

# Teresa Almendra's House of Oz and the expansion of the modern

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In the 1980s, in Ubatuba, on the shore of the state of São Paulo (Brazil), the architect Teresa Assoreira Almendra (1943, Angola) built what is believed to be her most accomplished work: the House of Oz. With a personal and professional path developed mainly in Angola and Portugal, the architect and interior decorator achieved, in this work, an intense dialogue between space, materiality and nature. Designed and built after Almendra left Angola, it allowed the architect to re-encounter a tropical context that was natural to her. Therefore, both as an architectural proposal and in a biographical sense, this work can be read as a personal synthesis of her African and European experiences, reinvented in Brazil. The goal of this proposal is to assess the particular condition of producing houses in their context. Methodologically, the work gathers relevant historical and architectural material – including drawings, texts, interviews – setting them in opposition and dialogue, in a critical perspective. Built in 1984, the House of Oz, which overlooks the beach, was commissioned by a Portuguese couple, who gave the architect complete freedom. Called Oz because of the importance given to its paths, these constitute an anchor between everyday life and the surrounding natural territory. For Teresa Almendra, the poetics of the place was underlined by the tracing of these crossings, where paths, passageways, galleries and bridges underpin domestic holiday life, forging a generous relationship with the enveloping forest and beach. In the House of Oz, architecture and decoration form a single entity, shaping family activities.

Alongside the understanding and contextualization of the house, there is the perplexity of seeing a house with such architectural value be neglected within the historiography of Portuguese architecture: by mapping presences, we identify the glaring void of absences.

## **1. Introduction**

When we look at the existing bibliography on the history of architecture in Portugal, we come across an absence of women architects that does not differ from the international panorama of the history of architecture.<sup>1</sup> The same is true of retrospective or current exhibitions, interviews and public events that perpetuate a hegemonic architectural culture.<sup>2</sup> Studies that focus on the contributions of women architects to the history of the discipline are on the rise. Among other things, they strive to fight this imposition of invisibility.<sup>3</sup> One of the main difficulties of this research is the identification of women architects

and the mapping of their works, given the silencing to which they are subjected. One of the methodological strategies that aim at overcoming this difficulty is the use of the so-called 'snowball' method, whereby it is possible to slowly gather, through interviews<sup>4</sup> and references, those elements that the bibliography and the archives do not show. The Portuguese architect Teresa Almendra<sup>5</sup> and her extensive work belong to that genealogy of discoveries.<sup>6</sup>

The House of Oz was built in Ubatuba in 1984, on the Brazilian shore. Within the Portuguese architecture panorama, it can be viewed as a way to understand how the various tensions that result from the complex conditions of historical and geographical influences are solved. This article intends to contextualize and dialogue with this house, as well as to give visibility to the author.

In the late 1970s, Portugal tried to create a social and economic context that would turn its back on the Estado Novo conservative dictatorship, the colonial empire and poverty.<sup>7</sup> The country saw the path to modernization and development in Europe. In the field of architecture, this meant an expansion of references, models and answers, alongside an attempt to consolidate the idea of what (so-called) Portuguese architecture could be.

From these premises, we will intersect the architect's personal and professional history with the history of the commission, design and materialization of the House of Oz, where the encounter of Portuguese, Angolan and Brazilian territorial and architectural cultures is crucial.

## **2. Teresa Almendra: An introductory biography**

Teresa Almendra's personal and professional life (Angola, b. 1943) is characterized by geographical and cultural multiplicity, the combined training in interior design and architecture, and a diversity of commissions for various programs. She completed a course in Interior Design at the Ricardo Espírito Santo Silva Foundation,<sup>8</sup> in Lisbon, in 1967. Upon her return to her native country, and until 1974, she worked as an interior decorator and architect for the Espírito Santo family and other private clients, designing hotels, restaurants, bank agencies, shops, and villas.<sup>9</sup>

