



LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS
MODOS DE HABITAR

ABADA EDITORES

LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD
GRANADA, 23-25 ENERO 2019



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La Casa. Espacios domésticos, modos de habitar
Granada 23-25 enero 2019

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La casa como experimento: Casa de Sesimbra (1960-64) de Portas y Teotónio Pereira

The House as Experiment: House in Sesimbra (1960-64) by Portas and Teotónio Pereira

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Resumen

Al largo del siglo XX, la casa asume un papel preponderante en la evolución de los valores expresivos, espaciales y constructivos de la arquitectura, asumiéndose como experimento. En Portugal, la transición de 1950 para 1960 constituye un periodo de profundas transformaciones en la arquitectura nacional, onde la Casa desempeña un papel importante como lugar privilegiado para la experimentación, para el planteamiento de nuevos principios metodológicos y de propuestas formales, espaciales, constructivas y materiales innovadoras. Proyectada por Portas y Teotónio Pereira, la Casa de Sesimbra (1960-64), constituye un una obra experimental que investiga sobre contextualización de la arquitectura, complejidad geométrica y espacial, forma, expresión y imagen, y la importancia del espacio interno, en la búsqueda de una arquitectura portuguesa realmente moderna. El artículo analiza la concepción y construcción de la casa, enfocando sus aspectos constructivos innovadores, que constituyeran un ensayo para obras posteriores de Portas y Teotónio Pereira.

Palabras clave: Casa de Sesimbra, Nuno Portas, Nuno Teotónio Pereira, casa experimental, arquitectura moderna portuguesa

Bloque temático: El proyecto doméstico como núcleo de la modernidad: casa singular y vivienda colectiva, del Movimiento Moderno al siglo XXI

Abstract

During the 20th Century, the House plays a lead role in the evolution of the expressive, spatial and constructive values of architecture, becoming a privileged object for experimentation. In Portugal, the transition between the 1950's and 1960's is a period of profound transformations in national architecture, where The House plays an important part, being used as a privileged place for experimentation, for the establishment of new methodological principles and innovative formal, spatial, constructive and material proposals. Designed by Portas and Teotónio Pereira, the House in Sesimbra (1960-64) is an experimental work, focused on the contextualizing of architecture, geometric and spatial complexity, the expression and image of architecture, and the importance of internal space, in the quest for a truly modern Portuguese architecture. The article examines the design and construction of the house, focusing on its innovative aspects that constituted a rehearsal for later works by Portas and Teotónio.

Keywords: House in Sesimbra, Nuno Portas, Nuno Teotónio Pereira, experimental house, portuguese modern architecture

Topic: The domestic project as the heart of modernity: the single, one-off house and collective housing, from the Modern Movement to the 21st century

Introduction

With the end of World War II and the collapse of European fascist regimes, Salazar's *Estado Novo* regime allowed for a period of less repression and greater openness to outside influence in Portugal.¹ In 1948, organized by the Union of Portuguese Architects² and sponsored by the Government, the First National Architecture Congress³ was held in Lisbon. The congress was seized as an opportunity for the affirmation of modern architecture and for public manifestation of the political and cultural beliefs of a new generation.

The beginning of a new phase of Portuguese architecture is thus established, that witnesses the closing stages of the dictatorship state-imposed models of regionalist and nationalist architecture, and also a period when architects seek to adopt the principles of modern architecture, with a deeper ethical, ideological and social sense.⁴

From the mid 1950s the need for a critical revision of the universal principles of modern architecture becomes central to Portuguese architects' concerns, leading to the beginning of a reflection focused on the possibilities of an architecture centred on man's cultural, social and psychological condition; an architecture adapted to its place, in geographical, constructive, social and cultural terms, and capable of integrating tradition and modernity.⁵

Between 1955 and 1960, the survey of Portuguese Regional Architecture⁶ was carried out. It was an accomplishment of disciplinary, cultural and political significance. A work of collection and systematization of information never before realized, it provided reliable sources for the study of popular Portuguese architecture. Also, it formed the basis for a sustained critical revision of the international style, proposing a reflection focused on context, history, and characterization of national reality. Finally, it affirmed the existence of a multiple and varied traditional architecture, contradicting the official position of a single national production.

