

## HESTNES FERREIRA'S PROPOSAL FOR AMSTERDAM CITY HALL COMPETITION – ANALYZED IN CONTINUITY WITH LOUIS KAHN

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**Abstract.** The end of the modern movement and the definitive realization of postmodernism installed a period of transition, full and diverse interpretations that overlap with new rationalities and build new ways of problematizing architecture, in the late 1960s. In 1967, the municipality of Amsterdam organized an international competition for its new City Hall. This competition corresponds to a critical moment for the internationalization of Portuguese architects during the period of the Portuguese dictatorship. The analysis focuses only on the proposal of the architect Hestnes Ferreira, who studied and worked with Louis Kahn. The analysis carried out on the project highlights the formal links between the two architects: the interpretation of the concept of Institution; the large central space and the entrance; the order or hierarchy of spaces; served spaces, servant spaces; materiality; natural light; and, finally, monumentality. The objective of this article is to show how Hestnes Ferreira's proposal projects in continuity with Louis Kahn. This article is part of the ongoing Postdoctoral research (2015–2021).

**Keywords:** Amsterdam City Hall Competition, Hestnes Ferreira, Louis Kahn, Institution, served spaces, servant spaces, materiality, light, monumentality.

### Introduction

In this period, appear new ideas and different ways to understand full and diverse interpretations that overlap new rationalities and build new ways of problematizing architecture.

In Portugal, the 1960s was still marked by the strong presence of the totalitarian State, coinciding with the breakdown of the colonial war, emigration, the growing rural exodus, or student struggles. However, they contrast with a period of economic liberalization and public investment, albeit discreet.

Internationally, the beginning of this decade coincides with the dissolution of CIAM in 1959 and the affirmation of Team 10. In a growing affirmation of new experiences that surpass its rigid and absolute model, successively contested the modern architecture.

In terms of architectural discussion, two significant publications appear *Architecture of the City*, by Aldo Rossi and *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, by Robert Venturi. There is a need to understand the relationship between city and building, combined with the growing importance of public opinion. This article focuses on the

year 1967 when the municipality of Amsterdam launches the International Competition for the City Council. Over eight hundred design teams from different parts of the globe participate. Most of the proposal's present multiple views of the *monumentality* implicit in a building that represents power and the various approaches proposed in the field of architecture.

From Portugal, the country geographically and politically distant from Europe, there is the participation of seven teams of architects of the new generation, the protagonist of the *transition*, between dictatorship and democracy. Of the set of proposals that responded to the competition, different solutions were delivered, both in terms of buildings and of connection to the city, demonstrating the significantly diversified Portuguese architectural culture. This moment represents a sign of vitality and internationalization of Portuguese architecture.

### 1. The brief

Chris Nielsen, the chief architect of the municipality, was responsible for preparing the competition; after consulting the different political parties, they extended the program

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as widely as possible. Nielsen was appointed as a consultant, fulfilling the functions of preparing the program and assisting the jury panel.

The jury was divided between “councilors of the *burgomaster* (president) and *aldermen* (councilors) when making the final decision.” The members of the jury stand out for being specialists in historic center buildings; the group was exclusively composed of architects – the Dutch Huig Maskaant, Piet Zanstra, J. Pedersen, and J. H. Mulder and F. Van Gool, Belgian, J. Schader, Swiss, and Sir Robert Matthew, English. By the closing date, 30 November 1967, received an unexpectedly high total of 803 entries. In these numbers, 640 foreign submissions came from all over the world.

They organized the competition in two phases: the first phase focusing on the understanding of the architectural possibilities and aspects of the urban planning of the place for the future building. In this phase, all architects could participate if they are accredited and registered. The second phase, of a limited nature and based on the results of the first phase. After selecting between five and eight initial proposals, a closer scale was required and, consequently, the exact definition of the program and budget. The winner was part of this limited group.

