

Nadir Afonso: the Painter (who graduated) Architect From his Collaboration with Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, to his Works in Chaves and the Abandonment of Architecture

By João Cepeda¹

Nadir Afonso, one of the most well known (and recognized) Portuguese painters, has dedicated a great deal of his life to practicing the profession from which he graduated as an architect a facet that is still commonly unknown by the great public, as it was just slightly studied by the history of contemporary Portuguese Architecture.

Regarding his career, it is to particularly note the periods he spent abroad, working with Le Corbusier and Niemeyer. These influential authors of the Modern Movement gave him the opportunity to participate in various projects that marked the history of architecture. This singular international phase manifestly resulted in Modern influences that are visible in the work he later built in Chaves.

Nadir Afonso ended up abandoning the profession, since when he has dedicated himself to Painting on a full-time basis.

1938–1946

The Formation Period

The “choice” of Architecture—Porto

Despite having always revealed a natural predisposition to embrace painting, Nadir Afonso ended up enrolling on a course of Architecture at the old School of Fine Arts in Porto (1938), advised by a member of the school staff. At the School of Fine Arts, Nadir Afonso found a quite open climate which, under the influence of Professor Carlos Ramos, marked a decisive moment in the reformulation of teaching Architecture in Portugal. Even so, his dilemma between being a painter or an architect never diminished. Throughout the whole of his graduation course, Nadir Afonso always persisted in designing Architecture to be seen and appreciated as if it were Painting, i.e., practicing architecture through the eyes and the soul of a painter.

1946–1960

The International Phase

In the studios of Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer—Paris, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo

Then, upon conclusion of his studies, what becomes outstanding is his rich and fascinating career abroad, mainly in collaboration with two of the most influent masters of the Modern Movement: first with Le Corbusier in Paris (“*Atelier des Bâtitseurs*—ATBAT”, 1946–48 and 1950–51), of who he became a great friend, and then with Oscar Niemeyer in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (1951–54). Thus, he had the unique opportunity to participate with

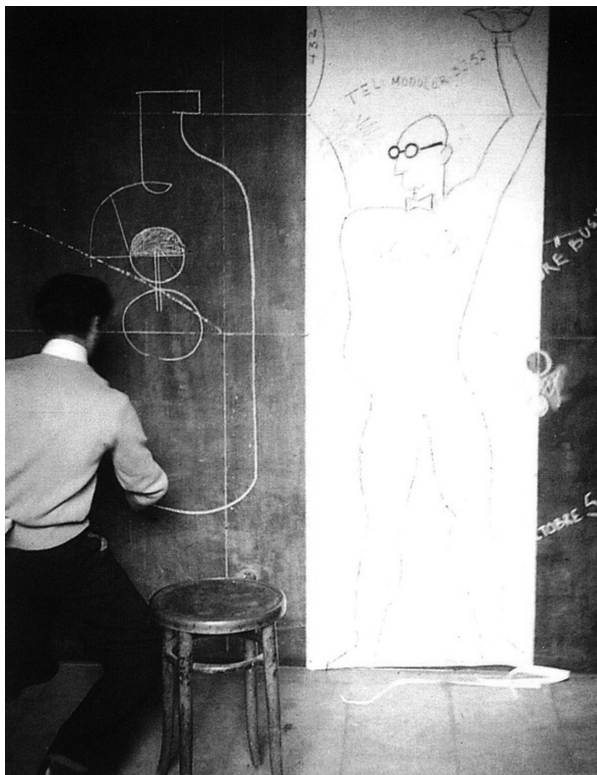


Figure 1. Nadir Afonso in the ATBAT in Paris, drawing Le Corbusier at the Modulor's scale, on the birthday of the Swiss architect. Photographer unknown.⁸

Figure 2. Nadir Afonso (on the right) working with Teodoro Ponce de León in the ATBAT of Le Corbusier, in Paris. Photographer unknown.⁹

Figure 3. From left to right: Olek Kujawsky, Iánnis Xenáki and Nadir Afonso (with their wives), at the time they worked on the construction site of the *Unité d'Habitation de Marseille*, 1950. Photographer unknown.⁸

Figure 4. Certificate of Le Corbusier to Nadir Afonso, 1948. Photographer unknown.⁵

Figure 5. Nadir Afonso in Rio de Janeiro, 1952. Photographer unknown.⁸

Figure 6. Nadir Afonso's house in the Outeiro Seco Road, nowadays (2010). Photo by João Cepeda.

