Between Kenzo Tange and Fernando Távora: An *'Affinitarian'* Architectural Regard

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***Abstract*—**In crafting their way between *theory* and *practice*, authors and artists seem to be always immersed in a never-ending process of relating epochs, objects and images. Endless *'affinities'* emerge, from a somewhat unexplainable (and intimate) magnetic relation. It is through this 'warburgian' assessment that two of the most prominent twentieth century modern architects from Japan and Portugal are put into perspective in this paper, focusing on their paths and *thinking-practice*, and on the research of their personal and professional archives. Moreover, this research especially aims its focus at essaying specifically on the possible *'affinities'* between two of their most renowned architectural projects: the Kenzo Tange's (demolished) Villa Seijo project in Tokyo (Japan), and Fernando Távora's Tennis Pavilion design in Matosinhos (Portugal), respectively, side-by-side – through in-depth fieldwork in the sites, bibliographical and archival research, (unprecedented) material analysis, and a final critical consideration.

***Keywords*—**Tange, Távora, architecture, affinities.

I. Introduction: The Possibility of Designing (Unexpected) *Constellations*

TYPICALLY, art historians and critics tend to assemble the vast majority of their studies on the central question of *'influence'*, or on finding (in)direct *'influences'* between eras. Consequently and ultimately, a kind of logical 'sequence' seems to be established, precisely through the cause-effect logic of those so-called (and supposed) *'influences'* – thus, an orderly arranged 'configuration' or 'system', finds itself magically structured. Not incidentally, Bloom [1] questioned this reasoning, by referring in 1973 to a latent anxiety that, inevitably, *'influence'* brought to all authors and inventors.

Although accepting the existence of *'influences'* and all its surrounding problematics, it is not through that lens that this research is built. Instead, what this research proposes is an alternative process of looking at history – or in other words, at the past –, through a more 'contemplative' manner. In Warburg's perspective [2] – which Benjamin [3] also 'seconded' –, this alternative seems more appropriate when approaching art history, and its authors (whether they are artists, painters, sculptors, architects, or others). The objective lies on the 'discovering' of (un)expected relations which can be found, by being able to start to have a glimpse of possible associations that overcome *space* and *time*, and not relying on any direct connections between periods, persons, 'styles' or *'influences'*. This possibility of (always) designing new *'constellations'* – as Baudelaire also put it [4] – builds the fitting conceptual panorama for this paper's research, and the adequate abstract view-frame from which this paper should be understood.

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II. Japan and Portugal: Traces of a Common Architectural Spirit

In architecture, the well-known concept of "Japan'ness" – which began being proposed in late XIXth century – embodies the search for the true essence of Japanese architecture which is guided by one primordial criterion: the identification of cultural values selected, simultaneously, for their traditional Japanese specificities, and for their contemporary, timeless and international validity [5]. This subtle combination of *tradition* and *modernity* constitutes the major foundation of "Japan'ness"'s uniqueness.

In Japan, and in that same late XIXth century, there was a strong reaction to the exterior Western modernization of the country which was since over-intensifying – namely through the strong cultural movement *"wakoh-yôsai"*. This movement defended that Japanese architecture's evolution should be sustained through a modern crystallization of their ancient cultural specificities – thus designing a decisive impact on architecture, through a focus on a crucial '(re)conquest' of the *Japanese essence*.

On a different continent, and concerning Portugal specifically, a singular process of appropriation of modernity took place, particularly since the 1950's, when a strong and present critical spirit began progressively questioning the validity of the intransigent (European) Modern Movement. A desire of overcoming its rationalist doctrines – stressing the attention on the respect for the nature of each material, and suiting it to its context – thus emerged.

Seeking a symbiosis between modern assumptions and the inputs of its cultural context, several Portuguese architects were thus searching for their regional and unique authenticity. This mid-twentieth century 'turn' appears to have had an important impact on a well-defined Portuguese context, escalating the critical questioning aura of some authors who were striving for another response to a certain 'blind' modernity – a *(local) Portuguese modernity*.

As such, tracing back Japan and Portugal's architectural history, there appears to have existed a noteworthy interesting *common approach and critical spirit* – although in different times. In fact, approximately 50 years apart, the two countries seem to have shared a similar concern – to integrate *modernity* and *tradition*, thus pursuing their modern architecture

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evolution's right path and integrity.