The proposed site for constructing the city Hall was limited by the Amstel River and the Zwanenburgwal Canal – southwest and northwest – and Waterlooplein to the northeast and southeast, marked by the Blauwbrug bridge. The terrain (Figure 1) was vacant by the destruction it suffered during the Second World War. The requirements program mentions the possibility for competitors to change the terrain limits only from the design of the channel margins, “with due respect to the proposed for the Amstel margin.”

The proposed location provides privileged access from all parts of the city and considering all means of public transport, such as car, bicycle, and boat. Located at a point of convergence in the city, valued by the metro line, the



Figure 1. Site for new city hall published in Program of Requirements, 1967.

NAi Collection, Nielsen archive (source: <https://static.nai.nl/stopera/en/Competition/pr03/pics/vergroting/pic1.html>)

program requires access to the station. The avenue that borders it has a suburban character, being the main access road between the city center and the north and southeast district through Mr. Vissenplein – the roundabout to the east of the land, where Portuguese Synagogue stands.

The program then proposes the main entrance to the City Hall designed on the southeast side, from the grand avenue. “Provisions (...) for the entry and exit of the wedding processions” and car parks easily accessible to the building must also be made. Along the Amstel, a margin treatment is required to form a full bike path from the city center through the Zwanenburgwal, passes under the Blauwbrug, and extends south.

The program describes all the necessary spaces and requests the inclusion of a bell, leaving the location to the teams’ discretion. Another essential condition referred was the free use of the natural light in the interior rooms. The issues of the volumetric integration in the city’s historic fabric were essential elements for choosing the winning solution. The contest provides all teams in the competition drawings of the surrounding facades of the place and photographs of the nearby monuments, namely the church of Mozen en Aronkerk, to the north.

“Meeting place for citizens” was the main idea of the program. Thus, proposing a large central hall with commercial services – a restaurant, a bar, a kiosk, and a tourist office – as part of a program of full rooms of different sizes. Located on the border between two scales, the small one, in the center of the city, and the larger one, of the new urban interventions, however this fact, did not deserve any mention in the requirements program. However, this potential conflict was underline by the obligation of the main entrance facing the avenue, referring to the future building to a large-scale road and urban scope that was related to recent interventions in the city. This fact caused a high resistance in the public opinion.

## 2. Portuguese teams

In addition to the geographical distance to the main European centers of cultural production, there was a certain conformism in Portugal that led to stagnation and impeded progress because of the Dictatorial regime – *Estado Novo*.

This international competition corresponds to a critical moment for the internationalization of Portuguese architects. Seven teams submitted the projects, a vast number for the Portuguese context. From the Portuguese teams (Figure 2), six were from Lisbon, Pedro Vieira de Almeida (1933–2011), Raúl Hestnes Ferreira (1931–2018), Bartolomeu Costa Cabral (1929) with Manuel Tainha (1922–2012), the Atelier Conceição Silva, whose project is led by the young Tomás Taveira (1938), Luís Fernandes Pinto (1930–2016) and Victor Consiglieri (1928–2019) with his partner Artur Florentino (1931). From Porto, José Pulido Valente (1936) competes, together with the sculptor José Rodrigues (1936–2016) and the painter Jorge Pinheiro (1931). In this competition, none of the Portuguese teams was distinguished.

The transition of the 1960s marked the expansion of horizons on the discipline, not only from a strictly functionalist and theoretical perspective of the modern movement but also from the question of regionalism with the realization of the Portuguese Architecture Survey (*Inquérito a Arquitectura Portuguesa*).

