

FERNANDO TÁVORA AND JAPAN, AN (ARCHITECTURAL) ENCHANTMENT – A JOURNEY THROUGH HIS PRIVATE PERSONAL LIBRARY COLLECTION

João Cepeda

Architect/PhD Student, Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto, PORTUGAL,
jscepeda@gmail.com

Abstract

In spite of, geographically, being two worlds apart, Portugal and Japan share a widely-known historical relation, traced back to the 1540's, when the Portuguese set themselves as the first Europeans to arrive in the land of the rising sun. Carrying with them the up-to-date models of European civilization, the enrichment came to be reciprocal to both cultures, at many different levels. Today, and generally speaking, Japanese traditional building culture is long commonly referred as one of the most common influential traits through many of the West's greatest prominent architectural authors. However – and despite this secular relation between the two countries, which is (still) existing today at various diplomatic political instances –, when approaching the generality of the Portuguese architectural *academia* research, or overviewing the majority of the typical *theory* built around modern Portuguese architecture, never once a careful research in this direction seems to have been undertaken, or even signalled or attempted. As such, seeking to contribute to the progressive construction of a *theoretical-practical* scientific knowledge about the process of appropriation and synthesis between modern Western architecture and (local) cultural traditions – namely, in this case, between Portugal and Japan –, and taking into account the known Japanese fascination of one of the most important architectural figures of Portuguese modernity – Fernando Távora –, as well as his visit to the country in 1960, which surely also came to be decisive for his professional path, this research paper focuses on the discovery and questioning of which echoes of the Western enchantment for Japan can be found in one of the most celebrated Portuguese modern architectural authors, not by focusing one more time on some of his architectural works, but specifically through a particular different novel perspective – a detailed and unprecedented inspection of its own personal private library collection.

Keywords: Fernando Távora, Fernando Távora Archive, Japan, Portuguese Architecture, Japanese Architecture.

1 INTRODUCTION – FROM THE EAST TO THE WEST, FROM JAPAN TO PORTUGAL

The Japanese way of building and inhabiting – deeply rooted in a secular tradition but manifesting innovative solutions – has decisively persuaded many Western authors, from Josiah Conder, Frank Lloyd Wright, Bruno Taut, Rudolph Schindler, Antonin Raymond to Alvar Aalto, among many others.

Thus, the well-known customs and traditions of Japan that, however, harmoniously coexist within a well-marked culture of opposites, provided a vast source of ideas for architectural contemporaneity, and for many decisive European modern architects.

However, and surprisingly enough – given the ancestral proximity between Portugal and Japan –, regarding Portugal and its numerous modern architects from the twentieth century, this panorama apparently seems to have never been fully explored or assessed through in-depth research entirely devoted to this theme, within the framework of architectural culture.

The fact that, in Portuguese context, modernity was appropriated through different moments that, eventually,

ended up creating a serious stage of thinking that tried to exhaustively foster its own unique regional (modern) identity, might have generated different types of theoretical focused essays.

Based on these premises, this paper focuses on the example of one of the mandatory characters in the crafting of modern Portuguese architecture of the final half of the twentieth century – the renowned Porto architect Fernando Távora (1923-2005) –, specifically researching thoroughly through – more than his widely-known architectural *practice* – his private personal library collection, in an unprecedented analysis of a significant part of his architectural “*idearum*”.

1.1 Origins, roots and echoes of “Japan’ness” in the West

Since late XIXth century, a growing quest for an identification of Japanese architectural idiosyncrasies specifically rooted on traditional Nipponese cultural aspects arose. This “Japan’ness” concept – comprising Western visions towards Japanese architectural lexicon, but also Japanese assessments regarding their own particular reality – began being built ever since.

From 1868, several Japanese architects, historians and thinkers, started suggesting resemblances between the XVIIth century Japanese domestic architecture and the Western “*avant-garde*” design (Chevroulet, 2010).

Rapidly, the Western curious regard captured the modernity of this “Japan’ness” and, through the writings and iconography of Western architects like Josiah Conder or Bruno Taut (among others), its impact began being felt amid many Western authors – like Frank Lloyd Wright, Rudolph Schindler, Antonin Raymond or Alvar Aalto, among other noticeable ones.