Nuno Portas (1934) and Nuno Teotónio Pereira (1922-2016) are two Lisbon architects that stand out in this period, both as designers and through their writings, playing an important role in the search for a renewed Portuguese modern architecture. From their production of this particular period of critical revision of modern architecture, the design of three single-family houses, for different contexts, stand out in the way they are assumed as experimental objects.

While still a student in Lisbon's School of Architecture, Nuno Portas joins Teotónio Pereira's office in 1957. The choice of this office by the young Nuno Portas as a place to start his

¹ António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970) was a Portuguese statesman who served as Prime Minister of Portugal from 1932 to 1968. He was responsible for the *Estado Novo* (New State) Regime, the authoritarian government that ruled Portugal until 1974.

² Sindicato dos Arquitectos Portugueses.

³ The First National Architecture Congress - *1º Congresso Nacional de Arquitectura* – was held in Lisbon's *Sociedade Nacional de Belas Artes* between May and June of 1948.

⁴ Ana Tostões. "Arquitectura Moderna Portuguesa: os Três Modos", in *Arquitectura Moderna Portuguesa 1920-1970*, ed. by Ana Tostões (Lisboa: IPPAR, 2004), 125.

⁵ Hugo Farias. "La Casa: Experimento y Matriz. La Casa de Ofir (1958), de Fernando Távora, y la Casa de Vila Viçosa (1962), de Nuno Portas y Nuno Teotónio Pereira, en el proceso de revisión crítica de la arquitectura moderna en Portugal" (tesis doctoral. Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, 2011), 25.

⁶ Inquérito à Arquitectura Regional – the survey was carried out by teams of architects, under the supervision of the Union of Portuguese Architects - *Sindicato dos Arquitectos Portugueses*, and sponsored by the national government. It was published in 1961, with the title *Arquitectura Popular Portuguesa*, meaning Portuguese Popular Architecture.

professional activity can be understood, on the one hand, because he knew it was the right place to develop architectural research;⁷ on the other, because Teotónio Pereira's office was,

...from end of the 1950's [...] the most interesting space of debate and reflection of the architectural production in Lisbon, asserting itself as an alternative to the architecture school, in as much as there worked some of the most interesting authors of the next generations: Pedro Vieira de Almeida, Vítor Figueiredo, Braula Reis, Gonçalo Byrne, Pedro Botelho.⁸

In this initial period of Portas's presence in Teotónio's office, where the work was developed in teams, under the supervision of Teotónio Pereira, besides developing the design of four residential towers in Olivais Norte, in Lisbon, three single-family houses are designed, for three very different contexts: the House in Praia das Maçãs, Sintra;⁹ the House in Vila Viçosa, Alentejo;¹⁰ and the House in Sesimbra. Nuno Portas was the principal author of these three single-family houses, aiming deliberately at experimenting through their design process,¹¹ specifically focusing on three main concerns: the quest for a post-rationalist dwelling space; the definition of the internal space as the main principle for the architectural solution; the idea of integration, in specific urban or natural environments.

In the context of this experimental period, the *House in Praia das Maçãs* (1957-59) introduced Portas's main concerns and lines of research; the *House in Vila Viçosa* (1958-62), is the corollary and close of this period. The *House in Sesimbra* (1960-64), probably the least known and studied of the three, is a design process of great experimentalism, where Portas researches about the contextualizing of architecture, about geometric and spatial complexity, about the expression and image of architecture, about the importance of internal space and its qualification, and about the need for relationship between modernity and tradition, in the quest for a truly modern Portuguese architecture.

The article examines the design and construction of the house, framing its methodological proposal, analyzing its formal and spatial proposal, and focusing on its innovative aspects, that constituted an experimental process and a rehearsal for later works by Portas and Teotónio, and an influence for Portuguese architecture in the following decades.

1. The House in Sesimbra

The House in Sesimbra was designed in 1960, for Fernando Braz de Oliveira, a civil engineer most famous for being responsible for the design and construction of the Cahora-Bassa water dam in Mozambique, at its time the world's largest. The building of the house would only be

⁷ "Entrevista a Nuno Portas", *Revista Arquitectura*, 4ª série, n.º135 (1979): 56-57.