With the Revolution of 25 April 1974, and after the independence of Angola, Teresa Almendra returned to Lisbon. With six small children and a day job, she took evening classes of Architecture.<sup>10</sup> After receiving her degree in Architecture, she opened an office together with her former professor, Joaquim Braizinha. In 1983, they were featured in the "After Modernism" exhibition, in Lisbon, where only 10% of participants were women,<sup>11</sup> which shows the extent to which Portuguese women architects and their work were removed from the public sphere. Later, she opened a studio under her own name.<sup>12</sup> The diversity of scales in which it operated, including urbanism, architecture, interior design, decoration, and object design, as well as a large workforce (reaching 25 workers in the 1990s), accompanied the rise of the studio.

She left in Brazil the work with which she identified the most. The House of Oz constitutes a moment of rupture and apparent simplicity, going against most of her production characterized by decorative and architectural narratives that can be described as post-modern. Also, the opportunity to design and build the House of Oz in Brazil, in that particular moment, allowed her to go back to nature, with which she had lived in close proximity in Angola. The architect remembers Angola as more cheerful and culturally open than Portugal and, in a certain way, Brazil gave her back that foundational experience.

For the family formed by António José Louçã Pargana<sup>13</sup> and Maria das Dores Pargana,<sup>14</sup> the architect designed villas and apartments in São Paulo and Ubatuba, in Brazil, New York, in the U.S., and Vale do Lobo, in Portugal. The Ubatuba commission was a holiday residence in a tropical context, a privileged spot between the beach and the forest for São Paulo's elites.

### 3. The House of Oz: An idea of immersive architectural proposal

*"The House of Oz"*

*I have always believed in the Genius Loci.*

*It is that strength conveyed by places that can lead us to the search of the "Magical Oz".*

*This house is a path – a path with bridges, squares, viewpoints. Sketch by sketch, I found the courage to assume it as it is: archaic but current, reserved but shocking!*

*It stemmed from that place, as if it had always been there... therefore, it cannot be associated with a certain architectural style or trend.*

*It pulsates in harmony with the place, another self, ancient dreams... memories of another country!*

*Mysterious walk!*

*It might not be a house, it might not be anything...*

*Scarecrow, fierce lion, tin man...*

*But it is*

*Because what I feel is that far away, by the sea, in the middle of the forest, I replanted roots, not even caring if it's spring! (Fig.1)<sup>15</sup>*

Implanted by the beach, in a luxuriant tropical environment, the House of Oz constitutes a design without restrictions. From the legacy of classical architecture, the clear forms of the two main volumes arise, punctually interspersed with wood elements and small subtractions and add-ons. If the contact with the ground is frank and complete, the gable roof stands loose and is supported by raw and elegant columns built with tree trunks.<sup>16</sup> The covering hovers protects the volumes, a light and loose presence, which fits perfectly into the tropical context that surrounds it (Fig.2).

If the understanding of the house can be broadly described by the inhabited volumes and the horizontal plane of the covering, the construction of the proposal carries the poetical intensity of opposites: between the apparent simplicity of the whole and the complexity of the different elements that

