

Picote Chapel. Architecture and Landscape

La capilla de Picote. Arquitectura y paisaje

José Fernando Gonçalves · Universidade de Coimbra (Portugal) · josefgoncalves@sapo.pt

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2927-7105>

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ABSTRACT

This text aims to examine the Chapel of Our Lady of Fátima in Picote (1956–59), designed by the architect Nunes de Almeida (1924–2014), in light of its relationship to landscape, architecture, and religious purpose.

Conceived as an anchor facility within a settlement that served the dam of the same name (1953–59), the project, although grounded in a classical structural order, is radically modern, simultaneously invoking Asplund and Mies van der Rohe. Through its portico and peristyle structure, which axially articulates and shelters the forecourt, the nave, and the altar in sequence, a clear opposition is established between the open space of celebration—mediating the relationship between human and nature—and the enclosed space dedicated to the relationship between human and God. It is precisely at this juncture, I would argue, that the Chapel of Picote attains both its meaning and its unexpected originality. The resulting liturgical paradox is at once challenging and compelling.

KEYWORDS

Landscape, Nunes de Almeida, Picote, Portugal, Sacred Architecture.

RESUMEN

Este texto se propone examinar la Capilla de Nuestra Señora de Fátima en Picote (1956–59), proyectada por el arquitecto Nunes de Almeida (1924–2014), a la luz de su relación con el paisaje, la arquitectura y la finalidad religiosa.

Concebido como equipamiento-ancla en un asentamiento que prestaba servicio a la presa homónima (1953–59), el proyecto, aunque fundamentado en un orden estructural clásico, es radicalmente moderno, evocando simultáneamente a Asplund y a Mies van der Rohe. A través de su estructura de pórtico y peristilo, que articula y cobija axialmente el atrio, la nave y el altar en secuencia, se establece una clara oposición entre el espacio abierto de celebración —que media la relación entre el ser humano y la naturaleza— y el espacio recogido destinado a la relación entre el ser humano y Dios. Es precisamente en este punto donde, sostengo, la Capilla de Picote alcanza tanto su sentido como su inesperada originalidad. El paradoja litúrgica resultante es a la vez desafiante y sugerente.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Arquitectura religiosa, Nunes de Almeida, paisaje, Picote, Portugal.

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Fig. 01. View of Trás-os-Montes (Portugal).



Fig. 02. View of Fraga do Pulo (Portugal).

PICOTE CHAPEL - ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE

This text aims to analyze the Chapel of Our Lady of Fátima in Picote (1956–59), designed by the architect Nunes de Almeida (1924–2014),¹ considering its relationship with the landscape, its religious purpose, and its formal and spatial experience.

PLACE - LANDSCAPE

The territory of the International Douro is not a place of passage to anywhere.

Entering the region means drifting along roads of curves and counter-curves that seem to have no purpose; they simply snake through hills and valleys and only occasionally brush against villages or small towns. Even with the construction of the motorways that now cross the region, access to Picote remains difficult, almost hostile (Fig. 01).

The river valley —monumental and sublime, in the sense so well defined by Schiller (for those capable of aesthetic emotion before the chance creations of nature)—² establishes rupture, discontinuity, and the improbability of any connection with Spain (Fig. 02).

As a result, the destination is the landscape itself: isolated, solitary, and perhaps for that reason, almost mystical. Above all, it is the experience of being immersed in it and dominated by it that prevails.

To this process of knowledge embodied through wandering in the landscape —established as a canon

in Goethe (*Italian Journey*), Humboldt (*Kosmos*), and Chatwin (*The Anatomy of Restlessness*)— architects add, through drawing, a method of reading and transforming territory that incorporates experience, the senses, and their material expression into the process of ‘conquering’ a place (the becoming of the project). From John Soane to Le Corbusier, this path would take root in the Porto School of Fine Arts (EBAP) and become one of the defining marks of Távora’s pedagogy.³ Traversing the landscape thus becomes the first act of thought and design, as António Machado (1912) poetically expresses it: «Traveler, there is no path; the path is made by walking.»