Consequently, in a time when the mythicized canons of the Modern Movement started being surpassed, these significant Japanese echoes in Western protagonists began playing a distinctive role in the configuration of a distinguishing response.

1.2 Modern Portuguese Architecture – the mid-1950’s new regard

Concerning Portugal, a singular process of appropriation of modernity took place, particularly since the 1950’s, when a strong and present critical spirit began progressively questioning the validity of an intransigent Modern Movement.

A desire of overcoming the rationalist doctrines – stressing the attention on the respect for the nature of each material, and suiting it to its context – emerged. Seeking a symbiosis between modern assumptions and the inputs of its cultural context, several Portuguese architects were searching for their regional authenticity.

This thinking also seems to have been influenced by a massive reverberation of Zevi’s literatures, specifically “*Verso un’Architettura Organica*” (Zevi, 1945), questioning 1920’s corbusian “dogmas”, and accentuating the organic approach advantages, opening doors to a process of humanization and contextualization of language that gradually also rediscovered Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture – which was clearly filled with distinct subliminal Japanese atmospheres and traits.

This mid-XXth century rediscovery of Frank Lloyd Wright appears to have had an important impact on a well-defined Portuguese context, over-intensifying the critical questioning aura of some authors who, having long admired the American master, were striving for another response to modernity – a (local) Portuguese modernity.

1.3 Portugal and Japan – tradition and modernity: traces of a common spirit

In architecture, “Japan’ness” embodies the search for the true essence of Japanese architecture which is guided by one primordial criterion: the identification of cultural values selected, simultaneously, for their traditional Japanese specificities, and for their contemporary, timeless and international validity.

This subtle combination of tradition and modernity constitutes the major foundation of “Japan’ness”’s uniqueness.

Tracing back Japan’s architectural history, there appears to have existed a noteworthy interesting common approach to the referred Portuguese critical spirit – although in different times.

In late XIXth century, there was a strong reaction to the exterior Western modernization, namely through the cultural movement “*wakoh-yōsai*”, which defended that Japanese architecture’s evolution should be sustained through a modern crystallization of their ancient cultural specificities. Having Chûta Itô and Kakuzo Okakura as two of its main figures (Taut, 1936), this (re)conquest of the Japanese essence had a decisive impact on architecture, for instance in the “*sukiya*”-style, directly connected to the traditional Japanese tea ceremony.

Therefore, approximately 50 years apart, Portugal and Japan seem to have shared a similar concern – to integrate modernity and tradition, pursuing their modern architecture evolution's right path.

2 FERNANDO TÁVORA – THE ENCHANTMENT FOR JAPAN

As previously referred, and bearing all the aforementioned indications in mind, Fernando Távora appears as one of the prominent architects that participated in the mentioned 1950's decisive moment: the regaining of the freedom of expression of Portuguese architects, and the affirmation of a new (and inevitable) modernity.

Moreover, his commonly well-known public interest and great passion for Japanese culture, and for the country's aesthetics and architecture, in addition to the fact that he travelled to Japan, suggested and fostered a special focus on his case, given the background motivation to research on the relations between Japanese architectural and artistic culture and the *theoretical* crafting of some of the unique modern Portuguese architectural identity.

2.1 The trip to Japan (1960) – Fernando Távora's travel diaries

Since the new directorship from Professor Carlos Ramos in Porto's architecture course at the School of Fine Arts in 1952, the faculty opened towards modernity, radically changing their obsolete disciplinary contents.

Consequently, Távora, who lectured in the school, applied to a study scholarship granted by the Gulbenkian Foundation in 1959, proposing a trip to analyse the teaching methods of American universities.

As a member of the famous CIAM (*"Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne"*), he then received an invitation to attend the "World Design Conference", to be held in Tokyo. Thus, mentioning the relevance of the conference's focus research on cutting-edge design methodologies, Távora readjusts his planning in order to include Japan in his trip.

From his personal diaries of this 1960 expedition (Fig. 1), a clear division between attending the referred conference, and his desire to explore the exotic Japanese culture, is clearly perceivable.