III. Kenzo Tange and Fernando Távora

A. 'Affinities': A Modern Tradition, or a Traditional Modernity

Kenzo Tange (Japan, 1913-2005) and Fernando Távora (Portugal, 1923-2005) were two prominent modern international architects that participated in those decisive moments in their homelands: the somewhat 'regaining' of an original expression for Japanese and Portuguese architects, and the affirmation of an inevitable *modernity* inextricably linked with Japanese and Portuguese (local) *idiosyncratic specificities*, respectively.

Considering this paper, other additional premises and *'affinities'* between both of them should be bore in mind.

Firstly, they both were contemporaneous of one another, although living thousands of kilometers apart (Tange was 10 years older than Távora, having finally died in the same year).

Secondly, they both knew each other from the famous CIAM (*"Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne"*), the legendary international congresses from which they were respectful members and – despite never having built any strong personal friendship or relation between them, at least from what is known until the present day – in which they had the opportunity to know each other personally.

Thirdly, and more importantly, they both shared a key common (already referred) architectural approach trait: the search for their work's integrity, by disclosing a *modern* language that sought to subtly – but not evidently – integrate local *traditions*.

B. From Távora's Trip to Japan (1960), and the Suggestive (Gulbenkian) Link

Fernando Távora's well-known (public) interest and great passion for Japanese culture, and for the country's aesthetics and architecture, led him to eventually having the opportunity to travel to Japan.

However, this Japan trip was also the consequence of Távora applying to a study scholarship granted by the Gulbenkian Foundation in 1959, proposing an expedition to analyze the teaching methods of American universities. Afterwards, he then received an invitation from CIAM to attend the "World Design Conference" that was to be held in Tokyo in 1960. Thus, mentioning the relevance of that conference's focus research on cutting-edge design methodologies, Távora readjusted his trip planning in order to also include Japan in his travel.

From his personal diaries of this 1960 journey, a clear division between attending the referred conference, and his desire to explore the exotic Japanese culture and exquisite traditional architecture, is clearly perceivable. Consequently, after visiting some of Kunio Maekawa and Kenzo Tange's "brutalist" buildings in Tokyo, Távora also detoured through Nikko, Kyoto and Nara, finding the history that he so dearly wished to experiment. He had then the opportunity to visit several gardens, parks, and many historic temples and traditional palaces. The remarkable descriptions he makes in Kyoto, from the Tofukuji, Chion-in and Ryoan-ji temples, as well as the Imperial Palace and, above all, the Katsura Imperial Villa, among many others, clearly stand out. His extraordinary drawings of the temples' plans and gardens – impressive for the rigorous representation of shapes and materials –, accompanied by numerous photographs, clearly suggest the true enthusiasm of Távora's approach to all those places.

The organization of spaces stands out in Távora's writings, particularly the analysis of volumetric relationships between the buildings and the gardens. Other annotations include the strong relations of the traditional architecture with nature, the harmony of the architecture's human scale, the simplicity of the built spaces, and the attention given to materials and their details.

"(…) Japan has a different majesty, and quality. I'm leaving with sadness. Here, yes, I'll have to come back." [6] Although never having the chance to come back to the country, Távora continuously "travelled" back to Japan many times – namely in his lectures, or in the numerous lessons he gave later to his students, as a professor (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Fernando Távora's photo in Kyoto, from his 1960 trip to Japan

However, it is through an attentive inspection of Fernando Távora's personal application documents to Gulbenkian Foundation for this trip, that the suggestion for this research somehow seems to germinate. Actually, within all the bureaucratic paperwork that constitutes Távora's individual process file as a Gulbenkian scholarship grantee holder (which includes all kinds of correspondence, budget plans, and many other official elements) – it is a single sheet of paper that, in this case, summons all this research's attention, and thus instigates all its consequent research interest focus.

