

Boa Nova Teahouse and Restaurant Leça da Palmeira, Matosinhos, Portugal 1958–1963

Architect: Alvaro Siza

Mota, Nelson

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**15 Boa Nova Teahouse and
Restaurant**
Leça da Palmeira, Matosinhos,
Portugal
1958–1963
Architect: Álvaro Siza

In the nineteenth century, the small fisherman's village of Leça da Palmeira was one of the favourite seaside resorts of the English colony in Porto (Oporto in English). While certain distinguished members of Porto's high society, otherwise known as the 'Port-wine aristocracy', rented houses for the holiday season, others decided to move to Leça permanently. Many wished to escape the overcrowding and pollution associated with Porto's relatively late industrial boom. Situated at the mouth of the River Leça, the British enjoyed Leça da Palmeira because it was remote but, at the same time, only a short distance from the city centre (which enabled businessmen to commute).

The presence of the English community was so great, and their endogenous tendency so notable, that one of Leça's beaches is named 'a praia dos Ingleses' ('the beach of the English'). Eager to mimic their customs, other members of Porto's bourgeoisie followed the English to Leça da Palmeira. The construction of Leixões harbour in the 1930s brought this phenomenon to an end. Located at the mouth of the River Leça, the harbour plunged the village, and its *villeggiatura*, into a depression. The strategic importance of this new facility would eventually trigger the construction of an avenue along the coast towards the north, a thoroughfare that provided faster connections to the main traffic infrastructure. The first phase of this avenue, which connected the centre of Leça with the area surrounding the Boa Nova lighthouse, was completed in 1953. This avenue was the backbone of a master plan designed to urbanise the village's northern coastal area and to create an Atlantic resort with housing and leisure facilities.

It was against this background that the municipality of Matosinhos, to which Leça had belonged since 1909, decided to launch a competition for the design of a restaurant and teahouse in 1956. Fernando Távora (1923–2005) was selected to design the project. Two years later, in 1958, Távora asked his architectural collaborators to develop the project further. The only clear instruction that he gave was in relation to the location: the teahouse and restaurant was to be situated on the cliffs near to the Boa Nova chapel. The team was made up of five young architects, all of whom were working on the project until one of the group, Álvaro Siza (b. 1933), came up with the idea that the building should replicate the movements suggested by the topography.¹ This sudden change in the design approach led to a degree of uncertainty within the team that was only resolved when Távora appointed Siza as project leader.²

1 A domesticated landscape: functional organisation and layout

If Távora was the responsible for the 'foundational act', i.e. the choice of the site, Siza was accountable for the exquisite articulation of the built mass in relationship to the location. The building was erected on the rocks bordering the shore and is thus somewhat isolated from *terra firma*. Access to the building is by way of a carefully designed set of platforms, steps and retaining walls. The connection between the parking area and the entrance of the

building comprises three flights of U-shaped steps. These create a *promenade architecturale* that dramatically filters the transition between arrival by car and the act of entering the building. The client is guided along an ascending pathway towards the entrance of the restaurant and, as he heads into the building, so to speak, he is also treated to expansive views of the ocean. The plasticity of the white walls that border the steps are delimited by the horizon and abruptly countered by the low ceiling of a porch finished with rough boards made out of red Afzelia wood (Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3).

Inside the building, there is an entrance lobby with a cloakroom and toilet. At this level, the client is able to see the distant horizon through the skylight that pierces the inclined roof of the stairwell. At the bottom, a floor-to-ceiling opening frames the view towards the rocks. The presence of the sea is conspicuously avoided here, and it is only rediscovered as the client descends the stairs.