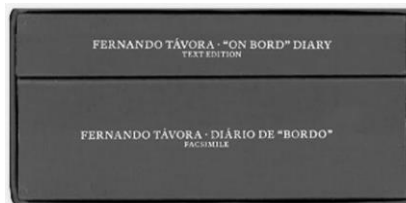


Fig. 1 – Fernando Távora's published personal travel diaries ("Diário de Bordo", 2012).
© Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS, Porto, Portugal)

Consequently, after visiting some of Kunio Maekawa and Kenzo Tange's brutalist buildings in Tokyo, Távora detoured through Nikko, Kyoto and Nara, finding the "(...) *history that so dearly wished to experiment.*" (Távora, 2012)

He had then the opportunity to visit several gardens, parks, and many historic temples and palaces (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 – Some of Fernando Távora's original photographs from his 1960 trip to Japan.
© Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS, Porto, Portugal)

The remarkable descriptions he makes, in Kyoto, from the Tofukuji, Chion-in and Ryoan-ji temples, as well as the Imperial Palace and, above all, the Katsura Imperial Villa, among others, stand out.

His extraordinary drawings of the temples' plans and gardens – impressive for the rigorous representation of

shapes and materials –, accompanied by numerous photographs, clearly suggest the true enthusiasm of Távora's approach to all those places (Fig. 3).

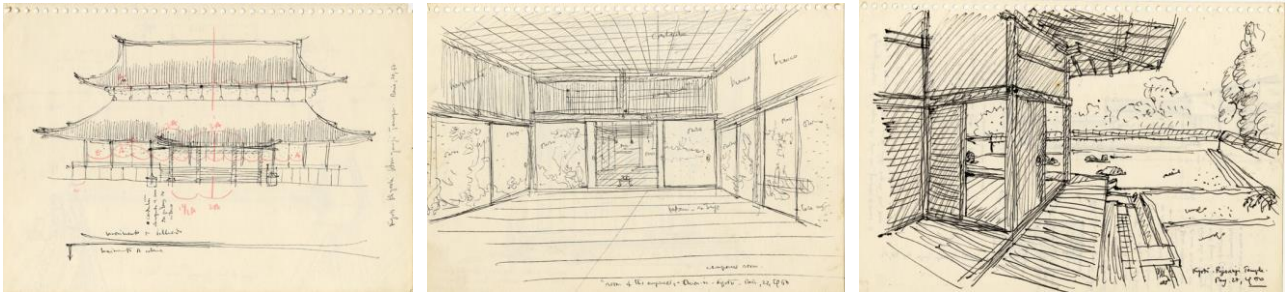


Fig. 3 – Some of Fernando Távora's original hand sketches from his 1960 trip to Japan.

© Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS, Porto, Portugal)

The organization of space stands out in Távora's writings, particularly the analysis of volumetric relationships between the buildings and the gardens. Other annotations include the strong relations to nature, the harmony of the architecture's human scale, the simplicity of the built spaces, and the attention given to materials and their details.

"(...) Japan has a different majesty, and quality. I'm leaving with sadness. Here, yes, I'll have to come back." (Távora, 2012)

2.2 The collection of books on Japan – Fernando Távora's private personal library

Scrutinizing Távora's former office's library and his personal private collection, it comprises several original editions of some of the most relevant theoretical compendiums of Japanese architectural culture.

Even taking into account his interest in Japan, his trip to the country, and some traces of his architectural works, it's still surprising to inspect this collection, and his past architectural office's possessions. In fact, one can say that Távora's personal archive not only suggests, but states a deliberate interest for this subject, and an extraordinarily attentive regard towards it.

Exploring through the collection, Távora seems to have become interested in traditional Japanese architecture, and afterwards in the Western architects that engaged with it, drawing his interest not only for Japanese architecture presented by some Japanese referential authors, but also by Western ones – still, traditional Japanese architecture presented by Japanese references appears to have become his more enduring motive of attention.

To determine accurately when Távora first showed a curiosity towards Japan and Japanese architecture seems, yet, still not possible. Nonetheless, accounting on the dates of acquisition of his books referencing Japan, it is perceivable that it began taking place when Távora was still studying at the Fine Arts, during a period when there was (still) almost no attention given to Japanese architecture in Portugal. On the other hand, in Europe, acquaintance with the architecture of Japan was already more advanced and well-known, due mainly to the theoretical works of Bruno Taut, among some others of smaller relevance (Taut, 1936, 1958).