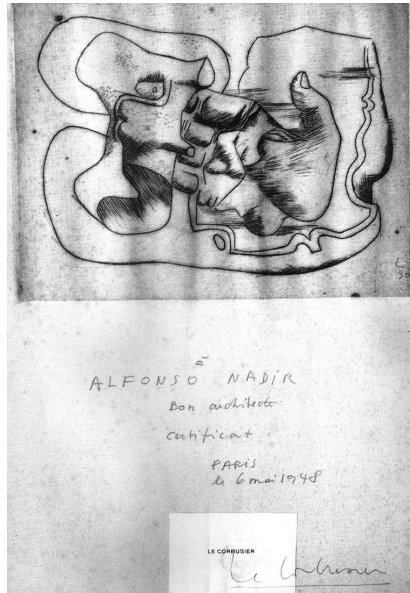


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these two renowned architects in some remarkable projects of the history of 20th century Modern architecture, like the *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles (1945-52), the *Claude et Duval Factory* in Saint-Dié (1946-51) and the project for the Exhibition commemorating the 4th centenary of the city of São Paulo in the Ibirapuera Park (1951-54), among others. It is also worth emphasizing his participation in the final investigation team of Le Corbusier's famous Modulor—a system designed to find harmony in architectural compositions. This opportunity gave him the advantage of getting a great proximity to one of his great passions—Geometry. This proximity decisively contributed to the development of his remarkable expertise in manipulating the proportions and relations among geometric shapes and figures.



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In Paris, he also collaborated with some of his former friends and colleagues of the ATBAT, the architects Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic and Shadrach Woods (1954-60), mainly in various urban projects, namely the urban plans of Bagnols-sur-Cèze (1956-61), Balata (1959) and Agadir (1963). Thus, his unique international career ended up being decisive in his learning process as an architect.

During this period, it is also worth emphasizing Nadir Afonso's contact with a wide variety of international personalities. Many of these were from the Architecture sphere, like Roberto Burle Marx, Hélio Uchoa and Lúcio Costa, but others were mainly from the Arts area, like Victor Vasarely, Richard Mortensen, Auguste Herbin, André Bloc, Cândido Portinari, Di Cavalcanti, Dewasne, Edgard Pillet and Fernand Léger. He worked together with some of these people, and the work experience he gained



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surely contributed to also enrich his future artistic evolution.

Although Nadir Afonso has invoked Painting as the main motivation for his world-wide career, the truth is that it was not certainly by chance that he chose to collaborate first with Le Corbusier and later with Oscar Niemeyer. As a matter of fact, Le Corbusier was the most important architect of the Modern Movement, which exercised a great influence in Portugal and especially in Porto. Niemeyer and the Modern Brazilian expressionist architecture were already widely appreciated in Portugal as well. Thus, no wonder that, having experienced what others would have ambioned, Nadir Afonso has worked with the architects who were culturally closer to the formation of a Modern consciousness in Portugal. Therefore, this period abroad should be regarded to some extent as an intentional and deliberate path by Nadir Afonso as an architect.²

So, although he has always lived a dual vocational and professional life translated into a simultaneous production of architectural and painting works, all this long international cycle was crucial to his architectural career, due to his direct contact with major players of the Modern Movement, and the knowledge and influences he gained, as well as the projection that he could, thus, achieve as an architect.

1960 —1970

The Autonomous Practice of Architecture

In his own studio—Chaves and Coimbra

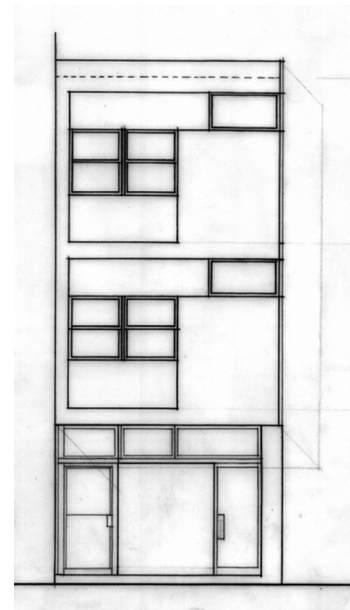
In Portugal, he worked in architecture for short periods. In Lisbon (1945, with Fernando Silva), in Porto (1950, with Fernando Távora, Fernando Lanhas and Fernando Moura), in Coimbra (1960-62, with

Carlos de Almeida) and finally ended up establishing his office in Chaves, his homeland. Here, in 1960, he began his career on his own as an architect, in a small environment that could only grant him humble clients and modest sales, certainly different from those affordable in the big cities and in some of the offices he had worked before and where, should he have stayed, he could have followed a more promising career and taken more advantage of the experience he had gained previously. Yet, Trás-os-Montes—and Chaves in particular—was marked by the presence of this painter-architect who concentrated there a great deal of his achievements, especially in the first half of the 60's.