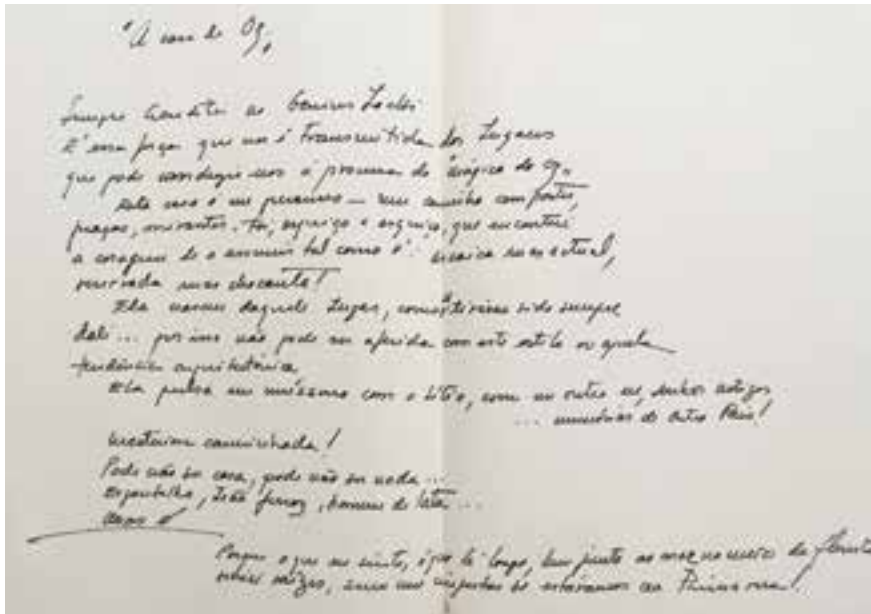


Figure 1. Teresa Almendra, House of Oz, Ubatuba – São Paulo, Brasil, undated, handwritten text by the architect on the poetics of the house. © Rita Almendra's personal archive.



Figure 2. Teresa Almendra, House of Oz, Ubatuba – São Paulo, Brasil, undated, composition of volumes and main facade facing the sea. © RTP Arquivos.

compose it. The articulation of domestic life is made, as the architect mentions in the descriptive memoir, as a “path – a path with bridges, squares, viewpoints”. These lines/plans of circulation link, permeate and expand the life of the inhabitants, in a balanced interplay between lightness (since they are suspended) and the coherence and articulation that they provide to the whole.<sup>17</sup>

In these visual interpenetrations, framed by the masses and the horizontal plane, Nature appears and becomes omnipresent: the beach, the sea, and the green mass of the surrounding forest (**Fig.3**). While in other Teresa Almendra’s

creations, impressive artworks organize the spaces, in the House of Oz the main guiding motif of the project is the unique and intense Nature of this place.

On the ground floor of the cylinder, we find the living room, and on the upper floor the master bedroom, with its own bathroom and balcony. Outside, the stairs that envelop this volume provide independent access to this bedroom. The parallelepiped-shaped volume has a large kitchen with a dining area on the lower section and other bedrooms on the upper floor.<sup>18</sup> The connections between volumes, on the same level, are made by passageways that extend into galleries on the upper floor.

Everyday life’s needs found answers through an architecture proposed in a continuous and almost ludic way. By the unfolding of the architectural elements – floor, walls, ceiling –, the furniture pieces that complement the spaces arise. Folds and rigorous movements of wood expand the hollow, endowing it with the completeness that is intended. Tables, benches, beds emerge from what is, strictly speaking, architecture. In the House of Oz, Teresa Almendra proposes

a continuum between the architecture and the intervention of interior design: everything is a gesture, action and materiality in intimate complementarity. The various paths, movements and crossings, on the one hand, dismantle the rigidity of the base-volumes and, on the other hand, unfold into opportunities to welcome everything that we expect a house to allow, promote and shelter (**Fig. 4**). The supposed harshness and imposition of fixed furniture is counteracted by the vastness and openness of spaces, where views and air prevail.



Figure 3. Teresa Almendra, House of Oz, Ubatuba – São Paulo, Brasil, undated, ground floor plan. © Rita Almendra’s personal archive.



Figure 4. Teresa Almendra, House of Oz, Ubatuba – São Paulo, Brasil, undated, the relationships between the interior and the exterior. © RTP Arquivos.

Therefore, the House of Oz intersects the clarity of volumes overlooking the beach with the approximation to a late modern that closely dialogues with the place – as Teresa Almendra mentions when she summons the *genius loci* –, but it also tries to achieve the historical dream of the total artwork. Teresa Almendra’s decisions for the House of Oz intersect different times and references, besides mixing different geographies: Angola, Brazil and Portugal.