Perhaps this was the first design challenge of the Picote Chapel: an anchor facility within a settlement whose plan, design, and construction display a rare modern coherence, conceived to support the building and operation of the dam of the same name (1953–59). Confronted with the overwhelming weight of the landscape, the architect responds with a construction that, through the very act of placing the object, interrogates nature and the civilizational impact upon it. It is thus an architectural proposition that does not hesitate to identify and mark the site through an unequivocal founding gesture—both in its siting and in the symbolism of its form — in resonance with the mythical dimension of that isolation.

As Portugal began to open itself to the world in the postwar period, the exposure to modernity that

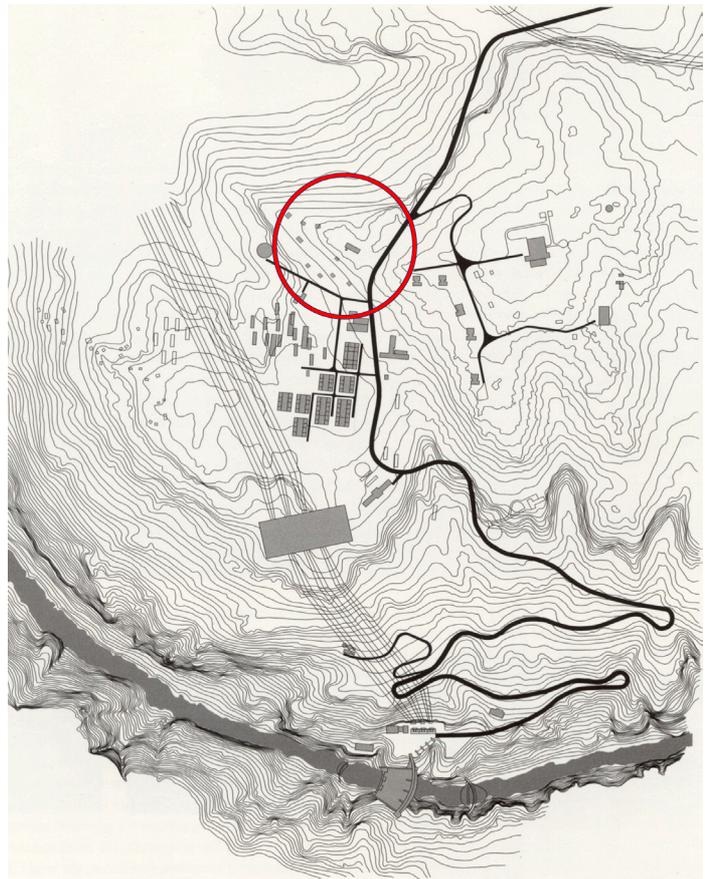


Fig. 03. João Archer de Carvalho, Manuel Nunes de Almeida, and Rogério Ramos, c. 1950.

Fig. 04. João Archer de Carvalho, Manuel Nunes de Almeida, and Rogério Ramos, Picote Plan, 1953-59.

Nunes de Almeida encountered in Hoddesdon when attending CIAM VIII (1951) was far from inconsequential, as were his participation in the CIAM Summer School in Venice (1952), his presence at CIAM IX in Dubrovnik (1956), the journeys undertaken across Europe by Archer, Almeida, and Ramos⁴—even when these occurred concurrently with or after the construction of the Picote Settlement (including trips made in the context of their work on the Douro hydroelectric schemes)—⁵ and the teachings of Lúcio Costa on architecture and landscape during his visit to Portugal.⁶

This gesture thus reveals itself as simultaneously ancient and radically modern, shaped both by close engagement with local culture and by the formal ideas that guided the practice of modern architecture.

PLAN - PROJECT

In Portugal, an overwhelmingly agrarian country where only Lisbon and Porto constituted urban centers with any significant industrial development, postwar European modernization efforts were reflected in the First National Development Plan, which promoted a process of accelerated industrialization. Within this framework of investment, the construction of power plants, communications infrastructure, and transportation networks became a priority, entailing decentralization and the creation of employment in territories long marked by poverty and widespread industrial underdevelopment.

The shift was abrupt in terms of both investment and economic impact—on a scale never before experienced in the country—particularly in the International Douro, a remote region whose productive conditions were closer to the eighteenth century than to the twentieth. The new settlements of Picote (1954–57), Miranda (1956–61), and Bemposta (1956–64), built to accommodate teams of engineers, unskilled workers, and their families, are the result of this investment.