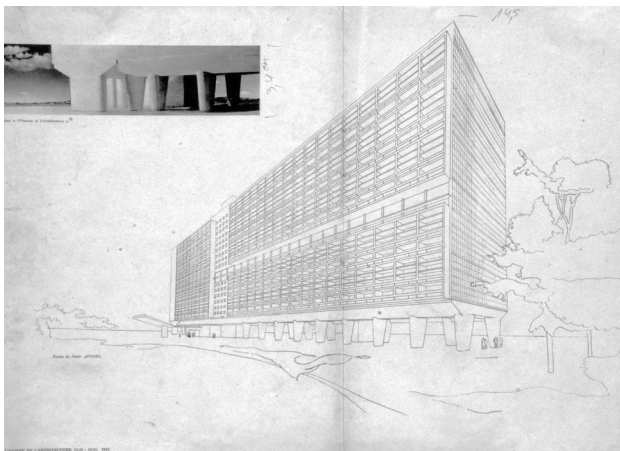
Regardless of the contexts, the performance of architecture emerged in Nadir Afonso's life only as an indispensable resource to his economical subsistence and never as a true passion like Painting, activity which he never left out of mind.



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Figure 7. **Le Corbusier's** factory "Claude et Duval" of Saint-Dié. Photographer unknown.⁵

Figure 8. **Nadir Afonso's** project for the residential and commercial building in Madalena-Chaves (elevation), 1960. Source: Personal archive of João Cepeda.

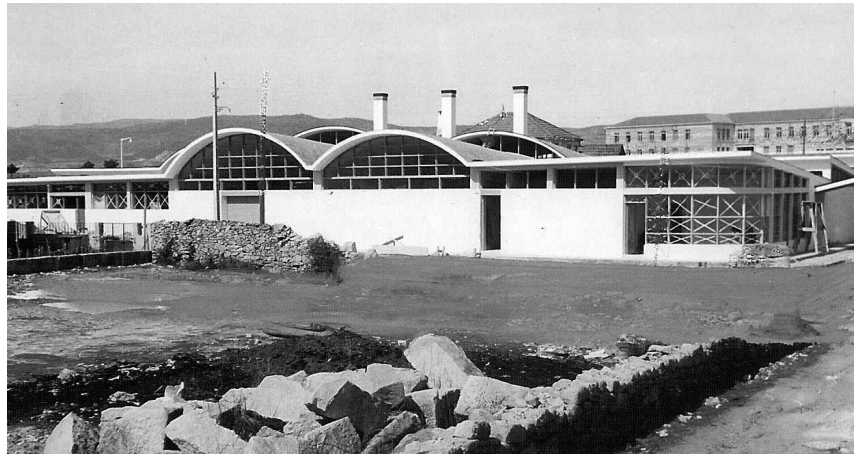
Figure 9. Perspective of the *Unité d'Habitation de Marseille* designed by **Nadir Afonso**, published in the magazine "*L'Homme et l'Architecture*", 1947. Photographer unknown.⁸

Figure 10. **Nadir Afonso's** residential and commercial building in Madalena-Chaves, 1960s. Photographer unknown.⁵

Figure 11. **Nadir Afonso's** Chaves bakery, nowadays (2010). Photo by João Cepeda.

Figure 12. **Nadir Afonso's** Chaves bakery under construction, 1962-64. Source: Personal archive of Nadir Afonso.

Figure 13. **Nadir Afonso's** Vila Real bakery (abandoned), nowadays (2010). Photo by João Cepeda.



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Therefore, his architectural work emerged gradually in a non-continuous way, at times showing little confidence or not even dictated by passion. Thus, the Modernity that characterizes his architectural work reveals some hesitation in certain pieces, whereas it is fully explicit in others, clearly emphasizing the Modern influences present in a well determined cycle of his life.