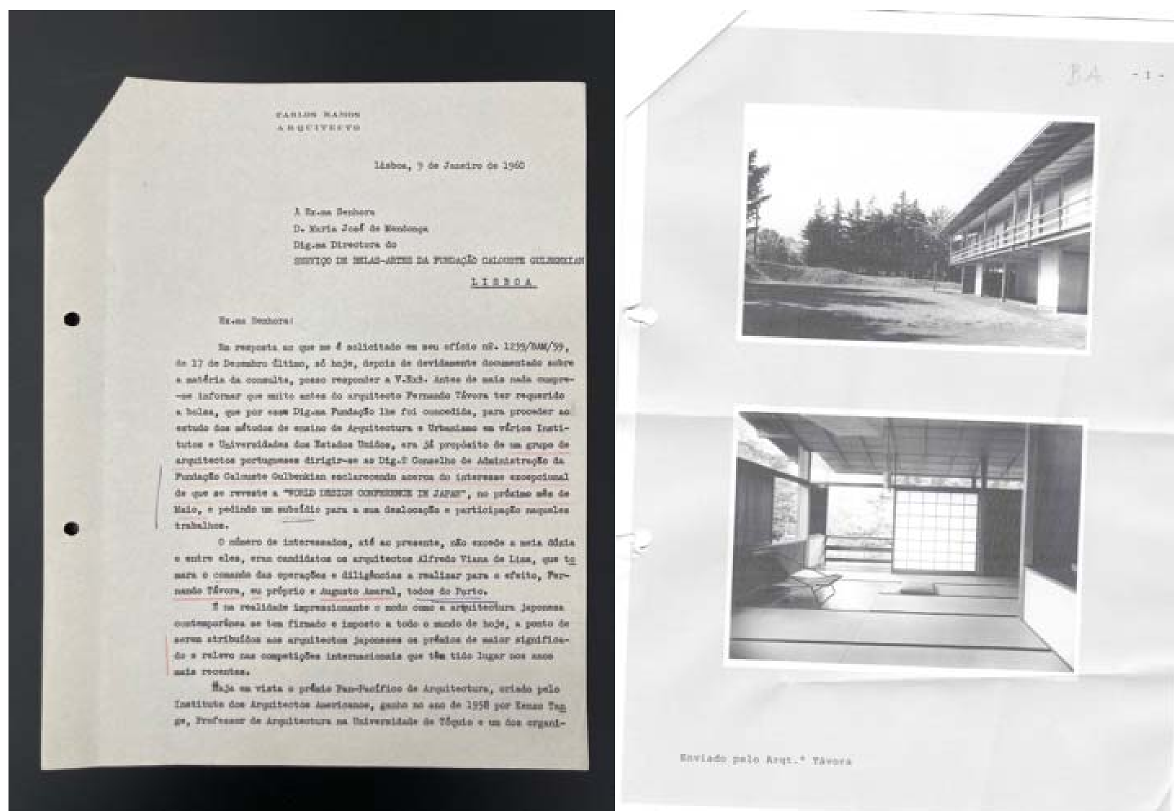
In order to document his scholarship application and the need to include Japan in his trip, and after a first letter Távora sent to Gulbenkian Foundation in which he made that request, Távora then sent a letter containing a single sheet of paper with just two black and white images of Kenzo Tange's built 'Seijo' house project in Tokyo (now demolished since the 1990's).

Commonly known as 'Villa Seijo', this modest house that Tange designed for himself and his family – and which the Japanese architect simply referred to as 'The House' – appears, then, as an illustration of works that Fernando Távora (seemingly) appeared to have had the desire to visit in Japan.

Additionally, this suggestive sheet seems to have complemented a previous letter by his university Director, Professor Carlos Ramos, also sent to Gulbenkian Foundation – this professor had been recently appointed director at the School of Fine Arts since 1952, and managed to somehow "open" the faculty towards modernity, by radically changing their obsolete disciplinary *"beaux-artisan"* contents.

This other previous letter sent by his Director Carlos Ramos tried to raise awareness to the worldwide importance of Japanese architecture at the time, aiming to 'sensitize' the Gulbenkian directors to the relevance of Fernando Távora's application and wishes to visit the country. In that referred letter, Ramos eventually even named Kenzo Tange as one of the Nipponese authors to follow closely, also illustrating his written words with some articles and photographs of Tange's more "brutalist" works and designs.

As such, Távora seems to have complemented that referred Carlos Ramos letter, sending after it this single paper sheet with only two images of a Tange's more *"modern-traditional"* design. This fact was exactly what stimulated this paper's research *'affinitarian'* regard (Fig. 2).