Its construction coincided with the opening toward the canons of modern architecture, already widely embraced in Europe as the appropriate response to the challenges of postwar reconstruction and endorsed by Portuguese architects since the First

Congress of Portuguese Architecture (1948), as an alternative to the conservative models promoted by the Estado Novo regime.

For this reason, it was possible to invest in a modern approach not only in the construction of the dams—necessarily modern due to their technical nature—but also in the planning and architecture of the settlements.⁷

The fact that the urban planning and architectural design were entrusted to three recently graduated young architects is striking, yet fully consistent with this commitment to innovation (Fig. 03).

Whether this modernity was embraced for its constructive efficiency (economy and speed of construction), for its capacity to attract specialized staff arriving from the city and demanding levels of comfort previously absent in the area, or for the persuasive force of the comparable models supplied by the engineering consultants involved in the works, the fact remains that all the settlements are anchored in a somewhat displaced garden-city imaginary, and their buildings adopt a modernist matrix of unusual and vibrant intensity.

The commission for the infrastructural development of the International Douro, entrusted to young architects still untouched by the doubts that the early fieldwork findings of the *Inquérito* (survey)⁸ would later introduce into design practice, thus became an opportunity to materialize—almost as in a laboratory—the dream of modernity encountered in Europe. To construct a modern campus in the midst of the countryside, in open and unrestrained dialogue with the landscape and in deliberate counterpoint to the austerity (and poverty) of the place. The rupture with the landscape, the productive fabric, and local culture is abrupt; yet the appeal is irresistible, and the site—remote and ‘invisible’—proved ideal for such an experiment.

Yet in Picote we do not find a city plan, because the relationships generated by the architecture there do not operate primarily on a social plane; rather, the project seeks to construct a place inscribed by the landscape, where the fundamental tensions are those between human and nature, or human and God.



Fig. 05. Rogério Ramos, Pousada, Picote (Portugal), 1954–58.

Fig. 06. Manuel Nunes de Almeida, Chapel of Our Lady of Fátima, Picote (Portugal), 1956–59.

The principal buildings (the chapel, the *pousada*, and the engineers' houses) appear isolated within the territory, their forms cut against the landscape they seem to survey, like objects placed without any clear definition of ownership. Within the overall settlement, however, they emerge only subtly, partially concealed by topography and vegetation and revealed gradually along the curves of the road that traverses the site. Descending toward the dam and entirely invisible to those arriving, lie the service buildings (market and school) and the housing for skilled workers (Fig. 04).

At the end of the route —and the very *raison d'être* of the entire enterprise— stands the concrete dam, a technological exhibition in itself in direct confrontation with the river valley. These are isolated forms engaged in a self-referential dialogue, akin to what occurs in the precincts of international exhibitions where technological and artistic innovations are displayed.

There is no center, nor do the programs of collective or civic use that might have generated one converge through an implantation strategy capable of producing urban coherence: the Chapel, the school, the commercial center, and the *pousada* are distant from one another, lacking both physical proximity and even visual connection. Each building stands on its own terms, only occasionally establishing relationships of adjacency —most notably between the housing for skilled workers and the nearby commercial center.

Indeed, the urban design appears primarily concerned with articulating the relationship between architecture and landscape, aligning more closely with Defoe's notion of place-making for humankind than with Rousseau's.⁹ This almost dreamlike yet progressive vision of a return to a more primitive human condition may also explain the unequivocal symbolic investment in the design of the chapel, the *pousada*, the engineers' houses, as well as in the gardens and paths shaped in dialogue with the site's topography and landscape.

Beyond the chapel, which will be examined in detail below, the design of the *pousada* and the engineers' houses —the most architecturally significant

buildings, prominently sited at the highest point of the settlement— further reinforces this absence of urbanity.

The *pousada* (Rogério Ramos, 1954–58), ambitiously positioned at the summit like a desacralized acropolis, imposes a ceremonial ascending route and invests uncompromisingly in a modern architectural language that may be related to Brazilian modernism or to the work of Gropius, among others. Beyond the modernity of its interior spatial organization, the entire architectural proposition is articulated through its relationship with the landscape, with no concession to urban order. The exterior space, devoid of physical boundaries, reinforces this reading, as it is structured through carefully designed paths aligned with the topography, with 'no other destination' than wandering through the landscape (Fig. 05).