From the immense group of books on Japan and its architecture that Távora began collecting, that includes several original authentic copies, some Nipponese essential references presenting Japanese architectural foundations stand out: firstly, *"Japanische Architektur"* (Yoshida, 1952), and *"The Japanese House and Garden"* (Yoshida, 1955), both by Tetsuro Yoshida (Fig. 4) – a renowned Japanese architect who travelled the world and the West, whose practice balanced the values of traditional Japanese architecture with those of modernism. These two books present a comprehensive overview and historical contextualization of traditional Nipponese architecture, as well as the philosophical principles on which that architecture was grounded. The spatial organization descriptions and the narratives of the building methods stress one clear underlying principle: modernity should be nurtured, sustained and nourished by tradition.

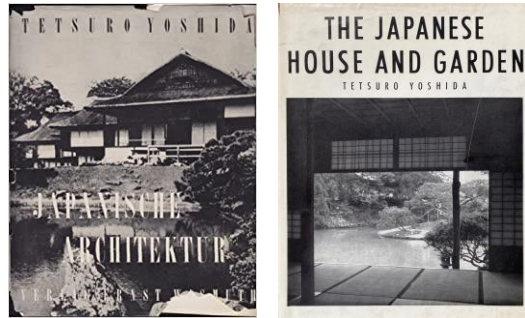


Fig. 4 – Fernando Távora’s books collection: “*Japanische Architektur*” (1952) and “*The Japanese House and Garden*” (1955), by Tetsuro Yoshida.
© Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS, Porto, Portugal)

Afterwards, Távora also purchased “*The Lesson of Japanese Architecture*” (Harada, 1954), and “*Japanese Gardens*” (Harada, 1956), both by Jiro Harada (Fig. 5) – a notorious Japanese art historian who lectured in America.

While the first book displays a complete synopsis of traditional Japanese building, its approach is that of a historian, and not an architect, simply targeting a more imagistic volume. On the other hand, the second Harada’s book offers an estimate on Japanese gardens, providing also a more imagistic take – nevertheless, they both are fundamental books when it comes to the dissemination of the traditional Japanese architecture and its art of gardens in the West.

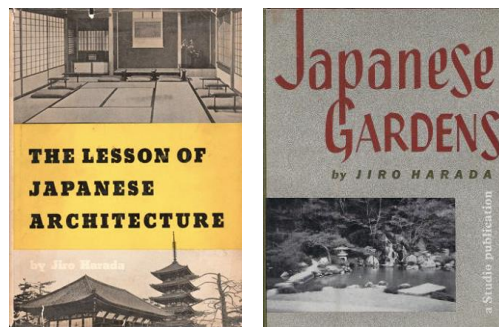


Fig. 5 – Fernando Távora’s books collection: “*The Lesson of Japanese Architecture*” (1954) and “*Japanese Gardens*” (1956), by Jiro Harada.
© Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS, Porto, Portugal)

Finally, among many other exemplars, one should also pinpoint Távora’s original copy of Hideto Kishida’s “*Japanese Architecture*” (Kishida, 1948) – a key Japanese architect and theoretician, here overviewing his country way of building and living (Fig. 6).

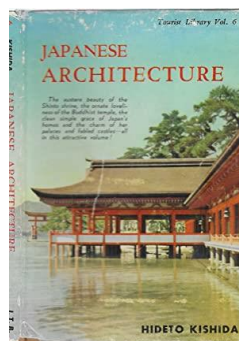


Fig. 6 – Fernando Távora’s books collection: “*Japanese Architecture*” (1948), by Hideto Kishida.
© Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS, Porto, Portugal)

As it was also previously referred, regarding – additionally and on the other hand – some cornerstone Occidental works disclosing Japan’s ancient architecture, the main of Távora’s belongings comprise, more importantly, the book “*Houses and People of Japan*” (Taut, 1958), by Bruno Taut – who, as mentioned above, was the main key actor in introducing Japanese architecture in the Western world. Disclosing an

outline of the traditional architecture of Japan, and of the modesty and simplicity of the Japanese way of living, the reverence for tradition is overwhelmingly praised throughout this work.

Moreover, *“Form and Space of Japanese Architecture”* (Carver, 1955), by Norman Carver Jr. – an American architect and photographer –, is also relevant to mention because of its singular regard towards Japanese traditional architecture, through the astounding medium of photography, which most certainly caught Távora’s eye. *“Temples et Jardins au Japon”* (Blaser, 1956), by Werner Blaser – a respected Swiss architect –, also displays an enigmatic photographic essay of Japanese tradition, namely focusing on traditional architecture, and on its intimate union with nature and gardens.