CARLOS RAMOS
ARQUITECTO

Lisboa, 9 de Janeiro de 1960

À Ex.ma Senhora
D. Maria José de Mendonça
Dig.ma Directora do
SERVIÇO DE BELAS-ARTES DA FUNDAÇÃO CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN
LISBOA

Ex.ma Senhora:

Em resposta ao que me é solicitado em seu ofício nº. 1239/BAM/59, de 17 de Dezembro último, só hoje, depois de devidamente documentado sobre a matéria da consulta, posso responder a V.Exª. Antes de mais nada cumpre-me informar que muito antes do arquitecto Fernando Távora ter requerido a bolsa, que por essa Dig.ma Fundação lhe foi concedida, para proceder ao estudo dos métodos de ensino de Arquitectura e Urbanismo em vários Institutos e Universidades dos Estados Unidos, era já propósito de um grupo de arquitectos portugueses dirigir-se ao Dig.º Conselho de Administração da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian esclarecendo acerca do interesse excepcional de que se reveste a "WORLD DESIGN CONFERENCE IN JAPAN", no próximo mês de Maio, e pedindo um subsídio para a sua deslocação e participação naqueles trabalhos.

O número de interessados, até ao presente, não excede a meia dúzia e entre eles, eram candidatos os arquitectos Alfredo Viana de Lima, que tomara o comando das operações e diligências a realizar para o efeito, Fernando Távora, eu próprio e Augusto Amaral, todos do Porto.

É na realidade impressionante o modo como a arquitectura japonesa contemporânea se tem firmado e imposto a todo o mundo de hoje, a ponto de serem atribuídos aos arquitectos japoneses os prémios de maior significado e relevo nas competições internacionais que têm tido lugar nos anos mais recentes.

Haja em vista o prémio Pan-Pacífico de Arquitectura, criado pelo Instituto dos Arquitectos Americanos, ganho no ano de 1958 por Kenzo Tange, Professor de Arquitectura na Universidade de Tóquio e um dos organi-

Fig. 2 Fernando Távora's Gulbenkian individual file process, with the mentioned letter and illustrated page, stating, at the final bottom on the right after the images, the elucidating written note in Portuguese, *"file sent by Arch. Távora"* (page samples)

IV. Between Kenzo Tange's Villa Seijo and Fernando Távora's Tennis Pavilion Projects

In spite of, apparently and after all, Fernando Távora never having had the chance to visit Kenzo Tange's house in his referred 1960 visit to Japan – at least, as far as his diaries, sketches and photographs from his journey are able to tell –, the vague resemblance (which, sometimes, is not that vague) between Távora's Tennis Pavilion design in Matosinhos, and Tange's own Seijo residence in Tokyo is a matter that, somehow, resonates deep interest and summons further research.

A. Villa Seijo (Kenzo Tange, 1951-53, Tokyo, Japan)

Kenzo Tange's Villa Seijo (a project from 1951-53), constructed in 1953 in Tokyo, was small in scale, and simple in *theory*. This Tange's house seems that it could have been pulled right out of the secular 10th (Japanese) century. The lines of the design are clean and straight, 90 degrees angled. Its rooms were spare and modular, solely partitioned by traditional rice-paper sliding doors which could be opened or closed, as needed by its occupants. The entire structure was raised on simple wooden stilts, in order to ventilate the interiors during Japan's hot summers. This stripped-back example of Tange's architecture seems to somehow reverberate some of the Heian-era principles that may have (un)consciously inspired it – a modular, unadorned and impermanent aesthetic (Fig. 3).

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Fig. 3 Kenzo Tange's Villa Seijo in Tokyo (1951-53, torn down in the 1990's)

B. Tennis Pavilion (Fernando Távora, 1956-60, Matosinhos, Portugal)

Concerning Fernando Távora's Tennis Pavilion (a design from 1956-60), this building was part of his larger Quinta da Conceição's Municipal Park project – a masterplan that foresaw the integration of new cultural/sports facilities while preserving the existing environmental values. Thus, marking the park with a reference that stated its tennis-courts, Távora designed a small building with an intense, yet subtle presence.