The Challenge of a Personal Work: The Indelible Presence of Modern Influences

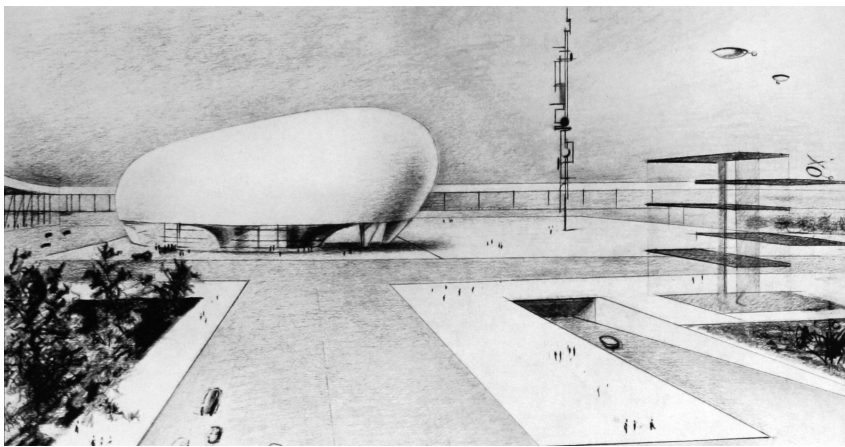
In general terms, Nadir Afonso intuitively expressed in those projects a language remarkably influenced by Le Corbusier. The mark of Modern Brazilian architecture with which he got acquainted during the period when he worked with Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil is sometimes also worth of notice. The Chaves (1962) and Vila Real (1965) bakeries—unique masterpieces of the 20th century Portuguese architecture, well-illustrative of the pure and abstract language of the Modern Movement—exhibit a delicate merge of those two Modern references. If on the one hand they exhibit a more rigorous and

orthogonal design, on the other hand, they display a freer, more spontaneous and gestural design in their dome coverings. This curve/straight dialectic results in a harmonious combination which, due to its originality, substantiates a unique spatial and volumetric Modernity in Portugal.

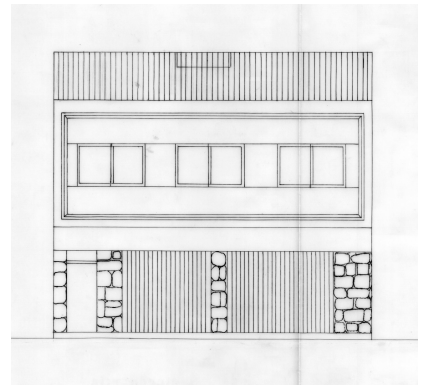
Simplicity is, in general, transversal to all of his Modern projects, in an attempt to compose simpler and purer volumes, together with a clear search for harmony and purity in proportions, thus giving the architectural solutions a clear desire of Modernity.

The house in the Outeiro Seco Road (1961) constitutes one of the most significant cases of this attention to the aesthetic care in the volume modeling. It reflects a Modern and pure geometric depuration which, in Nadir Afonso's architectural works as a whole, is perhaps the most illustrative example of the "Corbusian" vocabulary.

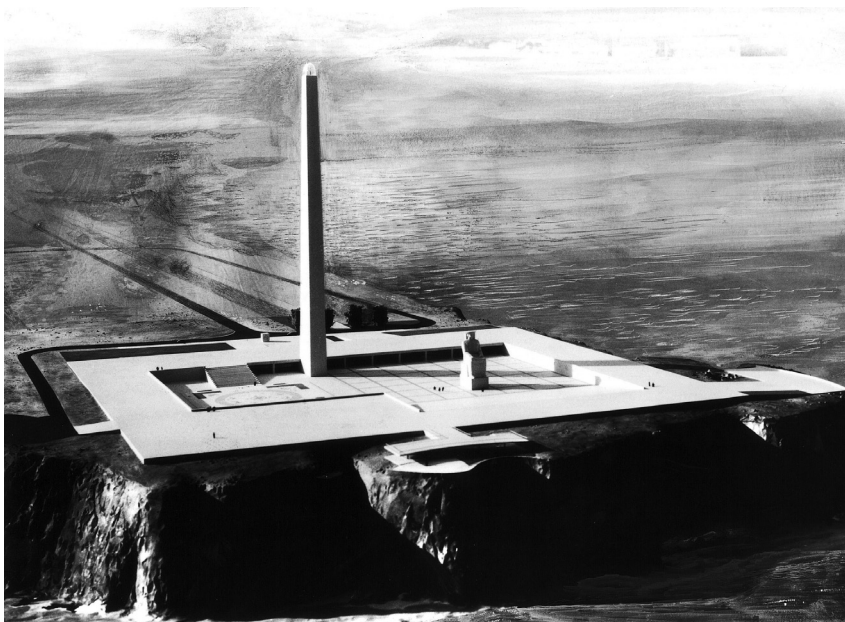
The project (never built) of a "rotary" theatre (1957) emerges from his set of works with an absolutely exceptional identity, due to its singular and utopian nature, "futurist" and original, associated with the transposition of the dynamics of kinetic art into architecture.