The State's objective in supporting research was “to contribute to the Portuguese architectural style; however, not reaching the objective, showing that, unlike the genuinely Portuguese style, there were as many architectures as so many regions. Led the rethinking of modern dogmatism by a young generation of architects, born mostly in the 1930s, of which Frederico Sant'Ana (19??–1961), Carlos Duarte (1926–2019), Pedro Vieira de Almeida (1933–2011), Raúl Hestnes Ferreira (1931–2018), which together with Nuno Portas (1934) started, from 1956, the third phase of the magazine *Arquitectura*, publishing and exercising a critical work, divulging the roots of the modern movement in a perspective of cultural and historical reflection” (Tostões, 2004, p. 141). They are critically placed before the regionalist architectural model of the *Estado Novo*, but also with the dogmatism of the International Style. This generation published their essays exercising critical work, disclosing the roots of the modern movement in a perspective of cultural and historical reflection, and responding in some way to Ernest Rogers. He, in 1957, posed the question “crisis or continuity of Modern architecture” in the editorial of the Italian magazine *Casabella*.

In Portugal, based the discipline on the reflections of Nuno Portas, who were criticizing the modern movement, but also the growing appreciation of languages, proposes a return to the city in the contemporary construction of urban space, proposing a series of new ways of thinking about public space, first in *A Arquitectura para Hoje* (1964) and, later, in *A Cidade como Arquitectura* (1969).

Esteves (2017) collected the Portuguese proposals, registered, and deposited in the archives of the Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. However, for the analysis of Hestnes Ferreira's proposal, the material available for research was accessed, in the architect's collection, deposited at the Marques da Silva Foundation, in Porto, Portugal.

It is convenient to contextualize the academic and professional path of Hestnes Ferreira until 1967, as shown in diagram (Figure 2).

Raúl José Hestnes Ferreira born on November 24, 1931, in Lisbon, son of the Portuguese poet and writer José Gomes Ferreira and Ingrid Hestnes Ferreira, Norwegian.

He studied at the School of Fine Arts of Porto (1952–1957) after being expelled due to his political activity at the School of Fine Arts in Lisbon. In 1957 Hestnes Ferreira dived into Scandinavia and experienced Finnish architecture (Saraiva, 2015). Although the initial plan of the trip was to visit the works of Alvar Aalto and the principal works of Finnish architecture, Hestnes Ferreira changes the plan, staying in Finland for a year. During this period, he studied, at the Finnish Institute of Technology in Helsinki, like an external student, urbanism with Otto Meurman (1890–1994), and architecture with Heikki Siren (1918–2013). During this period, he collaborates in the office of Woldemar Baeckman (1911–1994) in Helsinki, and during this period, he develops a Competition for a Church with Osmo Rissanen (Saraiva, 2011).

During five years, between 1958 and 1962, Hestnes Ferreira remains in Portugal and carries out five projects, the most important of which is the house he designs for his father in Albarraque, under the influence of the principles of Scandinavian architecture and the lessons learned at the School of Fine Arts of Porto. In 1961, Hestnes Ferreira received the diploma of Architecture at the School of Fine Arts in Lisbon with the Thesis on University Residences, with a classification of 19 values.

In the following year, between February and March, he attended the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies at Yale University, with a scholarship from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Furthermore, in the next year, as a student of master's in architecture Department of Architecture and Urban Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, attended classes of Architecture Studio, directed by Louis Kahn, with Norman Rice and Le Ricolais. At Louis Kahn's office, between 1963 and 1965 in Philadelphia, he took part in projects. Like: in the Plans of the Governmental Centers of Pakistan in Dacca and Islamabad; the National Assembly Buildings in Dhaka and Islamabad; in the Main Hospital in Dhaka, as a lead architect; at the College of Administration in Ahmedabad, Indian Union; and the project for the Art School in Philadelphia (not built) (Saraiva, 2011).