Deeply analyzing the project, the spirit of Távora's design alludes to an organic simplicity in the exploration of the built space's tranquility. Totally related to the site, the Pavilion's tribune is fully integrated with nature, rooted and depending on the topography. Its absolute simplicity is accentuated through an intimate domestic scale, and through the rigor of the plans' composition (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Fernando Távora's Tennis Pavilion in Matosinhos, Portugal (1956-60)

C. Further Specific Design Elements: From Theory to Practice – Further 'Affinities'

Further deepening our regard toward these two architectural projects in question, and especially putting them in 'confrontation', some specific design traits are worth being noticed, and assessed.

Firstly, it is interesting to note that both buildings are elevated from the ground, apparently following or being inspired by one of the main primordial 'rules' coming from Le Corbusier's modern approach to a new architecture. If, on the one hand, this trait is more evident in Tange's Villa Seijo, with several apparent *'pilotis'* elevating the building clearly from its ground floor; on the other hand, Távora's approach to this lift of the building seems more subtle or "modern"-like, using a ground floor stone wall that simultaneously hides the necessary vestibular programmatic bathrooms behind it, while holding the upper floor balcony above, slightly balanced from it.

Consequently, eventually a 'corbusian' free plan on the upper floors should be expected in both cases. And again, that can be appointed differently in each design – in this case, it is Távora who designs a 'freer' plan above, due also to the fact that its program required only a veranda for the viewers. On the other hand, Tange's villa is sometimes evidently following this situation – showing free 'pilotis' from the ground to the upper floor –, but also hiding them in the partition walls that frame the

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housing program at other times.

One other very interesting design element to assess consists in the roofs. From all that has been stated before, a (usual) design of a completely modern horizontal roof (or terrace) should be expected. However, what happens in reality is totally different. Both architects – and following their already mentioned philosophy of seeking to merge *modernity* with the local *tradition* from their countries – end up designing traditional gable (or pitched) roofs. And if Tange's seems to be, in a way, entirely traditional, with a 2-pitched design, Távora's roof seems to go a little deep further, solely designing a single-pitched (and more modern) roof covering proposal.

The materials and coatings chosen for both buildings also share many similarities, both using wood, white plastered walls, among some other small resources. However, and additionally, the fact that all these materials are utilized in a totally apparent – and 'brutalist' – manner, totally showcasing the building's structural truth, is the fundamental *theoretical* (and in the end, *practical*) design trait that both architects clearly display, by using all these (same and coincident) materials.

However, altogether – and despite considering the evident differences program-wise between the 2 buildings –, it is not for the specific and individual analysis of all these single design traits that, somehow, their unique *affinity* in-between seems to emerge – but quite on the contrary, it is from the global spirit which seems to emanate from an attentive and contemplative regard towards them.

Comprehensively, it is really for both the space's complete *"emptinesses"* and for the breathing that each material offers to these ensembles, that, firstly, a sense of an austere dignity seems to arise. Their seeming principles of not being spaces to inhabit, but to be enjoyed at times, translate their qualities into, sometimes, just empty 'porches'.

In fact, alike many spaces of Tange's Villa Seijo, the Tennis Pavilion is almost like a "blank space", a clean canvas for experimentation. It does not seem to need to respond to every day's life demands, and so do many several spaces of Tange's villa, distinguishing them from any other inhabitable space – these two designs are special cases of architecture.

Again, their *"emptinesses"* seem to design spaces which are formally defined, but (apparently) are not demandingly "utilitarian", at least, on usual terms – it is for the necessity and sensitivity of the people who will use it, to decide how they will occupy/fill that void.

Furthermore, the Pavilion's empty tribune, although covered, becomes external due to its limits' dilution. This "interior-exterior" space prompts us to another Japanese traditional design feature – the transitional *"engawa"* space, here emerging through the trees. This same kind of space prompts all along Villa Seijo's design, on both floors, completely disrupting any frontier between inside and outside.

Concluding, all these traits, together with both the garden's and park's global plans and landscape, seem to contain the same (Nipponese) logic of relationships (that, again, Fernando Távora also deeply valued in the temples' gardens he had the chance to experiment in Kyoto, especially in the meticulous harmonization between the built and the natural).

V. Conclusion: An 'Affinitarian' Regard, Designed through the Architectural Constellation of Kenzo Tange and Fernando Távora

Claiming *affinity* with an object, a picture, or a building – or stating that *affinities* exist between such things, sets us, then, within the correct conceptual framework for this paper's research.

