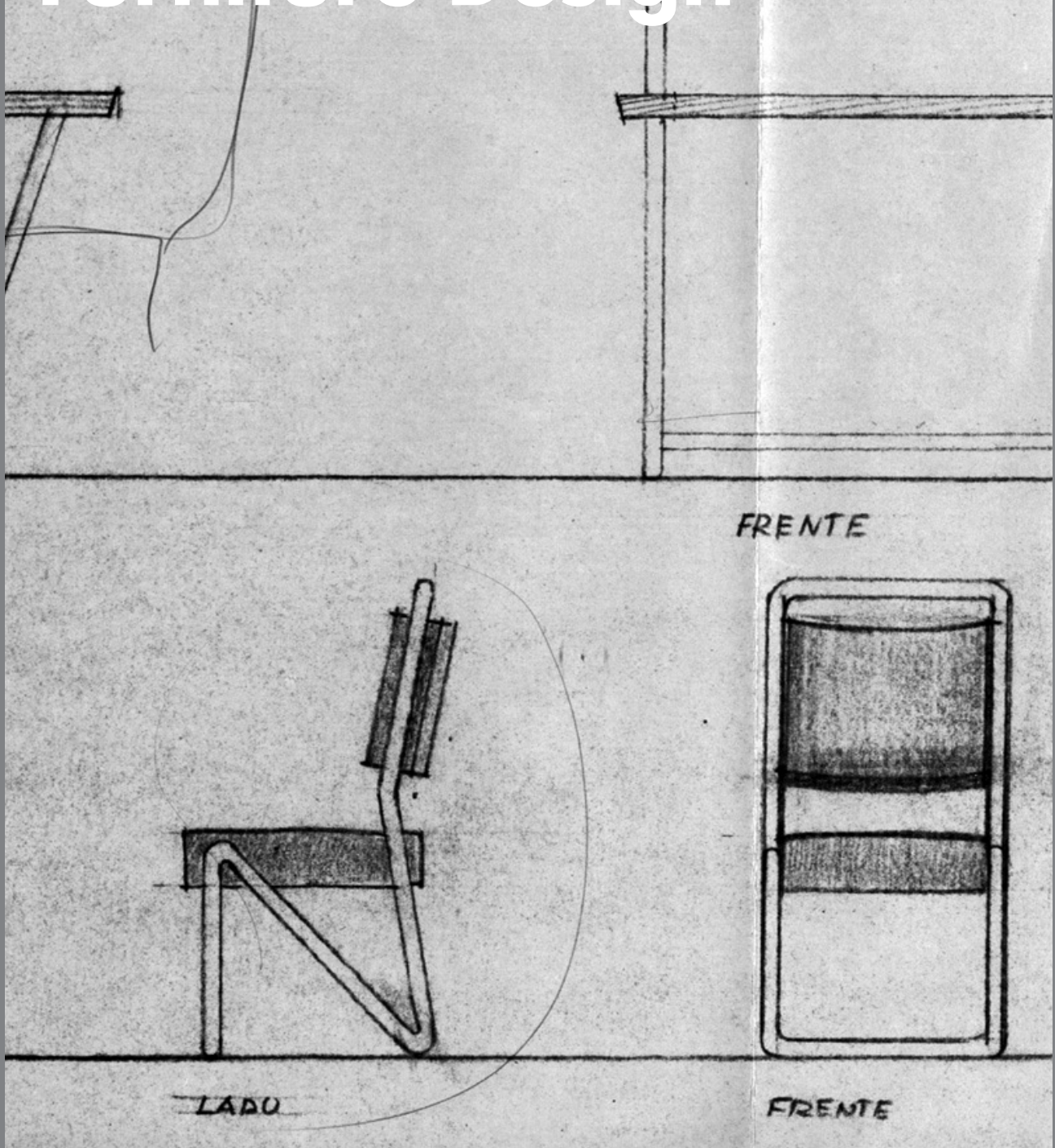


# Architecture and the *MESAS DO CATALOGO* Gesamtkunstwerk: Alberto Pessoa's Furniture Design

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In the post-war disciplinary discourse, the theme of architecture as a synthesis emerges evoking the idea of *gesamtkunstwerk*, this time associated with society's collective spaces. This debate sought the integration of functionalism with a more humanist approach as an attempt to bring together architecture and society.