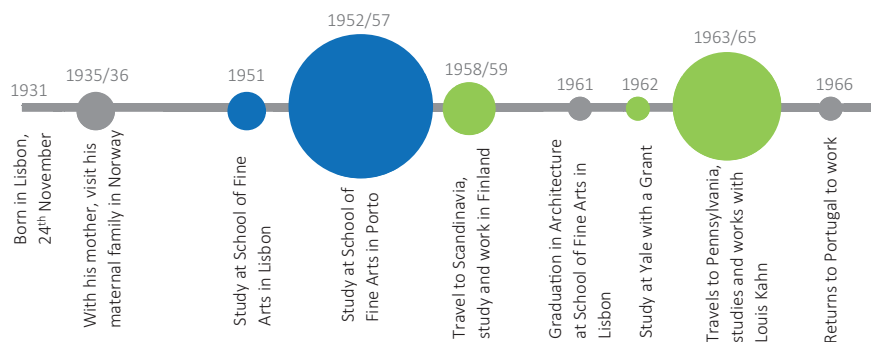


Figure 2. Chronological Hestnes Ferreira's academic and professional path (source: by the author)

Returning to Portugal, in 1966, he resumed his professional activity, individually and with other colleagues, in his studio, also collaborating with several official entities. The American experience allowed Hestnes Ferreira to understand the significance of the ancient Mediterranean culture and the extension of the idea of “monumentality” according to Kahn’s thoughts (Saraiva, 2019).

### 3. 0696 Raúl Hestnes Ferreira

Hestnes Ferreira’s proposal had the number 0969, and the code name HEAVEN I. The organization misspelled the architect’s name; in the contest documents, Ferriera appears instead of Ferreira.

His approach to the project included a diagram of the principal axes and streets diagram (Figure 3). To Hestnes Ferreira, the first step in approaching a project: understanding the place and its society, ensuring a solution that respects the cultural and constructive tradition of the city.

Designing a building of this type requires understanding the concept of “Institution.” In 1959, Kahn, in his speech at XI CIAM, in Otterlo, reflects on the role of the City Council, which “was a meeting place, it is now



Figure 3. Principal axes and streets diagram (14-07-1967) (Marques da Silva Foundation, RHF archive)

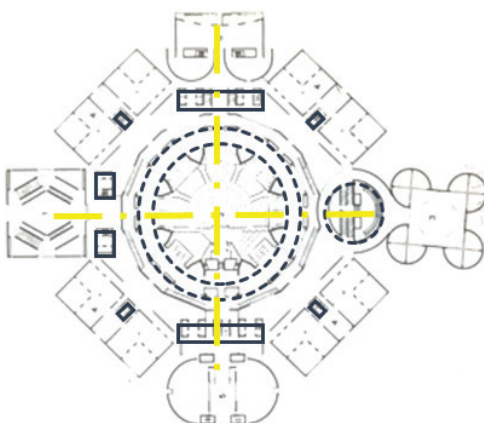


Figure 4. Floor plan, Centro Governmental Dacca, Bangladesh (1962|1983) (Saraiva, 2011, p. 189)

something different, and must return to being a set of spaces where the population can meet.” Hestnes Ferreira understands the importance of this concept and develops all her work, considering a central nucleus as the meeting and convivial point.

During the period that Hestnes Ferreira worked in Kahn’s office, he participated in the project for the Parliament of Dacca, and this fact may have influenced his proposal. The relationship between the two projects is unequivocal, the assembly represents the place of meeting and debate, and in this case, it is also the central space; we identify the axial structure in both buildings and the order, achieved by the definition and positioning between servant spaces and served spaces.

Nevertheless, in order to illustrate this statement, we must see the two analysis diagrams (Figure 4) and (Figure 5), identify with a blue continuous and blue dashed lines, the servant spaces, and all the other served spaces. In both projects, the yellow dot line shows the structuring axes.

The hierarchy of spaces has always been an essential theme for Hestnes Ferreira; this premise has always been present in the design. Kahn already did it and affirmed that serving spaces and served spaces are one of his maxims. These spaces assume different functions, visible not only in the plan but also in the volume of the ensemble, where they also appear as different parts.

Louis Kahn, in his essay *Form and Design*, stresses that the perception of form implies harmony in the sense of order, suggesting that form has no limits. The shape does not depend solely and exclusively on the design.

