, pondered this idea.

² Among other illustrative examples is the discussion of *foreign manufactures* in the early nineteenth century, which discusses interesting perspectives. One of those perspectives is the possibility of the keeping the factories in England, since they are the source of destabilization and depravity for those who work there, they are filthy displays of misery. This debate lies in the idea of an exclusively rural, Arcadian country, leaving all the misery and filth of industry and resources on the other side of the Atlantic. Within the documents that refer to this debate, interesting references to Coimbra and its region can be found: "Extracts from an Address of the American Society of New York for Promoting Domestic Manufactures, to the People of the United States", *Analectic Magazine* 9 (Jun.1817), 1, 3, apud Henry Petroski, *The Toothpick*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

³ Title of a set of novels written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, a Midwest writer, written throughout the 1880s and 1890s, compiled by her daughter Rose Wilder Lane and published between 1932 and 1943. This work inspired the script of a successful television series that, with the same title, debuted on NBC in 1974 and lasted for 8 years. A number of filmmakers were involved in the episodes over the years, but Michael Landon directed the majority of them. The cast included Landon himself, Melissa Gilbert, Lindsay Greenbush, Sidney Greenbush, Karen Grassle, and Melissa Sue Anderson, among others.

But did this sort of mystified desire for appropriation, this subliminal ambition of human nature, cause the immense suburban sprawl? A suburban sprawl that, throughout the entire twentieth century but most of all throughout its second half, dominated the territorial occupation in the United States and expanded as a model of global life.

Did it correspond to a historical accident? Was it an inevitability of developmental determinism?

It was not a coincidence that in the aftermath of World War II, during Fordism's fast euphoria, the federal government developed the essential programs for the promotion of isolated housing. All throughout the country, several strategies of suburban sprawl encouragement were put in place, providing mortgage plans for the construction of a total of 11,000,000 suburban single-family homes. The conditions included, on the one hand, lower amortizations than the values of the rental market and, on the other hand, discouragement of rehabilitation of existing residential buildings, and discouragement to the construction of townhouses or other typologically urban options. Among the most significant of these programs were the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration.

Simultaneously, an interstate program funded by federal and local funds, was set up to build 66,000 km of motorways - the Interstate Highway Act of 1956. These funds, which accounted for 90% of the total amount, corresponded to 26,000,000 dollars, and were complemented with local, state and federal subsidies for improvements in the existing road network. This program totally neglected public investment in collective transportation, which was only 1% of the total amount invested in this sector. It is very well known that the automobile market flourished over this same period of time, becoming accessible to most citizens (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, Speck, 2000: 7-10).

A few weeks ago, on March 31st, 50 to 100 thousand people protested in Madrid against what they called the exodus from rural areas ⁴. But, opposing

⁴ https://elpais.com/sociedad/2019/03/31/actualidad/1554022545_649884.html

to what one might think, this demonstration wasn't promoted by nostalgic ruralists, residents of small villages, or hippies with idyllic-pastoral views.

It was actually promoted mainly by two joint movements from two different cities - *Soria! Ya!* and *Teruel Existe*. Soria in Castilla y Leon, and Teruel in Aragon are two European cities, two regional capitals that suffer from metropolitan pressure and, as a consequence, are in a loss of population and in a noticeable loss of influence and political and administrative representation.

Supporters of these movements went to the centre of the metropolis to express their ideas and capture the global media's attention. And they got it.

This set of considerations, and they are nothing but considerations, undoubtedly requires a more refined and elaborate future reflection. We're faced with the possibility that contemporary Europe is gradually witnessing the return of the American myth. We're faced with the assumption that over the course of a century, about 30 million Europeans have crossed the ocean to the United States, almost all of them through Ellis Island, almost all of them thirsty and anxious for space and prosperity, abandoning the possibility of parsimonious and balanced management of urban territory. They rejected their home cities. They looked at the New World's territories, particularly in the Midwest, and they strongly believed that space was infinite, that it was no longer necessary to share it with anyone else. They established the cultural myth, and then the land market, the real estate and the automobile systems did the rest.

All throughout that same century Europe kept trying to preserve the possibility of a civilizational survival of cities, kept trying to reclaim the metropolises, kept trying to focus on the possibility of supporting each cities' own *ethos*, kept trying to believe in the political utopia of a continent with a network of diverse and complementary cities. That same Europe is currently abandoning these ideas in detriment of the model that is returning from the other side of the North Atlantic. Is this a complex question? Obviously. This matter should not be addressed only through the perspective of city issues, nor should it be

addressed by architects alone. It is undoubtedly an issue within the postcolonial field of studies. Nonetheless...

Nowadays, in Europe, the city as an entity is undergoing a confrontational moment with the hegemonic imposition of the metropolitan model. These moments can and should be understood through the *logics of production of non-existence*, described by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Santos, 2002: 237-280), in particular the *logics of productivist* and *dominant scale*, but also the *logics of social classification*. In order to face this situation and survive, the city must challenge the hegemonic metropolitan tendency with recovery and revitalization of its alternative characteristics. To overcome the *homogeneous and exclusive totalities* of metropolitan logics, the cities must permanently questioning it, using particularly an *ecology of productivity* and an *ecology of trans-scales*, but also an *ecology of recognition and knowledge*.

Most of all, the city's genetic code holds that distinct urge to aspiration, which indelibly links it to the project of becoming a better city. As such, the city can and should rely on all its past experience, identify alternatives, and recognise the immense expectations that its present situation entails. The city should also, in short, be studied from the perspective of a *sociology of emergencies*.

Acknowledgments

Translation by Rosa Bandeira

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