

Diving into the South of Raúl Hestnes

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Abstract

This article intends to show the relevance of the South in the architectural universe of Raúl Hestnes Ferreira. The text is divided into three parts: the first deals with the family environment and the neorealist approach followed by his father, José Gomes Ferreira; the second part examines his academic and professional career in Portugal, Finland and the United States; the third part corresponds to the deepening of the architectural lexicon of Raúl Hestnes and his confrontation with the architecture of the South. In order to substantiate the arguments put forward in the text, three works corresponding to different times are presented: Casa da Juventude de Beja/Beja Youth House (1975-1985), the Caixa Geral de Depósitos Branch in Avis (1985-1991) and the Jesus Bento Caraça Municipal Library in Moita (1989-1997).

Keywords: Hestnes Ferreira, Ancestry, Tectonics, Geometry, Monumentality

Full Article

1. Before the dive, the family influences

The civic and personal construction of Raúl Hestnes Ferreira is related to his family nucleus and his circle of friends. Raúl Hestnes was born in Lisbon in 1931, during the period of national dictatorship, which gave rise to the *Estado Novo* regime led by Oliveira Salazar (1899-1970). The Republican and Democrat side he learned from his paternal grandfather Alexandre Ferreira and the Neorealist literary universe of his father, José Gomes Ferreira, were major influences. The latter began his professional activity as a writer in 1930 after resigning from his duties as the Portuguese Consul in Kristiansund between 1926 and 1929.

Raúl Hestnes's mother, Ingrid Hestnes Ferreira, was a Norwegian from Kristiansund, and showed him the Scandinavian reality. In 1933, they visited his mother's family for the first time, returned again in 1935, and stayed in Norway for a year.

The complicity between father and son is visible in the diaries of José Gomes Ferreira, published under the title *Dias Comuns*, which he began on 1 October 1965, coinciding with the return of Raúl Hestnes from the United States of America¹. The nine diaries, published between 1 January and 17 August 1969, help to get to know his circle of friends and the most important events for the family. The formulated descriptions highlight his ethics and respect for people and for the freedom of each individual. These were the values that underpinned the ideological base that settled in the family and that later became the argument to oppose the dictatorial regime, which fell on 25 April 1974.

2. The first dives

Raúl Hestnes Ferreira was educated at the School of Fine Arts of Porto between 1952 and 1957, after being expelled from the Lisbon School where he studied between 1951 and 1952 due to his political activity. In Porto, besides the contact maintained with Carlos Ramos (1897-1969), director of the school, he was a student of Fernando Távora (1923-2003), who was the teacher who influenced him the most. While in Porto, as a student, he had the opportunity to collaborate with architects Arménio Losa (1908-1988), Cassiano Barbosa (1911-1998) and João Andersen (1920-1967).

However, in the context of his academic education, Francisco Keil do Amaral (1910-1975) stands out. He was always close to the family, influencing him in his quest for the essentiality of architectural thought.

The 1950s allowed him to bring together all these persons through the Inquiry into Popular Architecture in Portugal. Although Raúl Hestnes did not participate in this process, he assimilated the theoretical research centred on the architecture of the authentic, underlined in the popular house, the people and the Earth.



Figure.1- Raúl Hestnes Ferreira, Finland, 1958. [Raúl Hestnes Ferreira's personal archive]

Between 1957 and 1958, Raúl Hestnes dived into Scandinavia and experienced Finnish architecture (Fig. 1). The initial plan of the trip was to visit the works of Alvar Aalto and the main works of Finnish architecture. However, Hestnes changed the plan, remaining in Finland for a year. In this period, he studied urbanism with Otto Meurman (1890-1994) and architecture with Heikki Siren (1918-2013) at the Finnish Institute of Technology in Helsinki, as an external student.

The teachings of these two architects had a strong impact on the education of Raúl Hestnes, showing him, in particular, the importance of the constructive system and structure as integral elements of the conceptual process. In 1958, he worked in the office of Woldemar Baeckman (1911-1994) in Helsinki, and during this period, as a collaborator of Osmo Rissanen, he organized a Bid for a Church. (Saraiva, 2011: 118).