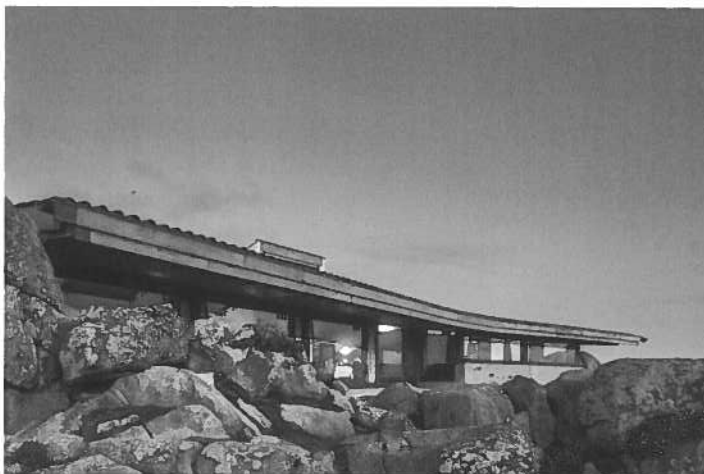
Downstairs, the public area is split between the tearoom and the restaurant. The division of the programme into two different rooms allows the spaces in the building to operate continuously and independently of one another throughout the day, rather than just at specific lunch and dinner periods. It also helps the venue attract a wider range of clientele,

Boa Nova, viewed from the beach.

Photo: Joao Morgado

Aerial view of Boa Nova teahouse and its surroundings.

Photo: Joao Morgado





Entrance view.
Photo: Joao Morgado

including business and leisure clients, as well as those in search of a gastronomic experience (Fig. 4, Fig. 5, Fig. 6).

The tearoom is roughly square-shaped and the stepped openings at the south façade reveal views of the rocks against which the building is built. In the restaurant, a large window that runs down the longest side of the room frames the ocean view to the west. At the Boa Nova teahouse and restaurant, the boundary between exterior and interior appears to dissolve. This effect is further heightened by the large span of the roof that projects over these windows and creates an intense relationship with the dramatic landscape surrounding the restaurant.

The service area is a long and partially sunken covered walkway that stretches behind the public rooms. A continuous horizontal window on the north side, which emphasises the fact that the roof is detached from the retaining walls, allows light into the space. Roughly the same size as the public rooms, it articulates the building in terms of both its functional organisation and layout, and also in terms of its relationship with the challenging topography. Next to the kitchen, further partitions were created within the service area, including a bedroom, dressing room, cellar and several storage rooms. The service area connects independently with both the tearoom and the dining room, thus avoiding interference between service circulation and the public *promenade*. It has, moreover, a discreet independent connection to the exterior in the north side of the building.

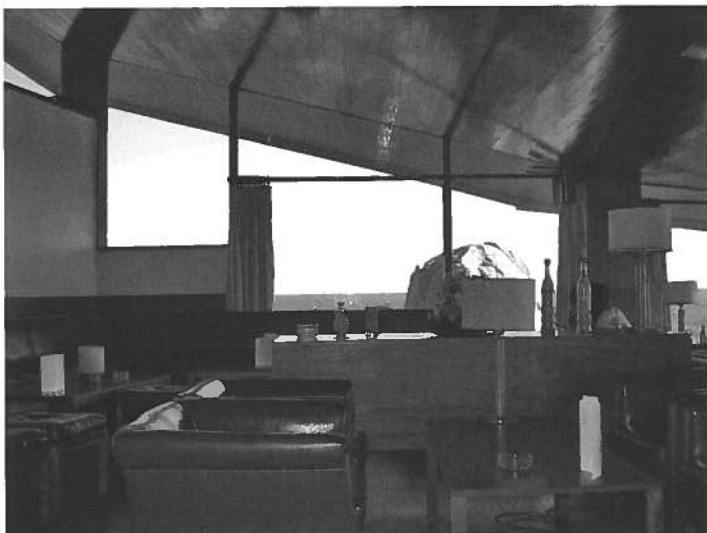
2 Architectural approach, materials, interior decoration and fittings

Siza was just thirty years old when he designed the Boa Nova teahouse and restaurant and it was one of his first commissions. The project can be seen as the architect's attempt to conflate his concerns at that particular period

Interior view of the tea room.

