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MARCH 2009

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120 | ARCHITECTURE

SLICES OF ACTION

The offset slabs give the hotel a dynamic appearance. Bedrooms are housed in the overhanging parts





STACK TO THE FUTURE

A Portuguese seaside city is being transformed into an architectural Mecca – with a growing collection of buildings by the likes of Fernando Távora, and now the arrival of an innovative stacked hotel

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAN HOLDSWORTH WRITER: CLAUDIA SARAIVA

An otherwise unremarkable seaside city in northern Portugal, Viana do Castelo is no stranger to gravity-defying contemporary architecture. A source of particular civic pride is the city's new Álvaro Siza-designed white concrete municipal library. Opened last January, it seems to hover above the commercial centre. The library dominates a re-imagined square master-planned by Fernando Távora – Siza's mentor and the founder of the Oporto School (the Portuguese architecture movement of which Siza is now the central figure). Távora also contributed two ambitious buildings himself to the project. By the end of this year, the square's all-star architectural line-up will be completed with the addition of a multi-purpose pavilion, designed by yet another of the school, Eduardo Souto de Moura. This will feature an aluminium box on top of a light-filled structure, emphasising the ethereal nature of Távora's vision for this part of town.

It was a vision that had a profound impact on hotelier Victor Silva, owner of the local Axis Hotéis e Golfe group. So inspired was he by Távora's project, he promoted a modest architecture contest of his own for his latest property, the company's fourth, which he had determined to build in the city outskirts.

The winners were Oporto-based VHM, a practice which had previously

specialised in coordinating and managing rather more modest construction projects. 'We never really understood why he invited us to pitch,' confesses VHM's head architect, Jorge Sodre de Albuquerque. 'It wasn't our typical project.'

Albuquerque's plan took the gravity-defying elements of Távora's master plan that had so impressed Silva and ran with them. He proposed an asymmetrical alignment of the slabs that made up each of the floors. That resulted in completely different perspectives of the building from various viewpoints, and captured something of the lightness which Silva had specified.

The initial 3D sketch, with the slabs venturing flamboyantly into the void, obliterated the competition in Silva's mini-contest: 'that' was what he wanted.

Inevitably, as the design took shape, the project became more conservative and balanced. Although on the main fronts of the building the irregular rhythm of the windows – which are marked by thick vertical elements of varying width – reinforces the asymmetry of the layout, it is not as haphazard as it seems at first glance. Every other overhanging slab is lined up vertically – first floor with third, and second with fourth.

VHM chose to clad the building in aluminum to guard against the corrosive sea air and the high rainfall in Viana; they made it black to underline the >>

UNDERGROUND HIT

The subterranean swimming pool was an engineering challenge

Below, the irregular windows line up on every other floor



construction's horizontal scope and to highlight the building's unapologetic landmark pretensions.

One thing the architects insisted on was that the indoor swimming-pool area be hidden underground. It proved by far the trickiest part of the whole structure to get right. Positioning each of the massive concrete structural supports over the pool was the sort of time-consuming, precision-engineering work that can really play havoc with construction budgets.

Inevitably, as the project progressed, these overruns led to a number of compromises in the finished building. The most noticeable of the subsequent cuts and adaptations were the elimination of the interiors designed by Albuquerque and, outside, the opting for cheaper LEDs for night-time lighting.

Overall, though, Silva's decision to invest in architecture has been vindicated. The hotel's overriding feature is not its scale but the building's strength of character. It stands comparison with the city's Siza and Távora buildings, even if it was born of personal passion rather than civic master-planning. ★

www.vhm.pt; www.axisviana.com