Using as support two projects designed by Portuguese architect Alberto Pessoa (1919-1985), this text will explore the architect's design of furniture as a fundamental token in the search for a Modern global design, to discuss one instance of how the idea of modern architecture as a synthesis of several disciplines was pursued.

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By Susana Constantino

In 1969, when the headquarters and museum of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation were inaugurated in Lisbon to a project designed by Alberto Pessoa, Pedro Cid and Ruy Athoughia,<sup>1</sup> this ensemble became praised as a reference of a cultural facility embedded with the values of the "new monumentality."<sup>2</sup> On the one hand it epitomized a building for a civic institution related with the notion of a collective representation of the *zeitgeist*. On the other hand, it was the sheer materialization of the Modern notion of *gesamtkunstwerk*. Architecture, landscape, art and design were conflated in this building searching for the total integration of the disciplines. Therefore, it became associated with the "affirmative moment of a global design approach."<sup>3</sup>

This concept of global design resonates with Modern avant-garde's notion of a total work of art, defined by László Moholy-Nagy as "an attempt to bring together into one entity singular works or separate fields of creation that were isolated from one another. This entity was to be the 'Gesamtkunstwerk', architecture, the sum of all the arts."<sup>4</sup> Further, Moholy-Nagy argued already in 1925 what would become a banner of the post war reconceptualization of the modern: that the synthesis of the arts should go beyond individual achievements, include symbolic values and be concerned with community life. Hence, the theme of the synthesis of the arts in the global design is thus defined as a means to foster the humanization of Modern architecture.

An attempt to deliver a global design approach had already been made by Alberto Pessoa. In fact, in his projects since 1945, especially in those for public buildings, the equipment and the furniture were not thought of as aesthetically autonomous but as an integral part of the architectural design as a global project.

In this article, two of these projects, the Central Library and the building for the Student's Facilities of the University of Coimbra, will be analysed. Supported by this analysis, I will argue that Pessoa uses the construction details and the design of the furniture to bridge the gap between the different scales of the project, thus becoming a fundamental element in the building's formal and plastic characterization, in the pursuit to deliver a *gesamtkunstwerk*.