Framed view of the beach rocks from the dining room.

Dining room interior.



into a single building. Although the design contains references to the work of Aalto, Corbusier, Wright and even Mackintosh (whose work Siza was interested in and greatly admired) it is never mimetic. As the architectural historian Paulo Varela Gomes noted, this project is the outcome of Siza's *Kunstwollen*.³ Moreover, in the way that the building attempts to deliver a synthesis of both modernist and vernacular traditions, it epitomises Portugal's contemporary reconceptualisation of the principles of modernism.

The finishing materials used in the building emphasise its hybrid nature. On the one hand, the layout is decidedly organic and forms a response to the topography of the site. On the other hand, it is an autonomous, artistic object in its own right. In general, the materials used for exterior vary according to the position of the observer. Approaching the building from the parking area, it appears to be defined by abstract planes of vertical whitewashed walls topped by wooden boards. Thanks to the long, oblique surfaces of the roof, which is made of red terracotta tiles, the building appears to be stretched horizontally when seen from the shore. This horizontality is further stressed by the wooden boards that define the edge of the roof, the hidden drainage of which is ultimately revealed in the sculptural, copper gutters that project the rainwater onto the rocks.

African Afzelia wood is used throughout the interior. It is used as finishing material for plain surfaces, such as the floors and ceilings, but also serves to highlight special features, such as pillars and skylights. In the latter, the wooden boards were not just cut with immediate tectonic requirements in mind and consequently fulfil a decorative role. The same wood is also used for the interior and exterior doors and window frames. Siza also designed the furniture and fittings for the building, which are predominantly made of red Afzelia wood and dark brown leather. The furniture is composed of embedded elements, such as fixed benches along the walls of the tearoom and dining room, and individual sofas, tables, chairs and cupboards. In addition to the natural light provided by the skylights, table lamps designed by Siza provide most of the supplementary lighting. The absence of lamps or other fittings on the ceiling reinforces the material and sculptural qualities of the building, something further underscored by the natural light that floods the building through the skylights, and the latter's exquisite carpentry.

3 Clientele and preservation

In building the Boa Nova restaurant and teahouse, the municipality aimed to attract an upmarket clientele to the area. They hoped that this would eventually transform the area back into a privileged seaside resort for Porto's bourgeoisie. Fernando Pinto de Oliveira, the mayor, played a leading role in endorsing this ambition and the construction of the nearby Leça swimming pool, also commissioned by the municipality and designed by Siza, further testifies to his programme. The luxurious venue certainly attracted an upmarket clientele to Boa Nova. Siza, who came from a middle-class family, and was born and raised in the area, claims that he seldom dined there as it was too expensive.⁴

In the late 1960s, Pinto de Oliveira's ambitions were hindered by the government's decision to build a petrol refinery in the area. Situated right

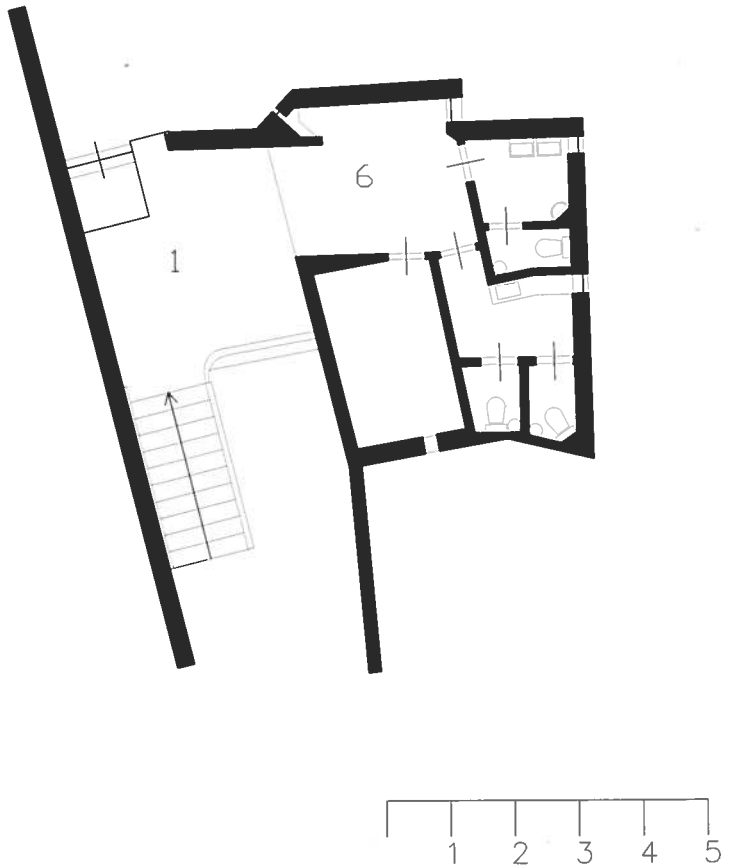
at the heart of a growing metropolitan area, and adjacent to Leixões harbour, Boa Nova was the perfect site for this massive industrial facility.