The general ignorance about this house led us to try to understand the way it was publicized at the time. In the realm of interior design, the house appeared in several publications in the late 1980s.<sup>19</sup> In Brazil, the house was featured in *Casa Vogue*, in 1988. Entitled “The Softness of Architecture”, the article introduced the architectural proposal, describing it as a “daring and simple project, in the style of new Portuguese architecture”. It also highlighted that the Portuguese architect was enchanted by Brazil’s weather and nature. Interestingly, in the brief text written by Teresa Almendra, she identified herself as an architect linked to Africa: “Once upon a time, there was a woman architect from Africa” who designed a house as a journey, “a path with bridges, corners and squares”.<sup>20</sup> A year later, the house is shown in *Annual of Interior Design/2. European Masters*, which features creators from all over the world.<sup>21</sup> This publication contained the most information about the house.

In the 1990s, within *Sintra First Architectural Triennale*, the House of Oz is presented by Teresa Almendra in the “Home: The Poetics of Dwelling” competition.<sup>22</sup> Counting on an international jury, 57 housing projects were proposed, with various typologies and a few built houses.<sup>23</sup> The House of Oz appears in the catalogue in a single black and white photograph – the façade overlooking the beach, the two volumes with a covering, the passageways, and the columns made of rough trunks. There is no indication, however, that this publication contributed to the general knowledge of the work.

#### 4. Final notes

As a white woman from the upper class, Teresa Almendra initially moved in a very particular Angola. Upon her return to Portugal, she faced conservativeness and persistent greyness. The opportunity to design the House of Oz in the luxurious Brazilian coast allowed her to relive her previous intense tropical experience. With the House of Oz, Teresa Almendra followed the holiday home program, but above all, she realized the pleasure of designing in close dialogue with a vibrant nature. Free from constraints – of typological embedding and client expectations – the architect interweaved, like never before, the many triangles in which she moved. The geographical, with the relationship between Angola, Portugal and Brazil. The architectural culture, with the light-colored volumes, the presence of the place, and the immersive architectural proposal. But also, the material, between the crude textures, the common construction materials and the ethereal dimension, the air that vigorously occupies the houses of the house. In the beginning of everything, there is nature, which dialogues with the House of Oz as a visceral artwork.

In Teresa Almendra’s professional path there is a surprising paradox: a vast built work, in part because of an unequivocal proximity to the elites, but also a lack of knowledge and recognition of her work and path. There are many reasons that can explain this invisibility, which we will present here as hypotheses to be studied in the future.

On the one hand, her long path as a woman architect who built her studio and career alone. We cannot forget that in the 1980s, women architects still worked in a male-dominated world and those leading their own studios were rare.

On the other hand, Teresa Almendra’s initial education as an interior designer, when seen from the perspective of architecture, may carry with it the stigma of a “lesser-than” activity, both artistically and technically. In other words, instead of expanding and strengthening her knowledge and skills (which it did) as an architect, it might have irreparably linked her the professional elitist idea of a “lesser-than” architect.

Finally, a significant part of her work is made up of so-called “houses of ostentation”, spatial representations of the power of the elites that

commission them. Moreover, another type of elite, formed by her colleagues, must have undoubtedly viewed Teresa Almendra's work as so-called "commercial" architecture, and thus irrelevant to the development of architectural culture, in Portugal or abroad. The knowledge about the House of Oz should represent a rupture in this (public and peer) non-recognition, allowing Teresa Almendra's exceptional proposal to be part of Portuguese architectural culture and History.

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- Interview with Teresa Almendra within the W@ARCH.PT project, Lisbon, by Patrícia Santos Pedrosa and Lia Gil Antunes. 15 July 2020.