⁸ Ana Tostões. *Os Verdes Anos na Arquitectura Portuguesa dos Anos 50* (Porto: FAUP Publicações, 1997), 181. Translation by the author.

⁹ About the House in Praia das Maçãs see: Hugo Farias. "A Casa como Experimento: 3 Obras de Nuno Portas e Nuno Teotónio Pereira, na transição da década de 50 para a década de 60 do século XX", in *Arquitecturas do Mar, da Terra e do Ar - Arquitectura e Urbanismo na Geografia e na Cultura* ed. By Conceição Trigueiros (Lisboa: Academia de Escolas de Arquitectura e Urbanismo de Língua Portuguesa, 2014), 200-209.

¹⁰ About the House in Vila Viçosa see: Hugo Farias. "Between tradition and modernity: design, construction, life and conservation of a 1960's Portuguese House", in *Adaptive Reuse - The modern movement towards the future* ed. by Ana Tostões and Zara Ferreira (Lisboa: 14th Docomomo International Conference, 2017) 473-478.

¹¹ Nuno Portas. "Habitação em Sesimbra. Testemunho de um dos Autores", *Revista Arquitectura*, 3ª série, n.º 93 (1966): 115.

finished in 1964. It was published in 1966 in *Arquitectura*, the most important Portuguese architectural magazine of the period.¹²



Figure 1: House in Sesimbra. Outside view in 1966
Source: *Arquitectura*, 3ª serie, n.º 93 (1966)

The house witnesses Portas's quest for a more complex geometry; the search for a geometrical solution that would avoid the pure volumetries of rationalist modern architecture, both in terms of its image and expression, and in terms of the spatial dwelling solution that rationalist designs usually propose. The design completely abandons orthogonality: the plan of the house is based on a triangular grid that is responsible for the complete solution of the spatial and functional layout.

According to Nuno Portas¹³ the context was the main motto for the design solution of the house: firstly, the plot of land, with its steep incline towards the sea, was the starting point for the conception of a fragmentary volumetry that would better solve the adaptation of the house to the ground's morphology and topography; secondly, this fragmented solution, adapted to the terrain, also served the purpose of making the better use of the beautiful views towards the sea and the village of Sesimbra; the panoramic view was also responsible for the option for flat roofs,¹⁴ that serve as outside terraces. These were thought to replace the traditional external lounging areas typical of a detached single-family house, that in this case were very difficult to achieve since the terrain is so steep and narrow.

The option for the complex geometry that structures the design of the house – a triangular grid that recalls Frank Lloyd Wright's residential designs of the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's (*Hanna House*, California, 1937; *Kentuck Knob*, Pennsylvania, 1954, for example) – was selected as a way to achieve in plan the same fragmented effect that was sought for the section: the creation

¹² "Habitação em Sesimbra", Revista *Arquitectura*, 3ª série, n.º 93 (1966): 114-119.

¹³ Nuno Portas. "Habitação em Sesimbra. Testemunho...", 115.

¹⁴ Note that in the other two houses Portas and Teotónio Pereira designed traditional tiled roofs, as a means to a) ensure a relationship between modern and tradicional architecture, and also b) to avoid the rationalist solution of the prismatic box with a flat, visitable roof terrace.

of movement, volumetric fragmentation and formal articulation, that would adapt the house to the inclined ground. This option would thus promote a different kind of interior space, in terms of diversity of shape, spatial articulation and relations, attaining a spatial complexity and fluidity that would transcend the common vocabulary of rationalist modern architecture.