### Crafting the Space

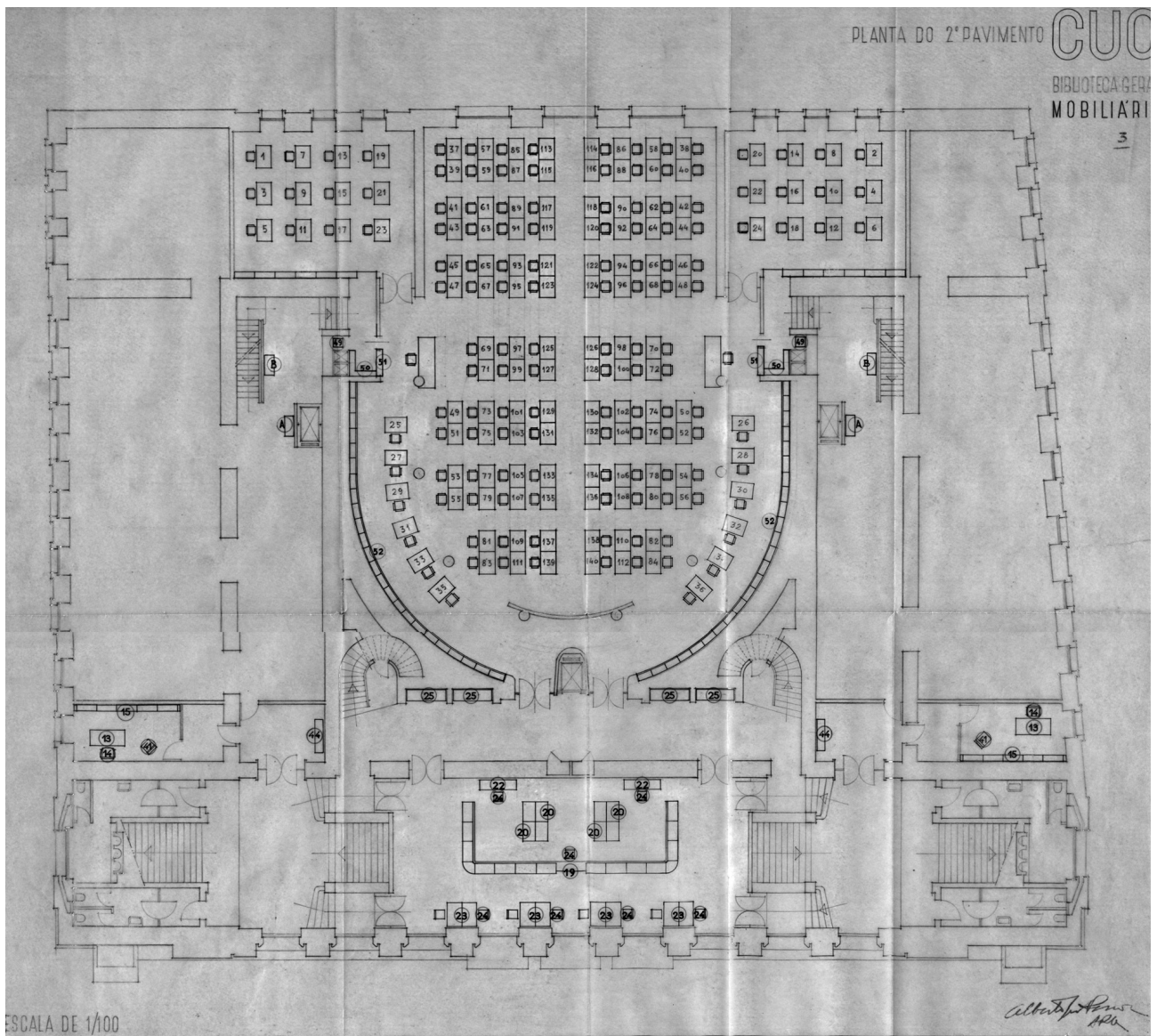
The outset of the construction of the new University of Coimbra campus, the so-called *Cidade Universitária*, was marked by a set of buildings designed by Alberto Pessoa,<sup>5</sup> among which the case of the Central Library is noteworthy. Taking advantage of the structure of a former educational building, which had itself been built on the foundations of the 18<sup>th</sup> century students theatre, from 1944 until 1946 the project was focused on renovating the façades "in order to integrate this building's architecture in the architectural type foreseen for the *Cidade Universitária*."<sup>6</sup> Once the interior layout was settled according to a pre-defined program, from 1954 to 1955 Pessoa thoroughly designed all the building's details, including lighting equipment and furniture.

The layout of the furniture was deliberately used to organize the space in relation with the building's structure. Likewise, the furniture's detailing resonates with the spaces hierarchical position concerning its representation value.

In the case of the main reading hall, Pessoa took advantage of the furniture layout—especially the double set of the cluster chair/table/lamp in waxed oak wood and *Formica*—to emphasize the proportion and the scale of the space, a reminiscence of the former theatre room. Moreover, the semi-circular shape is underscored by the incorporation next to the room's main entrance of a concave ceramic panel created by the artist Jorge Barradas. Hence, the furniture, both freestanding and recessed components, highlights the reading hall's spatial structure, which is further accentuated by the detailing of

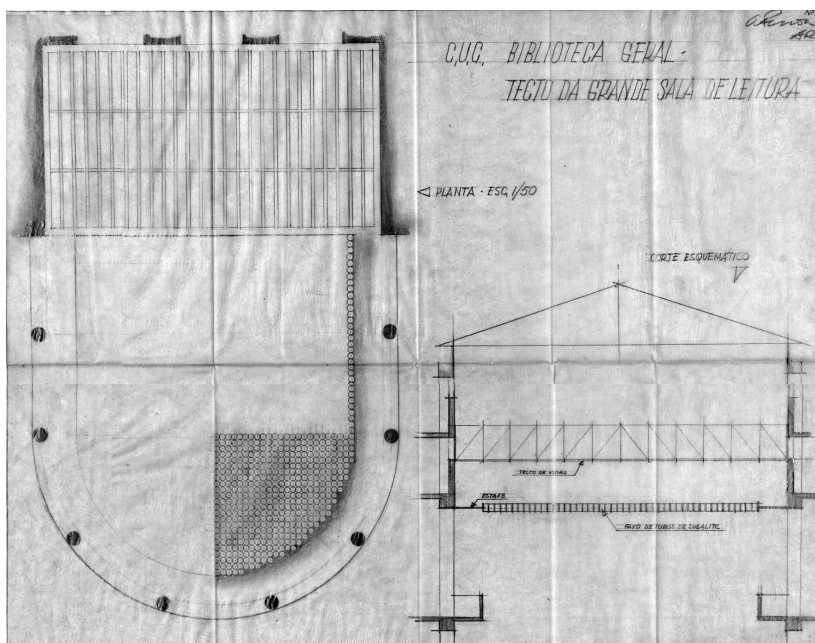
< Preliminary design of the furniture, 1955, Alberto Pessoa.