The houses, similar to one another, are freely arranged across the territory, with no identifiable property boundaries; they appear as objects placed upon the ground, extending themselves into the terrain through the social spaces (living rooms).

Radical and iconic, they emerge without physical or visual proximity to one another; they are at once delicate and dominant. Architecture is present to guide the steps of modern humanity in its return to the landscape, as a sign of conquest and, simultaneously, as a support for something that lies beyond human relations. In this sense, the ensemble proposes a connection to the spirituality of the place, as well as to the theological dimension of human existence.

CHAPEL

In line with the strategy for the settlement's urban plan, the Chapel (1953–59) —a key anchor facility intended to ensure social order at the time— is, not incidentally, the first building visible from a distance and one of the principal symbolic representations of the settlement; it is also the ensemble's finest architectural work. Nunes de Almeida (1924–2014) was twenty-nine years old when he joined the team and began the project (Fig. 06).

As previously noted, the building's siting does not follow any principle of urbanity: it is not placed at the center of the settlement, nor does it generate a public

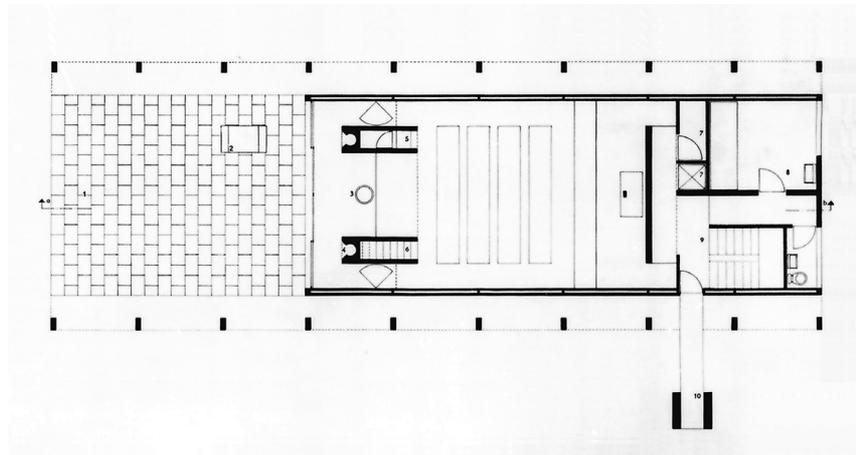


Fig. 07. Manuel Nunes de Almeida, Chapel of Our Lady of Fátima, Picote (Portugal), 1956–59; view in 1958.
Fig. 09. Plan design drawing.
Fig. 10. Elevation design drawing.

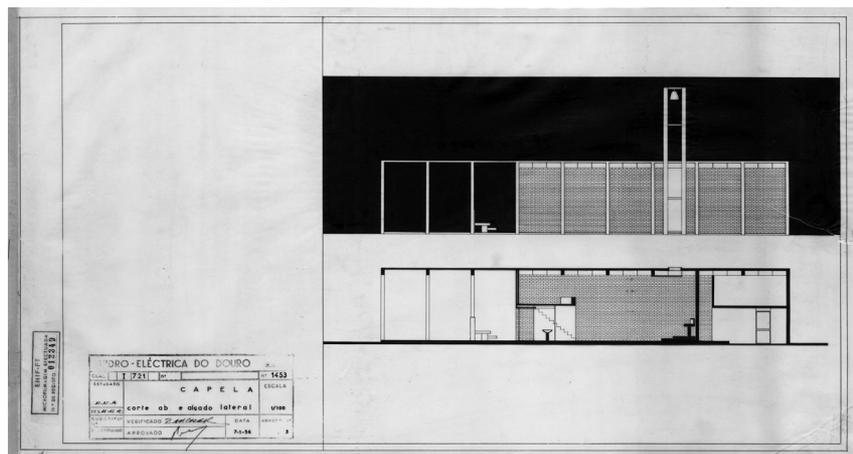




Fig. 08. Manuel Nunes de Almeida, Chapel of Our Lady of Fátima, Picote (Portugal), 1956–59; view in 2025.

space adjoining the churchyard, as was traditional in parish churches. On the contrary, although it is not located at the highest point in the terrain, it is sited in isolation like a sanctuary, enacting a founding gesture of a mythical time and temple that inevitably casts the visitor in the role of a pilgrim. In this case, the journey and the way the building appears within the landscape are more important than consolidating the community around it, or even respecting the canonical eastward orientation, which it deliberately disregards.