Diving into Scandinavia was instrumental in the consolidation and understanding of the identity of Raúl Hestnes Ferreira, introducing him to the revisionist logics around the Modern Movement.

Two years after returning to Portugal he gave two conferences, the first in Lisbon during the inauguration of the travelling exhibition on Finnish Architecture, organized by the *Suomen Rakennustaiteen* Museum in Helsinki and held at the *União Nacional dos Arquitectos* (National Union of Architects) and the second in Porto, at the School of Fine Arts. In relation to the exhibition, Hestnes Ferreira published an article in *Arquitetura* magazine, where he explained that the continuities between the different generations of the architects exhibited implied unity, focusing on psychological and human concerns, countering the Finnish reality with the moment that Portugal was going through (Ferreira, 1960: 60-61).

Between 1958 and 1962, Raúl Hestnes remained in Portugal and carried out five projects, of which the most important was the house he designed for his father in Albarraque, influenced by the principles of Scandinavian architecture and the knowledge acquired at the School of Fine Arts of Porto. Hestnes managed to transpose the neorealism advocated by his father in this project by creating a refuge that respected the family's way of life and the simplicity of the rural environment.

During this period², he carried out his professional activity in the southern region, with greater incidence in the Algarve, helping him to revive the memory of Portuguese popular architecture.

However, the desire to see new seas took him to the United States of America in 1962, first to Yale and then to Pennsylvania. In this dive, Raúl Hestnes absorbed, consolidated and shared Louis Kahn's³ longings regarding his fascination with

the ancient architectures of the South, especially the Greek and the Roman. Influenced by the architectures of the South, Louis Kahn intended to create an image of continuity in his buildings by choosing non-contrasting materials, giving a monolithic nature to his works.

With this dive, Raúl Hestnes consolidated concepts such as order, rhythm, symmetry, and monumentality as a means to enhance the meaning and coherence of his buildings. He invested in the long term, faithful to a construction ethics, assuming the value of time, present in the architecture of the South and defended by Louis Kahn.

In 1966, Raúl Hestnes returned to Portugal and resumed his professional activity, which he has continued until today.

3. Finally diving into the South of Raúl Hestnes Ferreira

Monumentality and neorealism intersect in the work of Raúl Hestnes, in the way each work is capable of transmitting the sense of eternity, to which one cannot alter or annex parts to the whole, defining a spiritual quality and the will to reproduce the manual sense of the construction, refining it and leaving out any accessory or excessive elements despite the geometric complexity. In his article Monumentality, Louis Kahn defined it as a spiritual quality. For Hestnes Ferreira too, this quality corresponds to the eternity capacity that each work can achieve.

Although Hestnes rejects similarities to the work of Robert Venturi, his work reflects contradictions and complexities: his works can be simultaneously closed (controlled openings and opaque walls) and open (with patios and terraces); large (outer scale) and small (inner scale); diverse (due to the type and form of fenestrations) and unitary (due to the proposed materiality); simple (regarding consistency and geometry) and complex (in terms of detail and singularity). These contradictions and complexities constitute the architectural lexicon of Raúl Hestnes.

Of the vast work of Raúl Hestnes Ferreira, three works illustrate the architecture of the South: Casa da Juventude in Beja (1975-1985) due to its ancestry (time); the Caixa Geral de Depósitos Branch in Avis (1985-1991) due to the precision of the brick (tectonics) and finally the Jesus Bento Caraça Municipal Library in Moita (1989-1997), due to the geometry (the implantation).

The Casa da Juventude de Beja is a key project in his work: due to its specific programme and the population for which it was intended, Raúl Hestnes aimed to give a festive character to the building. The conduction of this work coincided with a moment of collective euphoria, after the 25 April Revolution and the defence of

collective values, with the creation of areas that enabled the participation and collaboration of youth.