Finally, it is crucial to note Távora also had the book *“The Japanese House: A Tradition for Contemporary Architecture”* (Engel, 1964), by Heinrich Engel – a German architect who lived and worked in Japan –, which develops an exhaustive revision of the traditional Japanese house, with a long extensive analysis on its structure, layout and dimensions, in the conviction that these could support contemporary modern architecture (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 – Fernando Távora’s books collection: *“Houses and People of Japan”* (1958), *“Form and Space of Japanese Architecture”* (1955), *“Temples et Jardins au Japon”* (1956), and *“The Japanese House: A Tradition for Contemporary Architecture”* (1964), by Bruno Taut, Norman Carver Jr., Werner Blaser, and Heinrich Engel, respectively.

© Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS, Porto, Portugal)

His studying, interpreting and reading of all these books was surely determined by a specific interest in Japan and its architecture, given the fact that all of these works were considered main references for understanding Japanese architecture.

Furthermore, apart from all these major keystone *“oeuvres”*, it is interesting to note that Távora also collected other noteworthy Japanese publications, ranging from cultural-societal books, to artistic or aesthetics compilations, from which the seminal *“treatise”* *“The Book of Tea”* (Okakura, 1906), by Kakuzo Okakura – a leading Japanese philosopher and writer –, and the tome *“Nature and Thought in Japanese Design”* (Ito, 1960), by Teiji Ito – a recognized Japanese architectural critic –, both key Japanese traditional and contemporary philosophy, art and design volumes, evidently stand out (Fig. 8).

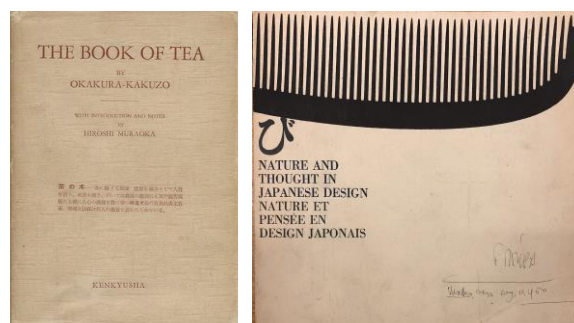


Fig. 8 – Fernando Távora’s books collection: *“The Book of Tea”* (1906) and *“Nature and Thought in Japanese Design”* (1960), by Kakuzo Okakura and Teiji Ito, respectively.

© Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS, Porto, Portugal)

The gathering and purchase of all these books on Japan can also sustain a Távora’s wish to enlarge the architectural references that dictated the teaching at his own Porto faculty – which was then very much influenced by the late Italian fascist architecture, and the appearance of Le Corbusier’s modernism and its impact on Brazilian architecture.

Also, perhaps the underlying suggestion present in all these theoretical works – the possibility of crossing modern architecture with traditional values –, comprised a fundamental factor in catching Távora's attentiveness.

However, truth be said, Távora's interest in traditional Japanese architecture seems to have gone way further than merely exploring the prospect of its ideals nurturing modern architecture – for him, the traditional architecture of Japan seemed to configure, in itself, a specific devoted interest, one in which a larger enchantment and allure for the country and its culture was becoming growingly recognizable.

Lastly, it should not be underrated that all the original book editions this research paper here identifies, are but a small minor part of Távora's "Japan collection" – so to name it –, as many other titles of his archive could be named, in a further extended research document on this theme (such as other special Japanese thematic books, editions, issues, magazines and/or periodicals).

3 CONCLUSION – THE JAPANESE RESONANCES OF FERNANDO TÁVORA'S PERSONAL LIBRARY

If many of the themes which resulted from the 1950's process of finding of a new Portuguese architectural modernity seem to be in line with some of the Japanese historic principles and customs – such as the constructive tradition, the harmony with the surroundings, the communion with nature, and the question of modernity *versus* regionalism –, which also crossed the consciousness of several Portuguese modern authors, like Távora, the fact is that never a study was attempted on building a relation crossing these topics together.