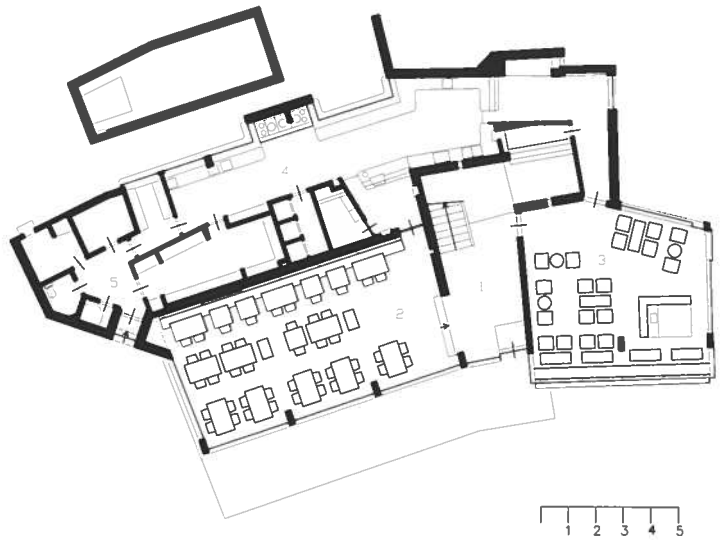
Curiously enough, since there was no other facility in the area that could compete with the spatial quality and reputation of the Boa Nova teahouse and restaurant, it proved to be the executives, high-profile staff and clients of the refinery who kept the restaurant alive during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In recent years, the area between Leça and the refinery has become even more densely urbanised. The new houses and gated communities that have sprung up have also become a source of potential clients.

The structure has been placed under a great deal of strain over the years, thanks to its challenging position (it quite literally has its feet in the ocean), the difficult coastal climate and the heavy visitor numbers. It was first restored in 1990 under the supervision of Álvaro Siza's office and normal activities were quickly resumed. The building's importance was publicly recognised in 2011 when it was listed as a national monument. In addition, and in that same year, the municipality also decided to execute a second in-depth renovation, once again supervised by Siza's office. This has restored the building to pristine condition, just in time for the fiftieth anniversary celebrations held in 2013 (Fig. 7, Fig. 8).

Entrance level plan,
Boanova.

Nelson Mota





Restaurant level plan,
Boanova.

Notes

- 1 The other collaborators engaged in the project were Alberto Neves, António Menéres, Luís Botelho Dias and Joaquim Sampaio.
- 2 The details about this process were provided by Álvaro Siza in an interview with the author, Porto, 24 May 2012.
- 3 Paulo Varela Gomes, 'Boa Nova Tea-House', in Trigueiros, Luiz (ed.), *Boa Nova Tea House*, Portfolio 1, Lisbon: Editorial Blau, 1992.
- 4 Álvaro Siza, interview with the author, Porto, 24 May 2012.

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