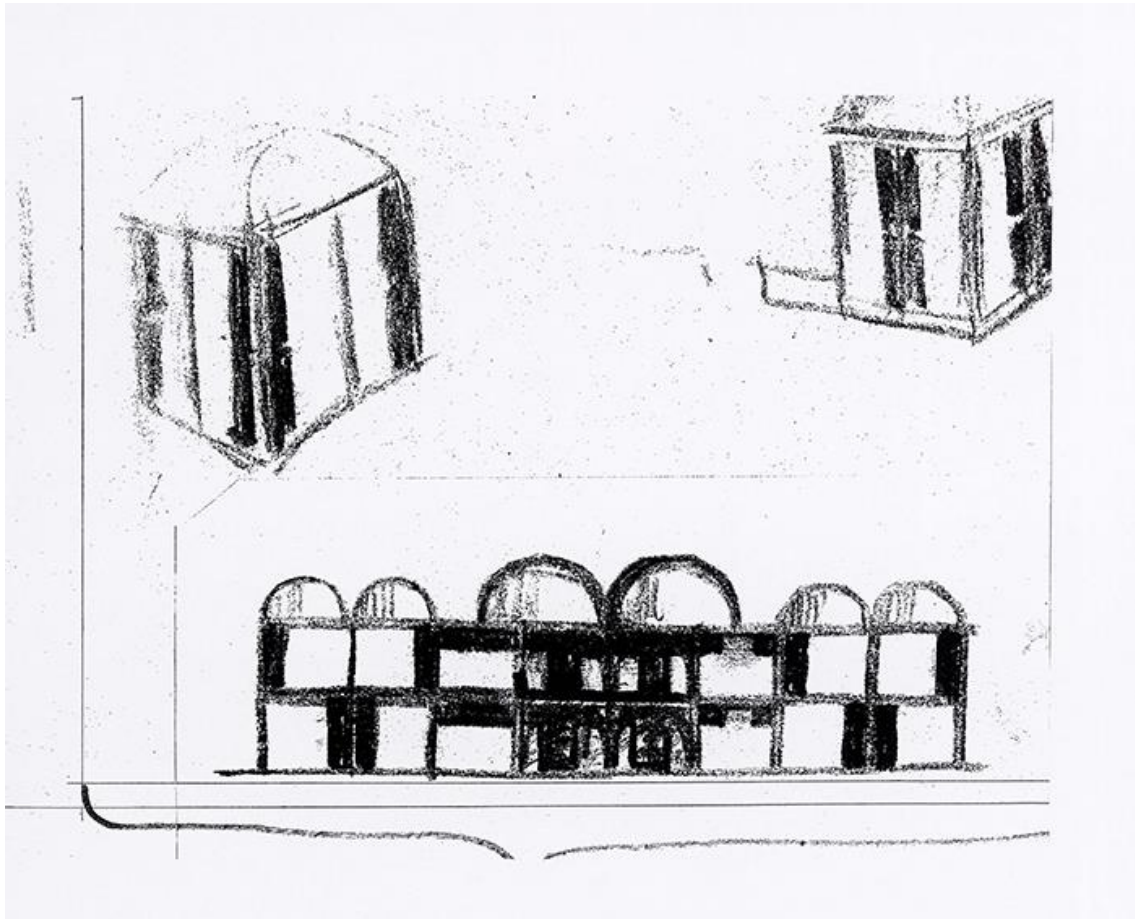


Figure.2- Sketch of the elevation, Casa da Juventude in Beja. [Raúl Hestnes Ferreira's personal archive]

However, in this project Raúl Hestnes chose to give the building a monolithic nature. Its formal simplicity is underlined by the size and position given to each opening (Fig. 2). The proposed materiality contained only traditional materials helping to simplify the final image of the building.

He was inspired by the traditional building tradition in Alentejo, covering the building with twenty domes, Priest Birretta type vaults. Hestnes relied on two teams from Serpa to build it as they exemplified the traditional building tradition. In this building, the brick assumes the double category of being both structure and coating, maintaining a permanent dialogue with materiality and tectonics.



Figure.3- Detail of the construction, Casa da Juventude in Beja. [Raúl Hestnes Ferreira's personal archive]

The symmetry, the rhythm and the scale are characteristic of the set (Fig. 3). The interior distribution strengthens the centrality and determines its formal, strongly symmetrical character. The rhythm of the set is emphasized by the shape of each opening, as well as by their position in the facade plans, complemented by the repetition of the vaults in the roof.