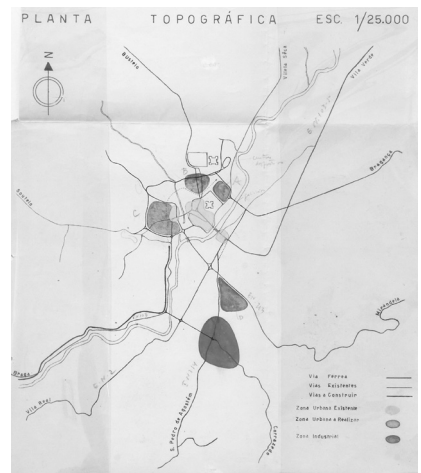
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Among all of his projects (and in particular among the most Modern ones), it is also inevitable to highlight one of his most distinguishable works which consisted of a sober and rational design for the Infante Dom Henrique monument (not built, 1954–55), face to face with the abyss and exceptionally integrated into the scenery of the Sagres cliff. The flat nature and subtle lines of this light and elegant project denotes a Modernity with which we identify ourselves, even nowadays, constituting, maybe, the most “current” project among all of his architectural works.

In these designs, besides the already mentioned attention to proportions and the formal rigor of the relations as a whole, Nadir Afonso often stresses the rhythm of his constructions through the use of chromatic contrasts, normally in a synthesis of two or three primary colors (in addition to white), with a special predominance of the blue and the red.

This aspect is well captured in the two bakeries, in the Outeiro Seco House and in the small residential and commercial building in Madalena (1960), and draws our attention to the Modern “Corbusian” palette of colors so widely used in many of the architect’s masterpieces. Yet, in this particular aspect, the influence intrinsic to Nadir Afonso’s mentality as a painter should not be overlooked, as it might probably have moved him to an instinctive addition of these streaks of colour.

This free chromatic treatment of shapes, aimed at completing and emphasizing a search for volumetrically harmonized and mutually “melodious” architectural compositions, was never supported by the use of the measures suggested by Le Corbusier’s Modulor, which Nadir Afonso could follow closely either as a member of the ATBAT final investigations team or in its subsequent application to various projects of the Swiss architect.

Figure 14. **Nadir Afonso’s** “futurist” project (never built) of a “rotary” theatre (perspective), made in Paris at the request of the Hungarian sculptor Nicolas Schöffer, 1957. Photographer unknown.⁸

Figure 15. **Nadir Afonso’s** (not built) project for the competition of the Infante Dom Henrique monument in Sagres (model), 1954–55. Photographer unknown.⁸

Figure 16. **Nadir Afonso’s** (not built) project for a small residential building in São Roque–Chaves (elevation), 1964. Photo by João Cepeda.

Figure 17. **Nadir Afonso’s** Chaves urban pre-planning (topographic plan), 1964. Photo by João Cepeda. Source: Personal archive of Nadir Afonso.

Figure 18. **Nadir Afonso’s** (not built) project of the movie theatre in Chaves (elevation), 1961. Photo by João Cepeda.

Figure 19. One of the **Nadir Afonso’s** proposals of the urban plan for the Dr. António José de Almeida Street in Coimbra (perspective), 1961. Photo by Eduardo Mascarenhas de Lemos.

However, if in this former group the wish of a Modern expression is obvious, in other situations we are confronted with drawings in which that expression is not so clear, and it seems there have been some concessions to rather more traditional answers. As a matter of fact, in other Nadir Afonso's architectural projects, a mixture of tradition and Modernity predominates, yet, they never assume a dominant style, at least integrally. Even so, they seem to wish to be singled out from a purely traditional Architecture.