Significantly, along the approach, the contrast between the open space of human—nature celebration and the enclosed space for human—God communion is immediately evident. The path thus evokes religious sensibilities ranging from pantheism to an intimate connection with the divine. It may be here that the Picote chapel finds its meaning and its unexpected innovation: the absence of physical boundaries outside reinforces its centrality and dialogue with the landscape, while the complete enclosure inside, adorned with Christian iconography, directs attention toward prayer (Fig. 07).

The liturgical paradox is both challenging and intriguing.

The concept and formal strategy we refer to are therefore at once ancient and radically modern: the regular, white-painted portico and the lateral tower appear cut against the blue sky and the natural landscape, asserting themselves as a monument. From the road, this composition sequentially shelters, along an

axial progression, the churchyard, the narthex, the nave/altar, and the sacristy, in a design that inevitably recalls the rectangular arrangement of classical portico and peristyle, accommodating the pronaos, cella, and opisthodomus—a spatial structure we are accustomed to seeing empty, articulated only through the rhythm of its columns (Fig. 08).

This apparent tension between modernity and tradition is resolved through a dialogue that seeks to bridge the two, a concern that would dominate architectural debate in the following decade but is not unfamiliar to a young architect whose training had been shaped at the Porto School of Fine Arts (EBAP), an institution undergoing modern renewal yet still structurally dominated by classicism. Nunes de Almeida also drew upon the ongoing European renewal of religious practices, symbols, and spaces, which in Portugal was promoted by a group of architects around the MRAR (1952–66),¹⁰ anticipating the liturgical reform that would result from the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). This was a reformist movement in religious art that sought to break with excessive academicism, valorize authenticity and symbolic meaning, and integrate contemporary architecture, painting, and sculpture into religious spaces.

The building is thus simultaneously unexpectedly modern and structurally classical, embodying a relationship between tradition and modernity that extends into the principle of a ‘total work of art,’ integrating architecture, furniture, sacred art, and

Fig. 11. Manuel Nunes de Almeida, Chapel of Our Lady of Fátima, Picote (Portugal), 1956–59.

Fig. 12. Chapel of the Holy Cross (Erik Gunnar Asplund) and Chapel of the Resurrection (Sigurd Lewerentz), Woodland Cemetery, Stockholm (Sweden), 1915-40.



liturgical vestments (Fig. 09-10). The statuary by Barata Feyo, the liturgical furnishings by architect Pádua Ramos, and the vestments designed by architect Archer (executed by his sister) are therefore an inseparable part of the building.

From the road, access is achieved along a long concrete paved path, creating a processional route as wide as the chapel's nave (Fig. 11). At the meeting point with the covered churchyard preceding the entrance—a loggia open on three sides—a granite base of the same width forms a step, emphasizing the space as an exterior altar. In this context, the space is punctuated by a lectern in the same material, placed

to the left, suggesting use for religious ceremonies during summer festivals (as in Le Corbusier's Notre-Dame du Haut, 1953–55) or for individual devotion when the chapel is closed.

This is the loggia found in Italian urban culture, but also, significantly, in the religious buildings of Asplund and Lewerentz at the Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm (1914–40) (Fig. 12).¹¹ It is a space that both accommodates and marks the transition to the interior; a space of preparation and deceleration that invites contemplation and inward reflection.

This first space is framed by the main façade of the nave, glassed-in at eye level across the full width



Fig. 13-14. Manuel Nunes de Almeida, Chapel of Our Lady of Fátima, Picote (Portugal), 1956–59; inside.

of the volume enclosing the chapel. Its transparency emphasizes the continuity of the spaces and invites both entry and prayer. However, once inside the chapel, the lofted choir ceiling, along with the two supporting structures that house the staircase and the confessional/holy water font, creates a transitional interior–exterior space — lower, darker, and denser — before revealing the altar, completely unobstructed and of double height (Fig. 13). The nave thus appears larger, brighter, and taller after this passage. Continuous light, flowing from the roof slab through the gaps between the beams and brick walls, and especially through the skylight above the altar, reinforces this sense of verticality (Fig. 14).