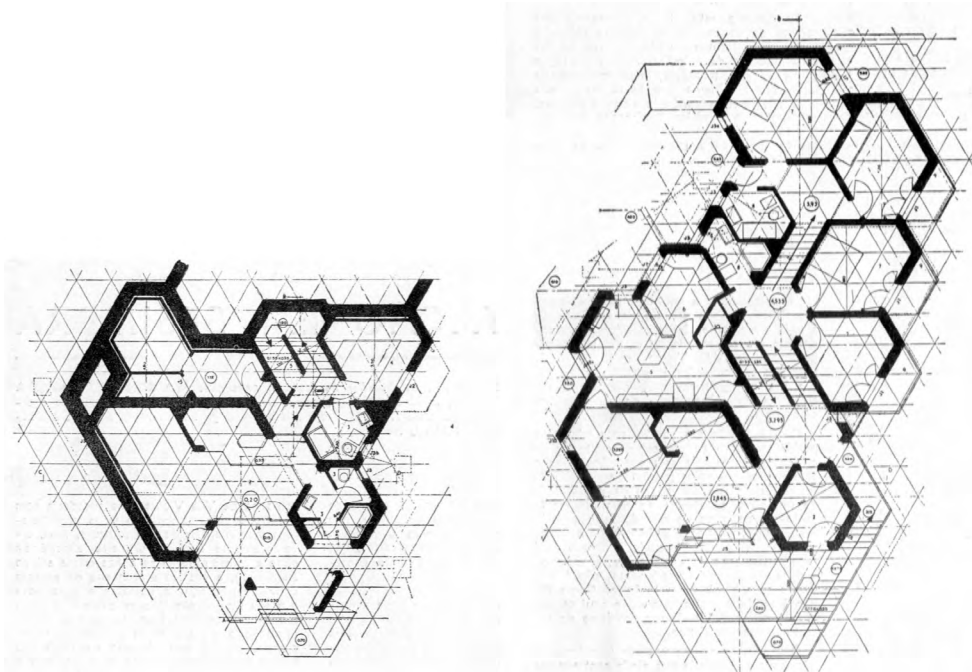


Figure 2: House in Sesimbra. Plans of the ground floor (left) and upper levels (right)
Source: *Arquitectura*, 3ª serie, n.º 93 (1966)

The house's functional brief is fundamentally displayed in three articulated levels, and a fourth inferior one: at the highest level we find the main bedroom and its bathroom; at the intermediate level, the rest of the intimate area of the house, comprising sleeping rooms and bathrooms; in the next level going down, we find the social and the service areas: main entrance to the house, study, living room, dining room, kitchen, pantry and complementary service spaces. Under this set of levels, all of them set apart by half a floor, and thus in spatial continuity, we find a lower floor that opens directly to the garden to the south; in this floor we find a living and games room, and a bathroom. A second entry to the house is on this floor, thought as the direct entry for anyone who arrives from the beach or the village.

The interior of the house, as was Portas's intention, is a spatial experiment of great fluidity, continuity and also complexity: on the one hand, because of the connection and communication between the different spaces – entry, living room, dining room, play room, for example; all these spaces communicate and relate without segregation, walls or doors. On the other, because of the geometrical shape and consequent form of each space; each 'room' has its own shape, height, and specific relationship with the exterior light and view, so as to avoid spatial homogeneity, repetition and monotony, and instead achieve a multi-ambience spatial complex. Finally, because of the articulation between different levels of the diverse spaces, set at different heights: Portas wanted a dynamic space, meaning that the dwelling space should be designed according to the movement, flow and activities of the dwellers.

The house's spatial proposal thus clearly moves away from modern rationalist undifferentiated and hygienic space: the house is designed from its interior, seeking to convey a richer and more meaningful spatial experience to its users. The purity and abstraction of modern space is overcome in the quest for a richer, more diverse, complex and significant space. This is achieved through the design of a fluid and continuous interior space that articulates different ambiances along a dynamic *promenade architecturale*; the use of expressive materials in their natural condition; the meticulous and space-specific design of windows and shutters that convey light-controlled intimate spaces; the design of the inside-outside relationships, with carefully framed outside views. In terms of materiality, the interior of the house plays with a relationship between concrete, white plastered walls, exotic wood elements, stone, and ceramic tiles. As with the formal and volumetric options, the material palette is set so as to avoid the purity and lightness of the rationalist modern movement interior spaces, and to propose a rich and intense ambience to each specific space.