In volumetric terms, all these other examples reveal a degree of depuration and simplicity remarkably lower than that of the first set of projects. By analyzing its architectural plans we realize, in addition, that they all possess less fluid spatial solutions, based on a remarkably traditional design. Yet, in this second set, Nadir Afonso invariably rehearses a complementary Modernization of the architectural object at the outside level, through various

design strategies that he applied with more or less intensity in each case. They served the purpose of suggesting simpler, purer and lighter volumes, the transmission of a stronger sensation of horizontality and orthogonality, the search for more abstract façades, and a current attempt at transmitting an illusion of a flat upper finishing, by disguising the coverings in traditional roofs which systematically configure the top of these buildings.

This remarkable difference comparing to his more Modern works is mainly explained by a gradual and increasing separation from his profession, motivated by an enormous creative dissatisfaction that his profession could never fulfill.

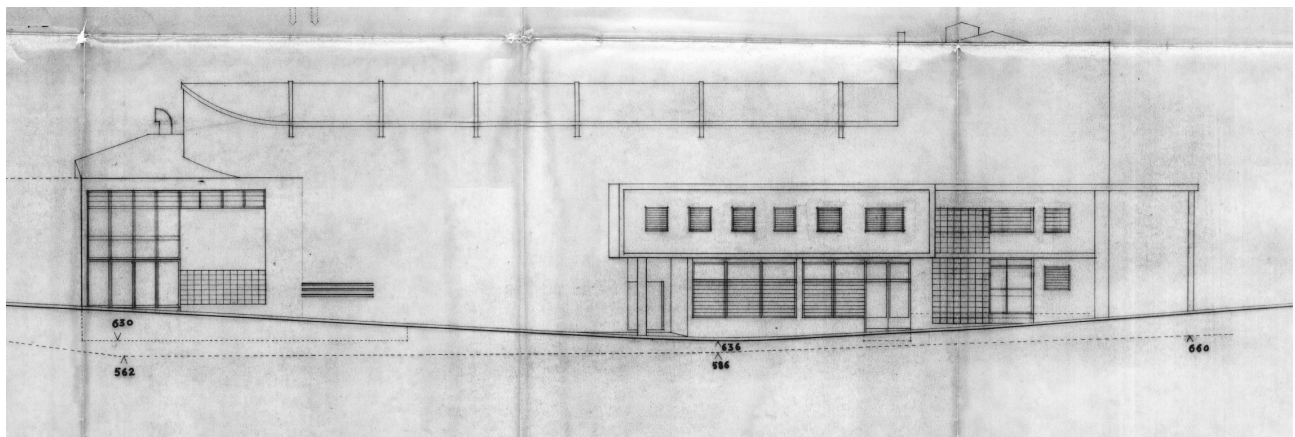
Actually, this interpretation seems to be confirmed by a chronological analysis of all of his selected works and projects. The most Modern ones were designed at an initial stage in his career as an architect (until 1962), whereas the most "compromised" ones correspond to a later period (until 1964), closer

to the time when he abandoned architecture, and so at a time of Nadir Afonso's particular disenchantment towards the practice of his profession.