The ancestry of *Casa da Juventude* is attained by the composition order, the definition of the scale of the building, the monolithic aspect of the work, and by the respect for the building tradition, giving the set a monumental nature.

The project for the Caixa Geral de Depósitos Branch in Avis⁴ started in 1985 and the work was completed in 1991. This building is located outside the walls of the historic centre of the village of Avis, in the district of Portalegre and occupies a triangular block. Raúl Hestnes chose ceramic brick as the dominant material, in order to guarantee little maintenance, as requested by the owner of the work.

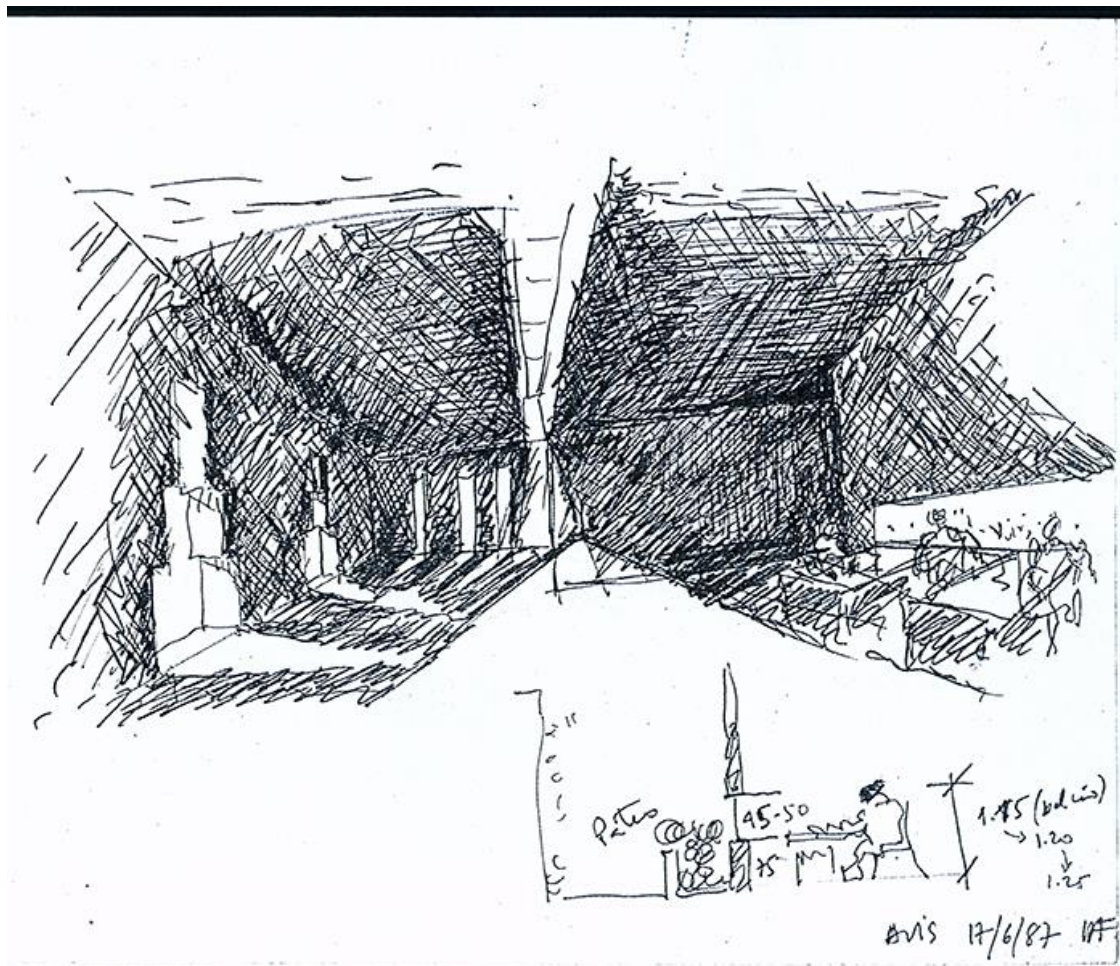


Figura.4- Sketch of the inside, Caixa Geral de Depósitos Branch, Avis. [Raúl Hestnes Ferreira's personal archive]

The tectonics results from the previous knowledge of the constructive parameters of this material, concretizing it in the drawing, and there is a fusion between the gesture of its design and the final image of the set (Fig.4). The simplicity of the programme results in the essentiality of the project.