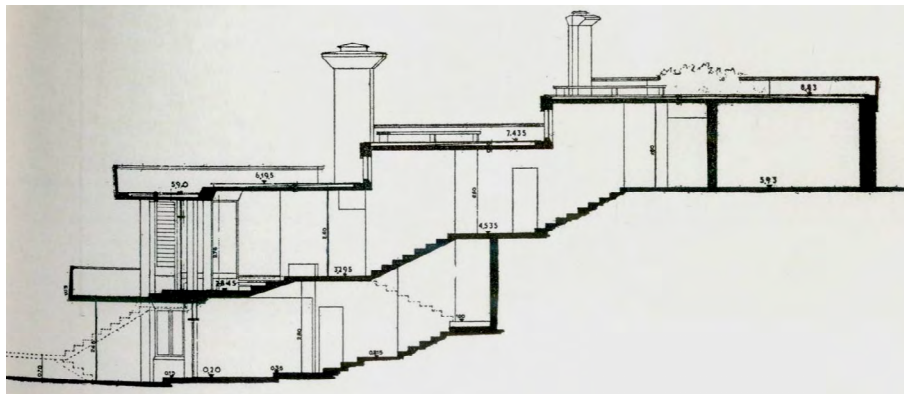


Figure 3: House in Sesimbra. Section through the house
Source: *Arquitectura*, 3ª serie, n.º 93 (1966)

The formal fragmentation and the split-levelled setting of the house along the terrain's slope establish the powerful outside image of the house. This is underlined by the non-orthogonal shape of the volumes and by the contrast between the white-painted outside walls and the rough exposed concrete surfaces of the terrace, balconies, outside stairs and chimneys' protruding ledges that strongly mark the facades of the house. The result is a unified building, solidly anchored in its ground and clearly integrated in its natural setting.

2. The House as Experiment

During the 20th Century, the House, more than any other building type, plays a lead role in the evolution of the expressive, spatial and constructive values of architecture. Its importance results both from the fact that the House was central to the career of the most prominent architects of the Modern Movement, and the fact that it was seen as a privileged object for experimentation: the House is the experimental laboratory of 20th Century architecture.¹⁵

In the case of Portuguese architecture of the 1959's – 1960's, a period of profound transformations in national architecture, the House and its Project play an important role, mainly

¹⁵ Hugo Farias. "La Casa: Experimento y Matriz...", 233-280.

because a very young generation of architects use the house as a privileged place for experimentation, for the establishment of new methodological principles and of innovative formal, spatial, constructive and material proposals.¹⁶

In the case of the *House in Sesimbra*, the experimental condition can be found in several different aspects:

a) The relationship between the house and its site

The first level of experimentalism can be found in the way Portas and Teotónio avoid what would be the typical rationalist solution to a sloping site, facing the view and the sea: a pure volume set on pilotis, floating over the ground and thus avoiding the resolution of the relationship between building and topography. The authors choose to solidly set the building in its ground, and to use the idea of fragmenting the house into an articulated set of volumes. In this, their proposal is very much in tune with solutions found in traditional and vernacular architecture, in which we commonly find houses made up of an addition of different volumes, many times set at different levels, according to the site's morphology and topography.

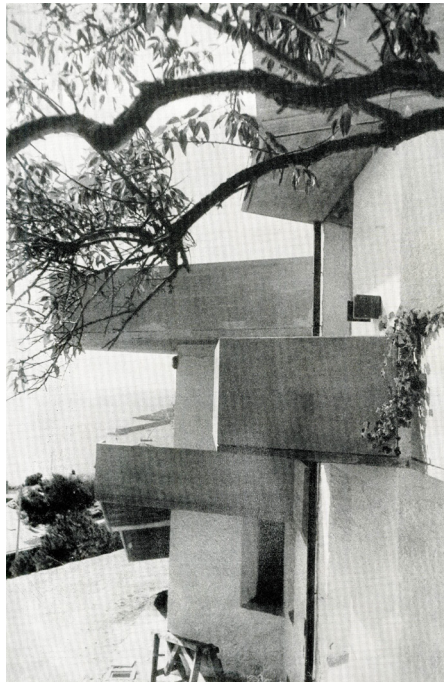


Figure 4: House in Sesimbra. Outside view in 1966
Source: *Arquitectura*, 3ª serie, n.º 93 (1966)

b) The use of a non orthogonal base-geometry

The second level, perhaps the most interesting and original for Portuguese dwelling architecture, is the election of a non-orthogonal geometry as a base for the composition of the different levels of the floor plans. Directly inspired in Wright, as the authors stated themselves, the triangular (or hexagonal) grid constitutes the rule for the drawing of the complete spatial solution, thus resulting in a very complex articulation of non-orthogonal, different-shaped interior spaces.