Focusing on the case of a prominent Portuguese architect who, having visited Japan, was an illustrative example of this 1950's Portuguese "crusade", somehow consubstantiates the relevance on this theme.

Apart from Fernando Távora's awareness on overcoming the Modern Movement's "obstinance" and its intended break with tradition, during his path, Távora also showed a dear enchantment for Japanese architectural and artistic "vocabulary" and cultural philosophies.

More than going through some of his buildings and architectural designs over and over again, this research paper offers a different take: an examination of his relation with Japan through his visit to the country, but mainly and most significantly through an unprecedented attentive exploration of his personal collection – where it is possible to realize that, taken as a whole, Távora's private collection reveals a persistent attention to this matter, illustrating, in a way, the true enchantment for the Japanese architectural lexicon that so enormously seduced Western architecture.

Távora's interest was, therefore, more than just a charming curiosity for Japan's exoticism: it was a real fascination for Japanese architectural culture.

Following Távora's career, the architect was initially seduced by the rationalist proposals, having, afterwards, evolved towards a noticeable adaptation to the values of the site, and therefore revealing a common concern with organicist concepts.

Curiously enough, whether in the attempt of using simple materials to design modern architecture, in the sensitive approach to traditions, or in the concern with architectural and natural landscape contextualization, Fernando Távora gives testimony of a theoretical framework and method inextricably linked to an aspiration which was also shared with some of the solemn, perennial spirit of the Japanese traditional and cultural-historic ideologies – the desire of reconciling modernity and its evolution in continuity with tradition, whereas 'tradition' should be comprehended, in a wider sense, as *permanence* – permanence of values and architectural practices, while still (and always) regarding innovation.

Concluding, over the years of his life and practice, Fernando Távora thus built, then, a unique connection with Japan, its architecture, and its culture – and one that was manifestly (and continuously) cultivated, nourished, and reassured by books and iconography.

4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, the author would like to thank his PhD advisors from the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP), Professors Nuno Brandão Costa and João Pedro Serôdio. Secondly, the director of his option / field of studies (Theory and Project Practices), Professor José Miguel Rodrigues. Thirdly, and lastly, the staff from Fundação Marques da Silva (FIMS) at Porto, for all the help regarding the opportunity to discover special material – namely within the scope of Fernando Távora's Official Archive Collection – for the research of this scientific paper.

REFERENCE LIST

- Blaser, W. (1956). Temples et Jardins au Japon.
- Carver, N. (1955). Form and Space of Japanese Architecture.
- Chevroulet, I. (2010). La Création d'une Japonité Moderne.
- Conder, J. (1886). Domestic Architecture in Japan.
- Conder, J. (1886). Further Notes on Japanese Architecture.
- Curtis, W. (2012). Fernando Távora – Modernidade Permanente.
- Engel, H. (1964). The Japanese House: A Tradition for Contemporary Architecture.
- Esposito, A. (2005). Fernando Távora: Opera Completa.
- Fernandez, S. (1988). Percurso, Arquitectura Portuguesa 1930/1974.
- Harada, J. (1954). Lesson of Japanese Architecture.
- Harada, J. (1956). Japanese Gardens.
- Ito, T. (1960). Nature and Thought in Japanese Design.
- Kishida, H. (1948). Japanese Architecture.
- Meech, J. (2001). Frank Lloyd Wright and the Art of Japan: The Architect's Other Passion.
- Nute, K. (1994). Frank Lloyd Wright and Japanese Architecture: A study in Inspiration.
- Nute, K. (2000). Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan: The Role of Traditional Japanese Art and Architecture in the Work of Frank Lloyd Wright.
- Okakura, K. (1906). The Book of Tea.
- Taut, B. (1936). Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture.
- Taut, B. (1958). Houses and People of Japan.
- Távora, F. (1962). Da Organização do Espaço.
- Távora, F. (1986). Arquitectura, *COAM*, 51.
- Távora, F. (1993). Fernando Távora.
- Távora, F. (2012). Diário de Bordo.
- Tostões, A. (1997). Os Verdes Anos na Arquitectura Portuguesa dos Anos 50.
- Wright, F. (1967). The Japanese Print: An Interpretation.
- Yoshida, T. (1952). Japanische Architektur.
- Yoshida, T. (1955). Japanese House and Garden.
- Zevi, B. (1945). Verso un'Architettura Organica.