Hestnes Ferreira’s solution in locating the spaces served on the edge of the building allows the use of natural light through the glazed surfaces. Once again, the continuity between Hestnes and Kahn is achieved by controlling light over spaces, “no space is space if there is no natural light” (Saraiva, 2017).

For Hestnes, the shape does not depend solely and exclusively on design. Louis Kahn, in his essay *Form and Design*, stresses that the perception of form implies harmony in the sense of order, suggesting that form has no

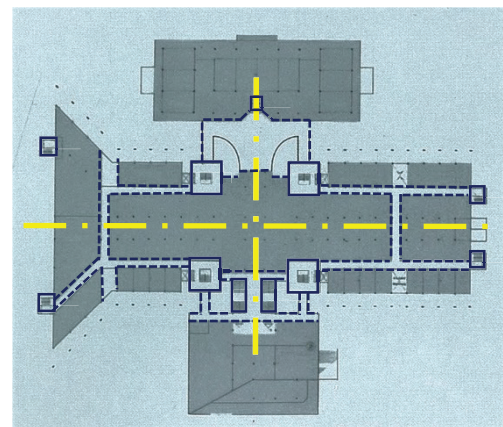


Figure 5. Floor plan of city hall (1967) (Marques da Silva Foundation, RHF archive, adapted by the author)

limits. By proposing a building “of great significance for a venerable city” (Ferreira, 2002, p. 65), Hestnes Ferreira intended in a first analysis, to understand the place from the pre-existence of the city. It notes the “peculiar layout of the streets and squares of the older Amsterdam,” which constitute a “strong challenge” to the design of the proposal. However, the architect’s approach starts from a plastic exercise, which arises a priori from connecting to the city. He states, “Our scheme aims to achieve an architectural statement where each part would keep its individuality and flourish into a whole integrating architectural, structural and mechanical requirements” (Ferreira, n.d.).

The following image (Figure 6) shows the working method from the initial idea to the final solution. The various possible solutions for the building underline the relationship between full and empty, or more precisely, built and not built space. However, the solution submitted for this contest is not yet visible in this diagram. In the Marques da Silva Foundation at RHF archive, there are several diagrams like this. For the Amsterdam City Hall Competition, Hestnes Ferreira made more than two hundred and seventy drawings.

Hestnes Ferreira develops a plastic concept, looking for form through the volumetric design. It attaches importance to each of the parts, united through technical centers and circulation, in their due volumes. Thus, “it allows its expression,” “forcing the character of each part” instead of “forming a whole” at the outset. Each block effectively fulfills a function in its way.

The model (Figure 7) shows the plastic concept of the proposal. The idea of each part forming the whole follows the reading of Louis Kahn. They attributed the same importance to the circulations between spaces that, for “a complex public building of this size and with so many visitors,” must be “clearly articulated” – by distinguishing what circulation spaces are, it reinforces the character of each of the volumes of the building.

Like his master, Hestnes Ferreira, in his projects, hierarchizes the spaces between servers and servants. The volumetric clarity based on the distinction between served

spaces and served spaces characterizes the building. Like Kahn, he emphasizes the separation between what is circulation and technical areas of the functional spaces of the building’s program. In this way, the access cores assume a vital role, affirming the volume of the complex, from the central atrium to the limit of the building.