¹⁶ Hugo Farias. "La Casa: Experimento y Matriz...", 8-9.

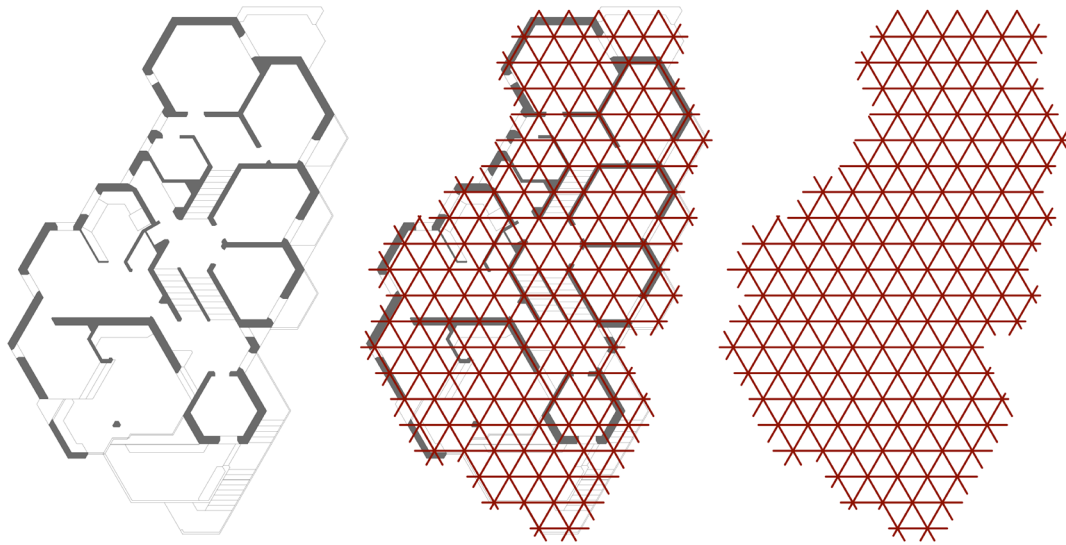


Figure 5: House in Sesimbra. Plan, plan with geometric grid, geometric grid.
Source: H. Farias (2018)

c) The proposal of a new interior spatiality

The third level of experimentation is the search for a new kind of interior spatiality. In the 1950's, one of Portas's main concerns was that architecture should be designed from its internal space, and not from the decision of an outside volumetric enclosure or pre-established image.¹⁷ In the case of Sesimbra, the formal expression of the house is a direct revelation of its interior space. And the interior is designed as a complex and dynamic ensemble, designed to avoid homogeneous and repetitive solutions, so that the spatial experience is as rich and diverse as possible. Each room has its own size, shape and height, according to its use and significance; whenever it is possible, the spatial solution is a continuum, defined as an architectural promenade through the house.

d) The quest for diverse and rich interior ambiances

The fourth level, very much a consequence of the complex geometric proposal and the quest for a new spatiality, is the design of the house as an articulation of diverse and rich interior ambiances: considering the architectural promenade through the house, the different shapes and heights of the spaces, each space is carefully and specifically designed in terms of its built-in furniture, diverse material and natural light qualifications, specific windows to ensure particular inside-outside relationships, etc...

¹⁷ Nuno Portas. "Habitação em Sesimbra. Testemunho...", 115. See also: "Entrevista a Nuno Portas", 56-57. And Hugo Farias. "La Casa: Experimento y Matriz...", 194-198.