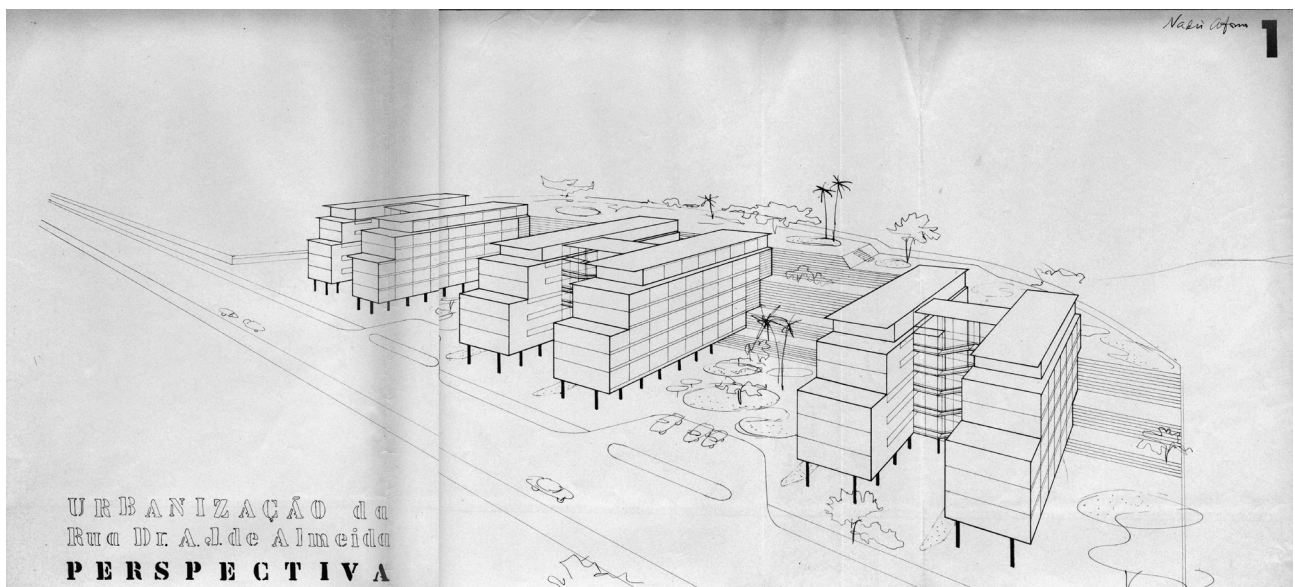
Only the bakery in Vila Real, a building with Modern lines, designed in 1965, emerges as an exception to this tendency. Yet, his choice in this project for a kind of "mimic" answer replicating, in general, his homonymous work in Chaves, seems to bring to light once more the "saturation point" that Nadir Afonso would already have reached towards designing new architectural projects, confirming to some extent the above mentioned interpretation.

Curiously enough, it is still worth mentioning that—apart from the Chaves urban pre-planning (1964)—it is also in his first works (the most Modern ones) that we can find the most complex programs he had to answer to.

His indifference to architecture, even though exponential at the end of his career, is also visible—throughout his whole work—in his great difficulty to



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deal with the clients, which would lead him sometimes to radical decisions, such as abandoning projects already concluded. These were the cases of the project of the movie theatre in the town of Chaves (1961) and its urban pre-planning (1964).

“Architecture is not an Art”

From his path as an architect (and artist) it is worth highlighting the importance of the strong theoretical reflection that always accompanied him, translated into a number of conceptual studies on Architecture. He had already defended these concepts in his thesis “*Architecture is not an Art*” (1948). The name of this thesis is very meaningful and almost seems to legitimate his difficult relationship with architecture. To him, the fact that architecture cannot be dissociated from its inevitable nature as a utility—to satisfy mandatorily a practical function—constituted the main source of all restrictions to his creativity, thus, in his view, placed out of the artistic scope.³

Curiously, Nadir Afonso’s theory of opposing art to utility is very similar to that of the famous architect Adolf Loos, who also influenced Le Corbusier during his graduation and in the beginning of his career: “[...] the house has to please everyone, contrary to the work of art which does not. The work is a private matter for the artist. The house is not. The work of art is brought into the world without there being a need for it. The house satisfies a requirement. The work of art is responsible to none; the house is responsible to everyone. [...] Does it follow that the house has nothing in common with art and is architecture not to be included in the Arts? That is so.”⁴

Nadir Afonso’s strong assumption that Architecture is not an Art, together with the complex interdisciplinarity of the first activity which implies a collaborative work and has no intimate, lonesome or individual artistic genesis, constitutes the core of his great creative dissatisfaction towards architecture. It is, therefore, usual to hear him say that he never liked architecture and never felt like a true architect.⁵ As a matter of fact, his devotion to painting was always so intense that not even the privileged path among his peers—contacting with two of the greatest architects of the 20th century—was strong enough to deviate him from it.

The Abandonment of Architecture

Based on these assumptions, somewhere between 1965 and 1970, Nadir Afonso made up his mind to leave architecture for good, thus releasing himself from the “[...] martyrdom”⁶ that he had chosen about 30 years before in Porto, and then starting a full-time commitment to painting and to the cre-

ation of numerous plastic and theoretical works.

In reality, his vigorous theoretical position, which he still defends nowadays, can be found reflected in some of the works he made—namely in the later ones—thus helping to explain the appearance of “passionless” and less interesting architectural solutions.

