



## Documentation, Restoration and Reuse of Heritage

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## **Bridging tradition and modernism in the reuse of built heritage. Fernando Távora's design approach at the Porto University Club**

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the concepts, methods and design principles of the Portuguese architect and professor Fernando Távora (1923-2005) in the reuse of built heritage through an in-depth analysis of the renovation and conversion of the so-called *Primo Madeira House* into the *Porto University Club* (1986-1990). The architect's different performance on the two buildings of the pre-existing complex reflects his case-by-case approach. The intervention in the main house consisted in occasional and delicate repairs that demanded skilled labour in traditional techniques, aimed at restoring the original bourgeois character. By contrast, the annexes show a more affirmative contemporaneity in the introduction of a modern staircase and the renewal and update of the bedrooms. This representative case took place at a stage of full maturity in the architect's career, reflecting the main features of his personal *modus operandi*: careful prior analysis of the pre-existence, respect for the previous character of spaces, atmospheres and construction systems, as well as sensitive introduction of new elements with subtle modern expression in continuity with the architectural identity of the building.

**Keywords:** Adaptive reuse, conservation and repair, design principles and strategies, Fernando Távora, modern architecture

### **1. Introduction and methodology**

The professional career of the Portuguese architect and professor Fernando Távora (the mentor of Álvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto Moura, among other architects of the so-called School of Porto) has given consistent contributions in the field of restoration and conservation of built heritage. His renovation works show a sensible adaptation of heritage buildings to new requirements (functional, spatial, technological, comfort, accessibility, etc.) while preserving the memory of the pre-existence, its constructive systems and architectural character. One of his most valued works in this regard was the conservation of the *Primo Madeira House* and its conversion into the *Porto University Club* (1986-1990).

This work dates from his professional maturity, also coinciding with a series of other exemplary cases of reuse of built heritage. Thus, Távora put into practice a method that was fully consolidated after decades of experience. Furthermore, the different responses given to the two buildings that make up the *Porto University Club* complex illustrate different nuances in his approach to the renovation of heritage buildings. That being said, this project has been insufficiently studied and disseminated, so this paper aims to study the concepts, strategies and design principles underlying this specific case, which, nevertheless, allows to draw more general conclusions about the architect's *modus operandi*.

The research methodology is based on the cross-referenced analysis of different resources, combining literature review, archival research, semi-structured interviews, onsite observation and drawing analysis and interpretation. The study of archival documentation was further complemented by field research, involving direct observation of the building (systematic photographic survey, drawings and notes), as well as by interviews with Távora's collaborators who were directly involved in the intervention (those testimonies provide valuable unpublished and revealing information about the design and construction processes). Furthermore, drawing has been a fundamental tool for comprehending the transformations, including plans of the previous state, the final state and the alterations (using the graphic code of reds and yellows to better understand the extent of demolitions and additions). Thus, each stage of the entire intervention process has been analysed in depth, establishing a sequence that allows documenting both the state prior to the intervention, the design of the operation, the execution of the works as well as the impact of this project in the context of the School of Porto and in architectural criticism.

## 2. Results and conclusions

The project for the Porto University Club involved the recovery of the main house, the annex building and the surrounding garden. Regarding the main house, the architect succeeded in adapting the nineteenth-century mansion for different functions from the original ones (lounge areas, restaurant, meeting rooms, library...), while preserving its previous identity. No significant changes were made to the layout thanks to the amplitude and functional flexibility of the spaces. Also, because the building was in an acceptable state of repair despite having been abandoned. Thus, the purpose was to recover and perpetuate the original bourgeois atmospheres by means of delicate repairs that required skilled labour in almost forgotten traditional techniques. The effort to recover the splendour of the ornamental repertoire (based on stuccoes, gilding, marble, marquetry, woodwork, etc.), required slow and expensive work, carried out in an on-site workshop where reproductions of the irrecoverable pieces were produced. In addition, Távora recovered original furniture, while other pieces were bought from antique dealers. The architect also designed some pieces from scratch, following classic but updated models, perfectly integrated into the traditional space. The colour palette of the walls was also slightly revised, using neutral shades of grey, blue and cream. The project was thus conceived as a comprehensive work.

On the other hand, the lesser heritage value of the annexes and the need to mark another stage of the transformation process led to a more affirmatively contemporary intervention, although with maximum respect for the pre-existence. The most obvious gesture of innovation is the new metallic spiral staircase in the atrium, assuming a sculptural condition. Other characteristics such as transparency, luminosity, chromatic uniformity (white), the formal simplicity of the new elements (such as the metallic profiles of the parapets), or the greater feeling of lightness (the curtains) show a clear expression of modernism.

In a context of global vulnerability in which the conservation and reuse of buildings are fundamental issues of the work of architects, this paper presents the valuable contribution of Fernando Távora in the adaptive reuse of built heritage. Indeed, this particular case shows some of the main features of the architect's *modus operandi*, based on a careful analysis of the pre-existence, supporting sensitive introduction of new elements with subtle modern expression in continuity with the identity of the old building. Tradition and modernism are thus combined in a balanced, natural and coherent way, confirming Távora's conception of built heritage, not only as something received from our ancestors that must be embalmed, but as "a permanent and collective creation" to be transmitted to the future generations.