Behind the altar, with separate lateral access from the exterior, are the sacristy and, on the first floor, the catechism room.

The clarity of the design, self-evident in its rigor and geometric logic, reveals both maturity in the mastery of form and meaning, and a deep understanding of contemporary architecture, as previously noted. It is therefore unsurprising that the spatial sequence and the nave, terminated by the wooden wall defining the altar (like a curtain), bear points of contact with Mies van der Rohe's St Saviour Chapel at the IIT in Chicago (1949–52). This resemblance is also evident in the austere monumentality, symmetry, and the configuration of the nave and the presbytery,

with the altar positioned in exactly the same location; it is further reflected in the arrangement of support spaces (behind the altar), the materiality of the brick walls (interior and exterior), and the roofing system (Fig. 15-16).¹²

Six years elapsed between the start of the project and its consecration, which took place on April 19, 1959. During this period, the project underwent some minor adjustments, yet it essentially maintained its formal and symbolic cohesion, a consistency that reflects the author's conviction in the concept and determination. Small modifications can be identified in preliminary drawings: the bell tower was relocated from the right to the left side of the chapel, along with its associated service access. This change opens an unobstructed view of the entire portico for those arriving at the settlement and brings the tower closer to the cluster of houses. Inside, the welcoming space is reconsidered, with the design of the confessional altered to incorporate the baptismal font — initially positioned at the centre — within its structure. The granite altar, originally placed against the wooden wall, was later moved forward, allowing the priest to face the congregation. There are no exact dates for this transformation; however, its original position can be identified in the project drawings and in the earliest photographs of the chapel, while its relocation is already evident in the 1960s, most likely after 1965.

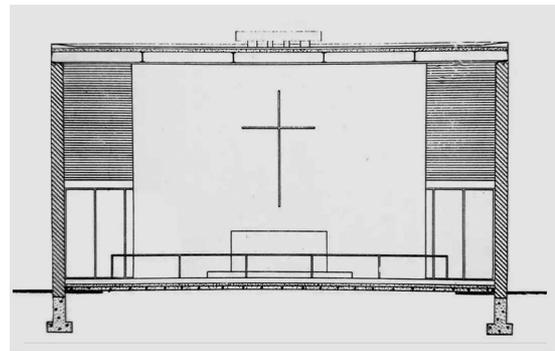
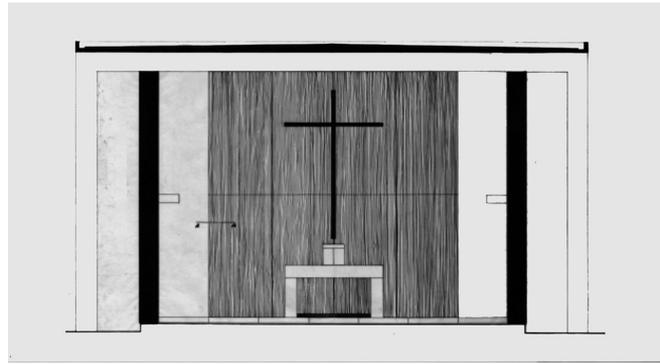
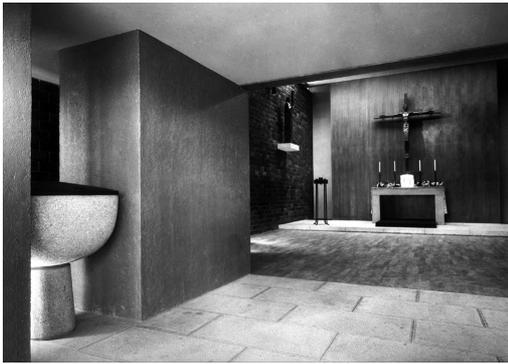


Fig. 15. Manuel Nunes de Almeida, Chapel of Our Lady of Fátima, Picote (Portugal), 1956–59; nave and design drawings.
 Fig. 16. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, St. Savior Chapel, IIT, Chicago (USA), 1949-52; nave and design drawings.