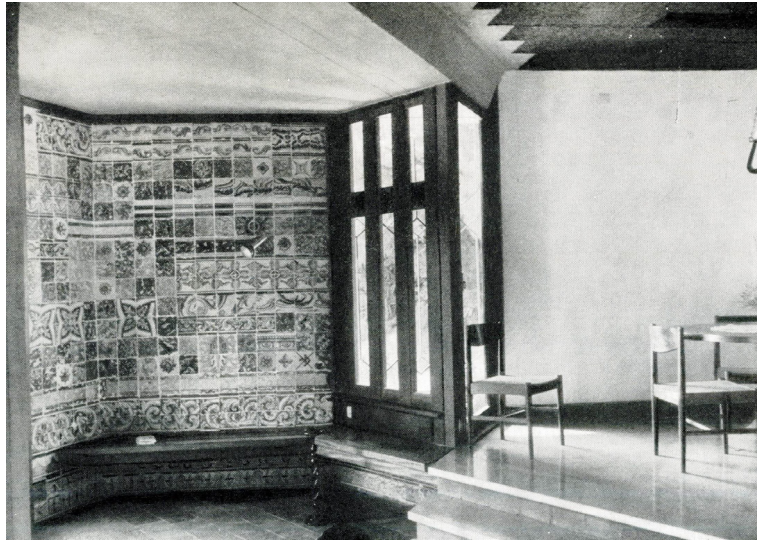


Figure 6: House in Sesimbra. Interior view of the livingroom, 1966
Source: *Arquitectura*, 3ª serie, n.º 93 (1966)

e) Structure, construction and image – a certain brutalism

Lastly, the house is also innovative in the way it is built and in the resulting image and expression. A reinforced concrete structure allows for the adaptation of the different levels of the house to the sloping ground, and also to the possibility of the flat roof garden-terraces.

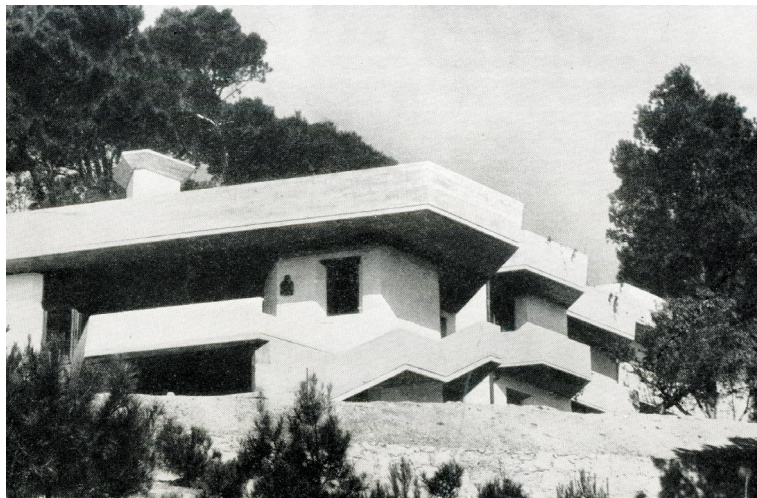


Figure 7: House in Sesimbra. Outside view in 1966
Source: *Arquitectura*, 3ª serie, n.º 93 (1966)

But it is the elements of rough exposed concrete – quite innovative for the time, particularly in residential architecture – that constitute the most interesting level of experimentation: the house has something of a *brutalist* expression, almost like a bunker or a fortress when seen from a distance. Portas and Teotónio would later on reuse this particular feature of the House in Sesimbra in other works of architecture, of the 1960's and 1970's, namely on their award-winning church *Igreja do Sagrado Coração*, built in Lisbon, between 1962 and 1970.

3. Final considerations

During the 20th Century, the House played a lead role in the evolution of the expressive, spatial and constructive values of architecture, becoming a privileged object for experimentation.

Nuno Portas and Nuno Teotónio Pereira's *House* in Sesimbra was designed as an experimental architectural work in the context of Teotónio Pereira's office. The house's formal, spatial, constructive and proposal and the way the design addresses the question of contextualization, and assumes internal space and its qualification as central to architectural conception establishes it as a reference work in the context of Portuguese modern architecture.

Its relevance as an experimental object in its time can be found in the way it proposes a new relationship between building and context; in the development of a non-orthogonal complex geometric based plan; in the search for a new internal spatiality, that set the rule for the architectural solution; in the design of rich and diverse interior ambiances that redefine the quality of interior modern space; in the proposal of a powerful architectural expression, close to British brutalism of the time, that would later on be reused in other non-residential works by Portas and Teotónio Pereira.

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