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## Notes

- 1 See, among others, Arias Laurino, Daniela. 2018. "La construcción del relato arquitectónico y las arquitectas de la modernidad. Un análisis feminista de la historiografía". Tesis doctoral, Barcelona: UPC Barcelona Tech. Escola de Doctorat.
- 2 In the Portuguese context, see, for example, Duarte, Ana. 2020. "(in)Visibilidades das Mulheres Arquitectas. Eventos de arquitetura em Portugal, 2010–2019". Master's Degree in Architecture's Dissertation, UBI.
- 3 In the 21st century there has been an international proliferation of research on the history of women in architecture. In Portugal, the research *W@ARCH. PT. Women architects in Portugal. Building visibility 1942–1986*, within which this article is produced belongs to this genealogy of research.
- 4 The authors emphasize the work and support of the architect Natália Fávero in the transcription of the interview with Teresa Almendra, in the treatment of the images and in the critical reading of the text.
- 5 Born Maria Teresa Ribeiro Pinto Assoreira, she acquired the surname Almendra through marriage. After her divorce, she reassumed her maiden name, Assoreira, in a legal context. Professionally, she continued using the name under which most of her work was made: Teresa Almendra. (Interview with Teresa Almendra, 2020)
- 6 The architect João Paulo Delgado was the one who drew attention to Teresa Almendra's work and the House of Oz. When he was an architecture student, Delgado worked with her and was involved in the final blueprints of the house.
- 7 To learn more about the context of women architects in Portugal, in the passage from the dictatorship to democracy, see: Pérez-Moreno, Lucía C., and Patrícia Santos Pedrosa. 2020. 'Women Architects on the Road to an Egalitarian Profession – The Portuguese and Spanish Cases'. *Arts* 9 (1): 40.
- 8 The Ricardo Espírito Santo Silva Foundation is a private institution, founded in Lisbon, in 1953. Its double role as a museum–school has been present since its inception, and Portuguese decorative arts have always been its main focus. In this course, the students were mostly women. Almendra recalled Maria José Salaviza in particular (1925–2006). (Interview with Teresa Almendra, 2020)
- 9 According to the architect, this intense production in Angolan territory was made invisible, since the authorship was attributed to the engineers who coordinated the projects. (Interview with Teresa Almendra, 2020)
- 10 In 1981, she received her Architecture degree from Lisbon's School of Fine Arts.
- 11 Alongside Teresa Almendra, we find Margarida Grácio Nunes, Maria do Céu Barradas, Maria Manuel Godinho de Almeida and Maria Rosário Venade. (Serpa et al., *Depois do modernismo*)
- 12 *Almendra, Maria, Lda.* was located on an industrial building, in Jardim do Tabaco, by the Tagus river. (Interview with Teresa Almendra, 2020)
- 13 António Pargana "was born in Porto, studied in Mozambique and Lisbon, and got his degree in Luanda. After the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, he completed the old triangle route of the colonial empire, which took him to Brasil." (Carvalho and Pinto, 2017).
- 14 Maria das Dores Pargana is a pediatrician.
- 15 Document handwritten by the architect herself (Rita Almendra's personal archive, n/d).
- 16 The columns are 13–meters tall wood trunks brought from the Brazilian region of Rondônia. (Asensio Cerver, 1989)
- 17 Veríssimo, "Maria Teresa Almendra. RTP 2 Artes e Cultura".
- 18 Interview with João Paulo Delgado, 2022.
- 19 See the issues 40 and 43 of the *Casa & Decoração* magazine, from 1989.
- 20 "A Suavidade da Arquitetura", 1988.
- 21 Asensio Cerver, 1989.
- 22 CMS and AAP, *Io Trienal de Arquitectura*, 57.
- 23 Only eight of the proposals came from women architects. Three of them were solo works – Teresa Almendra, Graça Nieto Guimarães and Cristina Veríssimo – and the remaining five were co-authored – Mónica Barreu, Isabel Laxximy, Maria da Conceição Melo, Cristina Salvador and Isabel Rosa.



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# Modern Design: Social Commitment & Quality of Life

## Editors

CARMEN JORDÁ SUCH

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