PRESERVATION

Radical, iconic, and the finest building of the Picote ensemble, the chapel first gained public visibility at the MRAR Exhibition at the *Paço Episcopal do Porto* in June, 1959 and in the review in *Colóquio. Revista de Artes e Letras*, no. 8, April 1960, although the coverage focused primarily on the design of the works of art. Subsequently, perhaps coinciding with the critical reevaluation of the modern movement, the chapel and the other buildings of Picote faded from collective memory; only a solitary caretaker, aware of the chapel's particularity, maintained the space for years. In the 1990s, Picote re-emerged through the work of architects Fátima Fernandes and Michele Cannatá in the publication *Moderno Escondido* (1997), a work they continued through the careful rehabilitation of some of the buildings, a process that continues today, generating a renewed

guide for discovery, curiosity, and the 'necessity' of visiting the place (Fernandes 2015).

Sixty-five years after its construction, Picote continues to reveal its unexpected novelty: an architecture emerging anew, awaiting (re)use after years of abandonment, neglect, and above all the lack of a sustained purpose in a national investment project that failed to consolidate human occupation in this territory.

The importance of preserving a group of such high-quality buildings, which so clearly reflect the political and cultural paradoxes of the period in which they were built, is unequivocal. Picote has embedded itself in our memory as a sign of modernity — a rare moment of cohesion between planning, design, and construction, preserved to this day as if in a time capsule, a mythical place of modernity.

Even in disuse, the relationship of the building with the site, in an almost eschatological sense of

the sublime, remains a powerful mediator between the physical world and what lies beyond it. Perhaps it offers a clue toward the necessary revision of religious practices, so often detached today from contemporary life and experience.

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- Fig. 02, 05-06, 08, 13-14. Author, 2025.
- Fig. 03, 07, 09-10, 15. Fátima Fernandes Archive.
- Fig. 04. Drawing by Fátima Fernandes.
- Fig. 12. Author, 2007.
- Fig. 16. Wikiarquitectura.com.

NOTES

1. Manuel Carlos Duarte Nunes de Almeida was born in Porto. He enrolled at the School of Fine Arts of Porto

in 1945 and received his Diploma in Architecture in March 1958.

2. For Schiller (1793), the sublime reveals the dignity of man: even when subject to the forces of nature, he remains free in spirit.

3. One of Álvaro Siza's guiding principles is the idea that a project is born more from the 'place' than from the architect's mind—a principle that the Porto School would later distill into the phrase: the project is in the site.

4. Authors of the plan and buildings of the Picote ensemble, a support settlement for the construction and operation of the Picote Dam (1954-57). Among other references, see the journeys undertaken in the context of work on the Douro hydroelectric scheme (Fernandes 2015).

5. The journey as a research tool was highlighted by Carlos Ramos in the curricular renewal at EBAP and would become one of the defining hallmarks of Távora's pedagogy.

6. Featured in the exhibition of Brazilian modern architecture at the III Congress of the UIA in Lisbon (1953) and published in *Arquitetura* 53 (December 1954).

7. The urgency of housing 5,000 workers likely justified the pragmatic, construction-site approach, with standardized typologies and series production for the prefabricated wooden houses and dormitories.

8. *Survey of Portuguese Popular Architecture, 1955–61*, with a team led in Trás-os-Montes by Octávio Lixa Filgueiras.

9. See the relationship between Daniel Defoe's concept of the 'civilized man' and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'natural man'.

10. *Religious Art Renewal Movement, 1952–66*. This group of architects included, for example, Nuno Teotónio Pereira and Nuno Portas.

11. Although Brazilian modern architecture was already known in Portugal and may have influenced the design of the *pousada* (Niemeyer's Pampulha Art Museum), in the case of the chapel, the design of the Palácio do Planalto in Brasília—which bears evident formal similarities—was created at the same time and therefore does not appear to be a likely reference.

12. The project was published in the 1950s by *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. Another point of proximity to Mies van der Rohe can also be observed in its conceptual relationship to the portico of the Farnsworth House (1946–50), the covered atrium, and the use of a white structural frame.