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Figure 1. Central Library, Coimbra. Layout of the furniture: 2<sup>nd</sup> floor plan. Preliminary design of the furniture, 1955, **Alberto Pessoa**. Source: Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra. CAPOCUC. CUC2008-138.

Figure 2. Central Library, Coimbra. Ceiling of the main reading hall. Construction detail, 1955, **Alberto Pessoa**. Source: Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra. CAPOCUC. CUC2008-49.

Figure 3. Central Library, Coimbra. Main reading hall. Photo by Susana Constantino, 2012.

Figure 4. Central Library, Coimbra. Type 1 and 2: table and chair, Main reading hall. Preliminary design of the furniture, 1955, **Alberto Pessoa**. Source: Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra. CAPOCUC. Processo 384.

Figure 5. Central Library, Coimbra. Type 23 and 24: table and chair, catalogue room. Preliminary design of the furniture, 1955, **Alberto Pessoa**. Source: Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra. CAPOCUC. Processo 384.

the ceiling, which includes a skylight offsetting the limits of the room, made with a grid of fibre cement cylinders.

As for the furniture of the catalogue room, it shows, somewhat surprisingly in that context, references to Modern furniture,<sup>7</sup> combining the chairs' and desks' structure in curved tubular steel with seats in green leather and wooden desktops, creating a formal connection with the other furniture in the room, namely the central desk, the recessed displays or the file drawers cabinets.

### Conflating Furniture and Spatial Structure

The students' facilities ensemble of buildings at the University of Coimbra was co-authored by Alberto Pessoa and the architect/artist João Abel Manta, and designed between 1956 and 1959. This building belongs already to a new paradigm of Modern architecture, suggesting a more intertwined design approach conflating several disciplines: architecture, landscape and design. Triggered by the components of the programme, which included a canteen, a gymnasium, a theatre and several students' cultural sections, the ensemble was organized in separated volumes articulated around a garden, organized according to a hierarchical assessment of their representation value.

Pessoa and Manta also proposed two ceramic panels covering a large part of the buildings' façades facing the main streets around the ensemble,<sup>8</sup> which they regarded

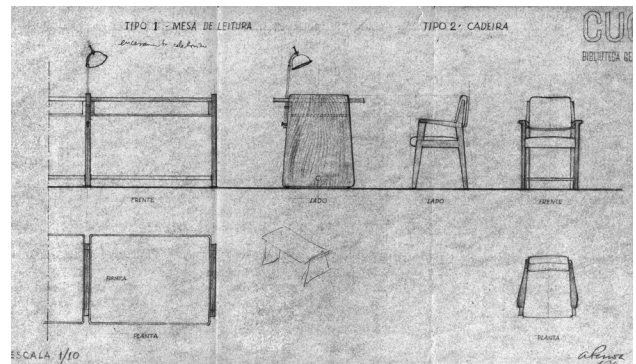
as "architecture's constituent elements," thus revealing their interest "in accomplishing a global design, from the building's conception, its functioning and decorative equipment, until the Integration of the Arts".<sup>9</sup>

In the interior of the buildings, Pessoa reiterates the idea of highlighting the building's spatial structure by the layout and detailing of the furniture. Once again different materials are used according to the purpose of each space and the assessment of its representation value, with some exceptions, though. Technical areas such as workshops and laboratories were equipped with curved tubular steel furniture, a material also used in vitrines and displays of more noble spaces, such as the academic museum. Further, this material was also combined in several furniture components with wood and *Formica*, thus revealing a conscious conflation of references taken from Nordic design and Modern steel tube furniture.