As a condition of the location, highlighted pedestrian circulation from the canals and road circulation at Waterlooplein, to the north, reserved the entrance for cars, whose park is at the same level. In a principle of “simple and direct connections,” the main entrance to the building is placed in front of the canal, which Hestnes considers the “main axis of Amsterdam,” privileging contact with pedestrian paths on its margin. Inland, it passes through a large atrium, one level above the car and bicycle park, accessible on all sides of the building through secondary entrances, found in the arcade that circumscribes it. While this space connects public services to the north, there is a smaller atrium, allowing direct access to the volume to the offices of the city hall and the *burgomaster* – the most restricted program. In the same volume, in direct contact with Waterlooplein, are the wedding rooms, with their park and free access, as well as commercial and archive services. The definition of orthogonal axes, like Louis Kahn, typically used in his works, also Hestnes Ferreira manages to achieve a more coherent organization between the parts and the whole. The plan shows an axial marking, the result of an unequivocal central space. From the central space, oriented towards the main channel, two perpendicular axes extend, which configure the building’s implantation. As seen in the CD section (Figure 8), the west-east axis has two large voids juxtaposed to the central atrium, which, on various levels and passages, correspond to the circulation and service spaces, surrounded by upper balconies that give access to the offices and offices located on the perimeter of the building. According to the requested spatial organization principle, on the ground floor are the civil registration and municipal services of the town clerk, highlighting the public character of this level. On the upper floors, there are the various municipal services that,

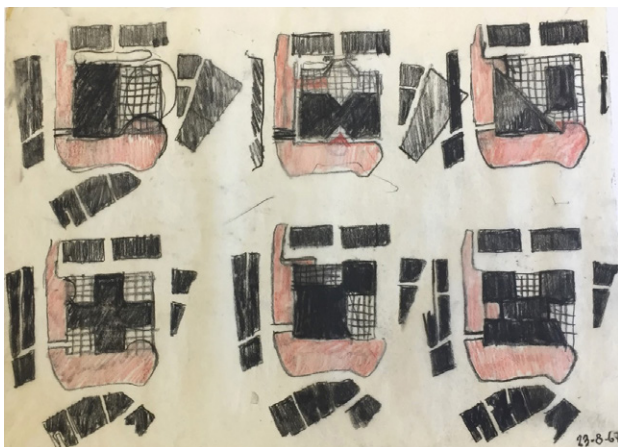


Figure 6. Six possible solutions for the city hall (23-08-1967) (Marques da Silva Foundation, RHF archive)

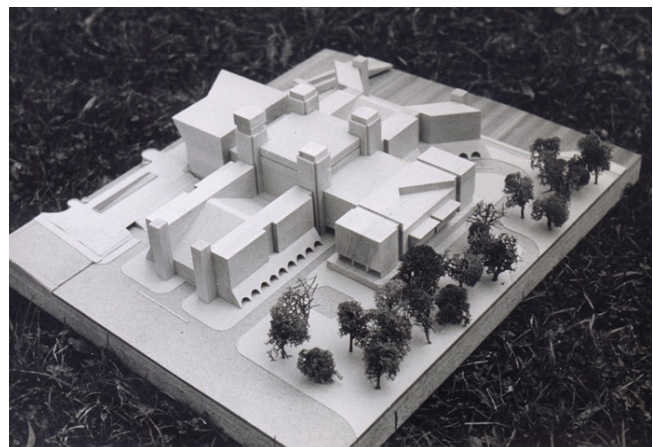


Figure 7. Hestnes Ferreira's model of city hall (source: Marques da Silva Foundation, RHF archive)