Raul Hestnes admits that sometimes he could not escape using Louis Kahn's images, in this case, the inclusion of the round window over the patio, considering that it appears by imposition of the material and results from the joining of the two facade planes. The rhythm is achieved by the succession of openings in the main facade, resulting in a cadence between full and empty, reflecting light and without light. The light and shadow game evidences the formal composition of the whole ensemble and intensifies the intense expressiveness of the whole work (Fig. 5).



Figure.5- Outside the Caixa Geral de Depósitos Branch, Avis. [Raúl Hestnes Ferreira's personal archive]

The scale of the Caixa Geral de Depósitos in Avis is revealed by the tectonics that Raúl Hestnes defines for materials; outside, ceramic brick and inside, marble, concrete, wood, and copper. The precision with which he interacts with each constructive element helps to elevate the tectonic to its maximum exponent. Materiality and symbolism allow us to integrate this work into the discourse on the monumentality of Louis Kahn.

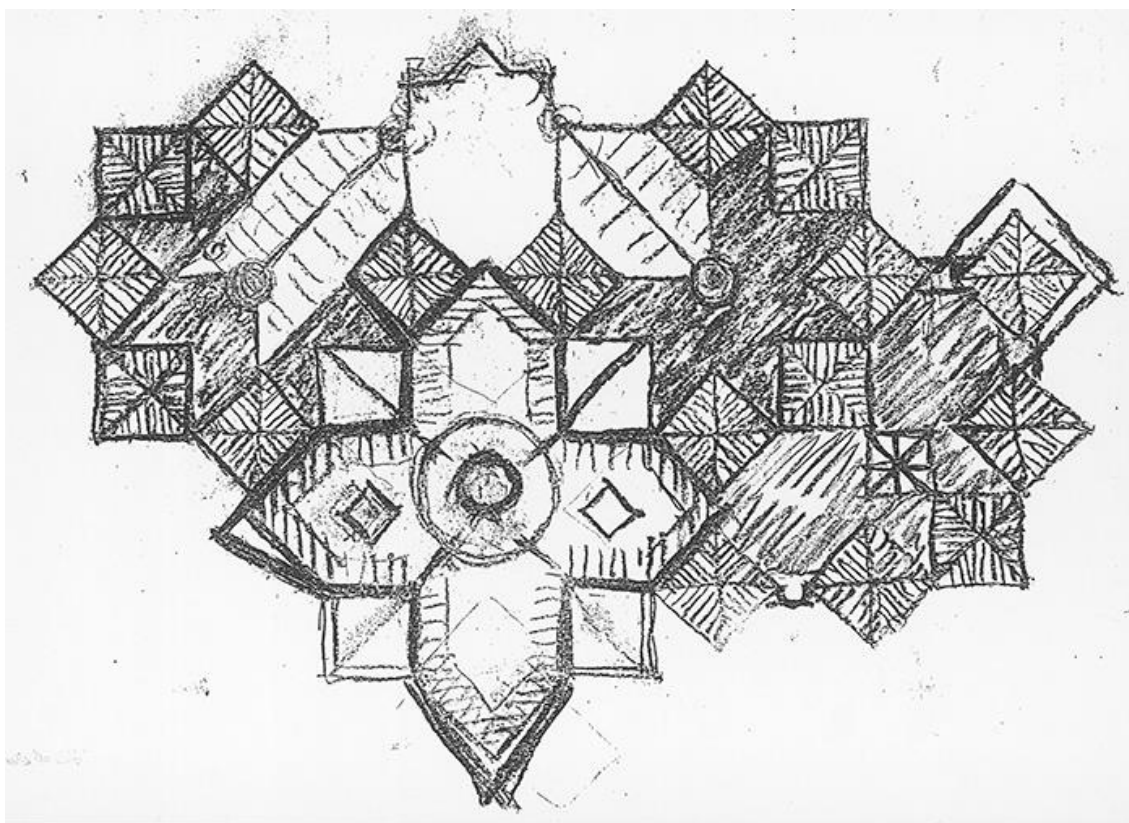


Figura.6- Sketch of the floor plan, Jesus Bento Caraça Library, in Moita. [Raúl Hestnes Ferreira's personal archive]

Diving into the Bento de Jesus Caraça Municipal Library (1989-1997) means going through a building where the geometric layout is the strong point of the design (Fig.6).