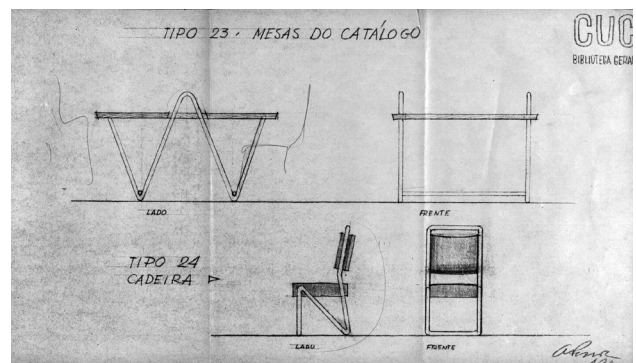
In the theatre building, the design of the furniture goes beyond spatial organization: the ticket office, the coat hangers, the bar of the cafeteria at the foyer and especially the chairs and the materials of the auditorium, they are all part of an integral architectural conception. The characterization of the space is deeply determined by the character and the materials specified to those elements. Even in more secluded areas, such as dressing rooms and other areas of the backstage, several furniture elements are recessed, designed for a specific location.



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## Architecture and the Arts Conflated into a Single Plastic Intention

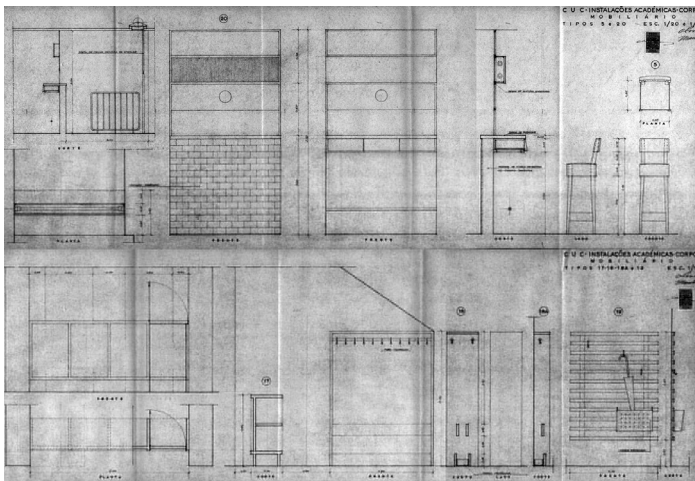
Hence, in the projects analysed, a system can be observed where distinct elements—furniture, equipment and finishing materials—are related through the unifying agency of the architectural project. In the case of the central library one can see that system working in the internal spaces of the building, autonomously to its external characterization. In fact, according to José António Bandeira, the Central Library is a “work of compromise,” which brings about Pessoa’s “subjection to the conditions of the *Cidade Universitária* plan and its language,” of which he would be emancipated in the “sublime definition of the detailing and, especially, in the design of the furniture”.<sup>10</sup>

Otherwise, in the Students’ Facilities ensemble, the conflation between the overall design and the detail is almost complete. Here, Pessoa delivers the idea of *gesamtkunstwerk* through the concept of the ‘Synthesis of the Arts’, a central notion in Modern architecture’s discourse. This ensemble, the author argues, “resonates with a perfect integration of the Arts, i.e.: with the cohesive and simultaneous conception of the whole and the detail, of architecture and decoration, conflated into a single plastic intention”.<sup>11</sup>

Alberto Pessoa brings about, as already suggested in 1925 by Moholy-Nagy, the idea of the conflation of the various artistic and design disciplines to create a unitary atmosphere, a total design. In Coimbra, a decade before the buildings for the Gulbenkian Foundation, Pessoa embraces a disciplinary synthesis where architecture works as the privileged medium towards the construction of an humanized habitat, and the framework in which it works together with the arts, landscaping, and building techniques as indissoluble components of a global composition from the structure to the furniture.

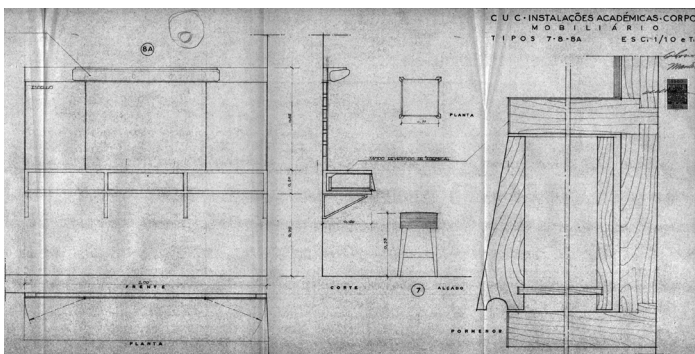
### Notes

1. The winning project for the Headquarters and Museum of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation resulted from a competition where the candidates were invited and the winner was selected by a committee of consultants formed by, among others, Lesley Martin, Franco Albini, Carlos Ramos and Keil do Amaral. The winning team of architects would eventually be joined by technicians from other disciplines, such as the interior designers Daciano da Costa e Eduardo Anahory. For more information about this project, see Ana Tostões, ed., *Sede e Museu Gulbenkian: Ensaios*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2006.
2. This was a central theme in the reconceptualization of Modern Movement’s discourse, triggered by the publication in 1943 of the