However, some of Nadir Afonso’s initial works, especially the Infante Dom Henrique monument (1954–55) and the Chaves bakery (1962) projects seem to reflect a certain degree of artistic involvement. From his drawings, the search for a strong tension and accuracy, purer volumetric modeling and more harmonious proportions stands out.

Having never expressed a wish to evolve artistically in Architecture, in these cases Nadir Afonso may have exceptionally moved away from this position and faced all the “impositions” not as restrictions, but rather as the basic references that would make it possible for him to go further and find an artistic character in his proposals. “[...] I don’t mean there are no architects—and maybe I have been one of them—who have also tried to find a balance within the laws [...] [that rule the work of art]. But it doesn’t look like the normal way.”⁷

As it has been illustrated throughout his entire professional career, Nadir Afonso was at all times a painter-architect, but always a painter in the first place and only afterwards an architect, a painter through his soul and architect only through education, having his life and works constantly marked by this dichotomy of activities.

However, the huge weight that his ability as a painter always had in his life does not seem to show with an identical density in his architectural work in a way that one could consider it as the “architecture of a painter”. The current use of colors (primary colors usually) in his buildings, searching for aesthetic and balanced compositions, and the concept of freedom present in the drawing of the dome coverings of the bakeries—aspects that can also be seen as some of the Modern influences that he received—are in fact the only situations that seem to point towards an intervention of his painting character in Architecture, but not significant to the extent of making it possible to identify a painter’s hand in the architectural work.

Concluding, upon the analysis of all of Nadir Afonso’s architectural inventory—which proves to be far bigger than it is commonly thought by the great public—it is worth emphasizing his set of initial projects, among which his adherence to a lexicon of great Modernity deserves a particular attention, even though without the radicalism and intransigence of the architects he worked with in France and Brazil.

In fact, even in the drawings in which Nadir Afonso seems to propose a more Modern language, adhering to some of “*Les cinq points d’une nouvelle architecture*” and to certain rational principles of the Athens Charter, that language is not fully developed. Nevertheless, his preferences for urban and architectural concepts of the Modern Movement are clear, applying them, even though, at a late stage of its diffusion in Portugal. These concepts are well illustrated in the house of Outeiro Seco (1961) and in his two first proposals of the urban plan for the Dr. António José de Almeida Street in Coimbra (1961), and still, with a more discrete presence, in his Chaves urban pre-planning (1964).

Actually, the fact that the author did not devote himself completely to architecture may have led to a non-exploitation of an absolute Modernism, to its limit. Nadir Afonso’s interest as a painter, always relatively alienated from architecture, may have inhibited the complete development of this aspect. Nevertheless, his first projects reveal a quality that seems to suggest an initial significant commitment of Nadir Afonso to Architecture, depicting his maturity as an architect, enabling him to leave his imprint in Chaves and reflecting his most representative architectural feature.

In fact, his most Modern projects clearly suggest a dimension of an architect that Nadir Afonso could have accomplished, if he had developed an interest and a deep engagement towards Architecture which could have led him to a full in-depth development of the Modernity displayed in his first drawings and, perhaps, precluded his sudden and premature abandonment of the profession.

Notes

- João Cepeda was born in Lisbon in 1983, he attended the *Instituto Superior Técnico* of the Technical University of Lisbon and, having been granted a scholarship from the Helvetic Confederation, the *École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne* in Switzerland, completing his Masters in Architecture with the thesis “*Nadir Afonso, the Architect*”. He is currently starting as a professional architect.
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- Afonso, Nadir, *Les Mécanismes de la Création Artistique*, Neuchâtel, Éditions du Griffon, 1970.
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- João Cepeda, “*Nadir Afonso, o Arquitecto*” (policopied text), Master Thesis, Lisboa, Instituto Superior Técnico, 2011.
- Vladimiro Nunes, “*Entrevista: Nadir Afonso A Emoção da Geometria*”, *Arquitectura e Vida*, Lisboa, nº 67, 2006, 35.
- Nadir Afonso interview conducted by the author in João Cepeda, “*Nadir Afonso, o Arquitecto*” (policopied text), Master Thesis, Lisboa, *Instituto Superior Técnico*, 2011.
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- Tostões, Ana (ed.), *Arquitectura Moderna Portuguesa*, Lisboa, IPPAR, 2004.