Although the final result does not correspond to the original project, because it was moved to Parque da Moita instead of being located in the same place as the Judicial Court of Moita, its design does not differ much from the original idea, due to the impossibility of making a new project.

The planimetric composition results from the use of the square and its repetition through rotation and symmetry, characteristic of the architecture of the Mediterranean. The inclusion of two courtyards, one adjacent to the reading area for adults and another in the children's reading area, underlines the constructive tradition of Southern architecture. The rhythmic repetition of the whole structure of the building helps to demarcate the different reading spaces and the areas for serving the public, conferring unity to the whole space. Each area relates directly to the target audience, in the way it defines the scale of the building and furniture.

Materiality plays a prominent role in the building. Brick is not only used as a carrier material, but reinforces its role in the architectural context and more precisely in the relationship it creates with other materials, especially with white concrete (Fig. 7).

In this project, Raúl Hestnes demonstrates a variety of tectonic solutions in the use and manipulation of brick, which, however, is not considered excessive. Still, it is the complex geometry that characterizes this work.



Figure.7- Reading area, Jesus Bento Caraça Library, Moita. [Raúl Hestnes Ferreira's personal archive]

4. After the dive ...

Diving into the architecture of Raúl Hestnes presupposes swimming through the constant triangulation between Mediterranean and Scandinavian architecture and the work of Louis Kahn, in search of the essentiality of architecture.

In the Portuguese as well as in the international context, authors such as Carlos Santos Duarte, Paulo Varela Gomes, Willy Serneels, Ahmet Gülgönen and others confirm the importance of Raúl Hestnes Ferreira for the panorama of Portuguese architecture.

Alexandre Alves Costa, mostly for having maintained a close personal and educational relationship with Hestnes Ferreira, describes him in a very informative way: "he arrived to the Mediterranean through a long and winding road, from Porto to Finland, from the order of the Moderns to Kahn, to Rome, to the universality of the compositional order" (Costa, 2007, p. 125). This statement emphasizes the influences that Hestnes Ferreira received to accomplish his work.

For Raúl Hestnes Ferreira, design, order and form are concepts that are interrelated and complement each other in the will to overcome the conceptual process.

In the works of Raúl Hestnes, ancestry, tectonics and geometry are inseparable, the materials are chosen in accordance with their respective formal and expressive potentialities, integrating the value of time and the way each material behaves throughout the lifespan of each building. By making the construction system apparent, each work is simplified, eliminating any element that might confuse its interpretation. Ancestry is one of the qualities of his works, originated in his interpretation of the long term.

For Raúl Hestnes Ferreira, monumentality is not a goal, but a consequence. His works stand out due to their character, inertia, weight, and the way they contribute to the urban context, expressing an idea about their nature, use and their destiny, and in the way they awaken the senses.

Remarks:

¹ The diaries began eleven years before their first edition, published only in 1976.

² In 1961, Raúl Hestnes Ferreira completed the degree in Architecture at the Higher School of Fine Arts in Lisbon with the thesis on University Residences, with a classification of 19 marks.

³ Raúl Hestnes worked with Louis Kahn between 1963 and 1965, in Philadelphia, having participated mainly in the Plans of the Governmental Centres of Pakistan in Dacca and Islamabad; in the National Assembly Buildings in Dhaka and Islamabad; in the Main Hospital in Dhaka, as coordinator; at the School of Business Administration in Ahmedabad, Indian Union; and at the Art School in Philadelphia, an unbuilt project.

⁴ In 1993, this project was awarded the National Prize for Architecture - Construction, Technique, Detail, by the Association of Portuguese Architects.

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