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Figure 6. Student’s Facilities, Coimbra. Theatre, Ticket Office and Coat Hangers. Construction detail of the Furniture. 1960. **Alberto Pessoa** and **João Abel Manta**. *Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra*. CAPOCUC. Processo 539.



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Figure 7. Student’s Facilities, Coimbra. Theatre, Dressing rooms tables. Construction detail of the Furniture. 1960. **Alberto Pessoa** and **João Abel Manta**. *Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra*. CAPOCUC. Processo 539.

Figure 8. Student’s Facilities, Coimbra. Library. *Biblioteca de Arte da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian*. *Coleção Estúdio Horácio Novais*. CFT164 160934.ic. Photo by Horácio Novais. 1960s.

Figure 9 Student’s Facilities, Coimbra. Drawing Room. *Biblioteca de Arte da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian*. *Coleção Estúdio Horácio Novais*. CFT164 160955.ic. Photo by Horácio Novais. 1960s.

Figure 10 Student’s Facilities, Coimbra. Theatre, Foyer. *Biblioteca de Arte da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian*. *Coleção Estúdio Horácio Novais*. CFT164 160949.ic. Photo by Horácio Novais. 1960s

Figure 11. Student’s Facilities, Coimbra. Theatre, Auditorium. *Biblioteca de Arte da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian*. *Coleção Estúdio Horácio Novais*. Photo by Horácio Novais. 1960s.



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manifesto "Nine Points on Monumentality". See Josep Lluís Sert, Fernand Léger, and Sigfried Giedion, "Nine Points on Monumentality" in Joan Ockman, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968. A Documentary Anthology*, New York, Rizzoli, 1993, 29-30.

3. Ana Tostões, "A Arquitectura Como Imagem Gulbenkian," Tostões, Ana, ed., *Sede e Museu Gulbenkian: Ensaio*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Serviço de Belas-Artes, 2006, 40.
4. Moholy-Nagy, Laszlo, *Painting, Photography, Film*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1967, 17. (1st edition 1925).
5. The first constructed buildings are the University's Archive (1948), the Faculty of Letters and the Central Library (1956). The works for Coimbra's "Cidade Universitária" started in 1943 on a building site which was the result of an enormous operation of demolition of the medieval urban fabric. The general plan was designed by Cottineli Telmo, and it was influenced by Salazar's regime political agenda, thus following as references the campuses of Madrid and Rome.
6. Alberto Pessoa, "Memória Descritiva do Projecto de Arquitectura da Biblioteca Central. Junho 1944", *Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra*, CUC 2008-97.
7. Widespread in big scale after the mass production of, among others, low-cost chairs and desks designed by the Bauhaus furniture workshop, supervised by Marcel Breuer since 1926, or the presentation of furniture designed by Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret in the Paris Autumn Salon in 1929. For more information on the modernist furniture in Portugal, see Rui Afonso Santos, "O design e a decoração em Portugal: 1900-1994" in Pereira, Paulo, dir., *História da Arte Portuguesa*, vol.III, Lisboa, Circulo de Leitores, 1995, 437-505.
8. In fact, only one of the panels would eventually become part of the façade; the other panel was sent to the interior of the garden, mounted on a wall built on purpose to the design of the architects.
9. Alberto Pessoa, "Carta dirigida a Engenheiro Director-Delegado da CAPOCUC. Agosto 1958", AUC, CAPOCUC 508.
10. José António Bandeirinha, "Os Edifícios da Associação Académica e o Teatro de Gil Vicente", *Monumentos. Revista Semestral de Edifícios e Monumentos*, 8, March 1998, 83-84.
11. Alberto Pessoa, "Memória Descritiva do Projecto do Painele de Azulejos Policromados. Janeiro 1959". AUC, CAPOCUC 508.

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