If, as Brian Dillon essays [7], an *affinity* can be a relation of significance, as it is a critical personal sensation that is not exactly taste or desire, but has aspects of both, then the best way to approach this sensitive – yet crucial – aspect of art *theory* and *practice* is through (as this research suggests) the so-called Aristotelian 'argumentation by example'.

Approaching this subject via two discrete and seemingly disparate examples (in this case, Tange and Távora; Villa Seijo and the Tennis Pavilion), this research is first of all about images that spark the eye, the intellect, or the discernment – or in other words, and following 'warburgian' logic, about designing (un)seen *constellations* that are yet to be exposed. Searching to overcome these relation's unspeakability through critical thinking, and to stress the intimate and abstract intricacy of looking and finding examples of buildings that "speak" with each other, although never having "met"; whose spirit evokes a mutual attraction, although reasoning seems to be hard to grasp – this is this research's proposal when assessing Kenzo Tange's Villa Seijo, and Fernando Távora's Tennis Pavilion.

In fact, some of Kenzo Tange's most notable works include, among many others, the Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park (1950), the Yoyogi National Gymnasium for the 1964's Tokyo Olympics, and the celebrated (never-built) 1960's plan for Tokyo Bay.

All these Tange designs are dramatic: mega concrete structures, swelling curves, artificial islands erected on reclaimed land. That is exactly why it is commonly suggested that Tange also took active part in one of the twentieth century's most ambitious and futuristic architectural movements – the so-called Japanese "metabolism" [8].

If, on the one hand, Fernando Távora's take on a *local traditional modernity* was more one of reinventing and merging *vernacular* constructive (Portuguese) materials and solutions, on the other hand, Kenzo Tange (and the metabolists) way of viewing their *local Japanese modernity* was more radical "lexical"-wise, and also more one of anticipation (and celebration) of evolution and its inevitable and continuous change and destruction, thus designing modernity around this spirit of buildings and structures that could be forever replaced, renewed or completed (of course, also heavily influenced by the local *traditional* Shinto ideology of constant death and renewal of all things, which supports all Japanese aesthetic culture).

However, in these 2 specific designs – Villa Seijo and the Tennis Pavilion –, both authors seem to deeply resonate one another.

In reality, instead of designing lordly concepts for revolutionary realities, in his residence, Kenzo Tange kept his own personal home simple. By looking to the past, Tange somehow proposed a 'warburgian' time "jump" – a kind of a time displacement with an aesthetic from (almost) a millennium

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prior. Maybe this particular choice – to invoke, in his own house, an aesthetic from the *past*, and from *tradition* – resonated with Távora's (un)conscious *thinking-practice*.

Concerning Távora, his design of the Tennis Pavilion also emanates the same aura of *tradition*, and of somehow reconciling the acceptance that houses (or *spaces*) like those, were already built long before, and will be (forever) built again – the timelessness and transience of buildings, in other words.

If the formal analogy between these two designs seems more than evident, that is not what summons this research the most – nor even some eventual suggestion of direct influences in-between them, as it was already mentioned.

From all the set of suggestions already laid out previously, what most triggers the focus of this research is one particular aspect: the apparent strength of these two projects in somehow capturing a kind of resistance to 'elucidation'. Their 'blurry', 'obscure', somehow 'fugitive' *spatial* qualities are alluringly suggestive, like spaces that forever refuse to be 'named', 'tagged' or 'narrowed' in their endless potentialities – of use, interpretation, and contemplation.

Throughout time, Japanese traditional housing construction was never meant or designed to 'live' forever, building-wise – pillars, beams and ground structural foundations are designed in wood, ceilings and coverings are straw, and the majority of the partitioning home walls are created by rice-paper [9]. In Japanese aesthetic culture, the tragedy of life – and its great beauty – is that nothing stays the same for long. However, this side of *ephemerality* is softened by a kind of "continuous continuity" – here lies the role of *tradition*. This duality of ephemerality/timelessness is another aspect that seems to reverberate from both designs. And maybe Tange and Távora, in these two projects, seem to perhaps be reminding themselves of their place in time, somehow designing a gesture of reassurance, that this was not the end of history – nor of possibility, interpretation, or *'affinities'*.

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