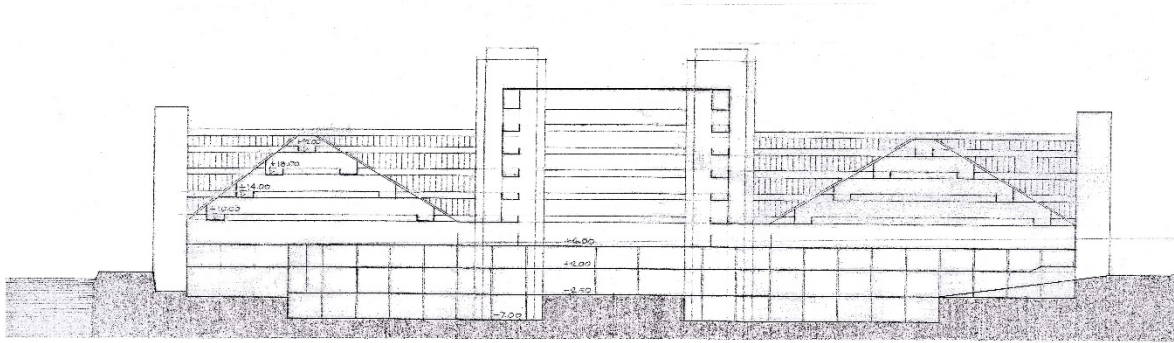


Figure 8. Section CD, Hestnes Ferreira proposal  
(source: Marques da Silva Foundation, RHF archive)

without being specified, demonstrate a more individual character at the volume facing the river, over the entrance, a large reception room that extends over the top floors. The bell was included in one of the central access towers, incorporating it into the volumetric shape and affirming it as a symbol of the City Council and the city.

Hestnes Ferreira considers that the shape of the building is “a reflection of the treatment given to ensure adequate lighting and visibility to the outside,” as well as the result of the “need to create outdoor spaces protected from storms,” evident in the arcades that surround the entire building. All facades were corresponding to office space and services covered in glass, with metal frames design. Inside, the treatment of the atrium surfaces is exclusively in reinforced concrete. Outside, Hestnes states, “our proposal did not ignore the city’s architecture, in particular the Berlage Stock” (Ferreira, 2002, p. 65). He proposed the use of brick as a covering for the entire built mass.

Hestnes Ferreira also shares the same references as Louis Kahn, as in his works, the control and the presence of Light is one of the most important and significant points in his way of designing and constructing, “...light, for me, is fundamental; it is the spatial key of a building. It can assert that there are two types of light, one that guarantees the functionality of space, and the secret light that gives spaces, especially those most hidden, the effect of the unexpected” (Saraiva, 2011, p. 302).

Louis Kahn was inevitably marked by “an interest in exploring the knowledge of the great examples of the past” and his personality “a man who cared so little about possessions” and a “precursor” in “challenging consumer society” (Ferreira, 1973, p. 3).

It is in this sense that Kahn positions the “architecture stagnation” because “the work is not thought to the core, of not looking for its form in a structural and meaningful way” (Kahn, 1962, p. 23).

Hestnes Ferreira does not, just as Louis Kahn did not, design according to the commercial use of stylistic approaches, nor according to the majority of them, but can, with the repetition of certain elements, create a registered trademark and distance himself from the Portuguese national perspective (Saraiva, 2017).

For Kahn, monumentality was the “spiritual quality inherent in a structure which conveys the feeling of its eternity, that it cannot be added or changed” (Ockman, 2000, p. 47).

## Conclusions

Hestnes Ferreira’s proposal highlights the constructive choice in terms of technology and proposed materials. At the same time, it integrates the structure of the city and relates the interior with the exterior, making the program a reality.

Hestnes Ferreira seeks to affirm the building as a unique piece; however, it should not be read as a whole. It is at the junction of the parts through the circulations that he revisits a clear concept, which takes complexity. Volumetrically it is distinguished from the city; however, materiality contextualizes it.

According to Hestnes Ferreira and Louis Kahn, each architectural work be simplified, allowing to exclude any element that might confound its reading to achieve its purest aspect (Saraiva, 2014).

The proposal reflects the strong influence of Louis Kahn in the architecture of Hestnes Ferreira. The materiality, which in addition to the city, is an echo of Kahn’s architecture, forms large opaque brick panels, underlining the monumentality that transcribed inside: the building’s spatial logic favors circulation spaces in the vast voids that become for themselves a different experience when they are covered.

The concept of monumentality, Hestnes Ferreira, as in Louis Kahn, is partly obtained through the manipulation they make on the scale of their buildings. For these two architects, the scales of a building presuppose an intelligent and correct control, divided into two moments. At first, they consider the human scale present in the interior space and, in a second, the monumental scale visible in the exterior and the common spaces.

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