



the art of
building a
Portuguese home.

UNDERSTANDING . LIVING . BELONGING

A foundational guide to

THE FEELING OF A PLACE

By
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*Atmosphere is the aesthetic quality of
a place that communicates itself to
our emotional sensibility.*

Peter Zumthor, Atmospheres

the art of building a Portuguese home.

Part I: Qualities of Atmosphere

Part II: The House Through the Senses

Part III: From Atmosphere to Tangibility

A house can be complete, and still feel *unresolved*.



Daily objects on the kitchen counter.

Everything is in place: the materials were considered. The palette is coherent. The proportions are aligned.

And yet something is missing.

Not a thing that can be named or pointed to. A quality. A sense that the space has not yet become what it could be

This feeling is not a failure of taste. It is not a problem of budget, or effort, or intention. It is something more specific, more foundational: it is the absence of atmosphere.

*And atmosphere, unlike furniture, cannot
be chosen. It has to be understood.*



The discomfort is specific, even if it is hard to name. You walk into a room, and something resists you: not visually, not logically. The room is functional. And yet you do not stay in it longer than you need to. You do not find yourself there by accident, at the end of an afternoon, without having planned to be. You don't desire to return to it. You may occupy the space, but the space is not inhabited by you.

The house looks right. But it does not feel alive.

● *A space that is technically resolved, culturally absent.*

● *Materials that are appropriate but unrelated.*

● *A room that has no narrative, no sense of how it came to be, or why it is that way.*

These are problems of coherence. And coherence cannot just be assembled from the outside.

A place is not assembled. It is *formed*.

Portugal has a spatial vocabulary, more than a visual one. It is built from light behaviour, material memory, the relationship between interior and exterior, the way rooms were originally used, and how that use left its mark.

When that vocabulary is unknown, the instinct is to reach for familiar elements: tiles, wood, textures, a certain palette. When placed without a foundational connection, these elements relate in incoherence.



A window left open to allow the fresh air.

The result is a space that references a place without belonging to it.

Recognisable. But not inhabited.

What actually creates the feeling of a place is not a set of elements. Is a set of *qualities*.

THE QUALITY OF *TIME*

Not visual complexity, but temporal depth. A space that holds evidence of different moments: a surface that has been repaired, an object that arrived from somewhere specific, a material that has aged in a particular way. Layering is what makes a room feel like it has a past.

Walk into the room and ask: does anything here feel like it has a relevant story? If everything feels equally new and equally present, the room has no past yet. That is what is missing.

What is often misread is not the absence of objects, but the absence of time made legible. And this is where decisions begin to carry weight.

Introducing “age” is not a matter of selecting the right pieces. It is a matter of understanding what in a space is allowed to remain, what must be introduced, and what must be left unresolved.

When this is misjudged, the result is immediate: a space that performs memory, rather than holding it.

THE QUALITY OF IMPERFECTION

The uneven edge. The surface that shows its age. The join that does not disappear. These are not flaws to resolve: they are the evidence that something real was made by hand. That it was built through someone else's own story, in a specific place and time. The perfect imperfections of handmade objects are what make a space feel produced rather than inhabited.

Imperfections can be scary because they expose vulnerability. They also bring to evidence the marks of life. A texture with patina and nuance is as honest as skin marked by time: both speak the vocabulary of life lived.

Not every imperfection carries meaning. Some are structural. Some are careless. The question is not whether to preserve or to correct, but which imperfections belong to the life of the space, and which interrupt it.

When everything is corrected, the space loses depth.

When nothing is corrected, it loses clarity.

The work is in knowing the difference.

THE QUALITY OF *HONESTY*

When materials are selected for appearance rather than character, they sit in a space without grounding it. This is not always a visible mistake.

A material can look correct and still behave incorrectly over time: reacting to humidity, light, or use in ways that reveal the mismatch.

What was selected as a surface begins to detach from the conditions of the space. And the space, gradually, loses coherence.

Portuguese materials are not always easy to understand: the thick stone, the crackling floorboards, the irregular limewash walls. These materials are not trying to argue with you: they are telling you their story. Don't expect a 100-year-old pine floor to behave like a laminated cover-up. It will never happen. And that's the beauty of it.



An imperfect object with a story.

THE QUALITY OF CONTINUITY

The sense that the decisions made in a space share a common origin - not a style, but a sensibility. That the rug, the wall, the light, and the object are all answering the same question, even if they arrived from different places and different times.

The question - more often than not - is who you are within the sanctity of your own space, and what you want that space to be.

This doesn't mean that all rooms should look the same. But they should feel connected. Moving through each space should feel like an experience of continuity, not one of alienation. It can be rooted in a colour palette with different chromatic values, in a specific material that repeats itself, in a texture. In a feeling.

Continuity is not repetition. It is alignment.

The difficulty is that alignment is rarely visible at the level of individual decisions.

It only becomes evident when decisions accumulate.

A single material, a single object, a single gesture that does not belong - even if corrected in isolation - interrupts the whole.

This is why coherence cannot be assembled incrementally without a clear structure behind it.

*Not everything should feel resolved.
Some surfaces are meant to remain uneven.
Some transitions are meant to stay visible.*

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THE HOUSE THROUGH THE SENSES

Belonging expresses itself through our innate way of perception: the senses.

Homes are often designed from a visual distance: from screens, catalogues, photographs of other people's spaces. And only when the room is finished, it is asked whether it works. But a home is not a static image. It is a space you eat in, sleep in, argue in, recover in. It is experienced through every sense simultaneously. These are not secondary qualities. They are the primary ones.

*A space can be photographed beautifully and
experienced as empty.*

This is because the eye reads surfaces and proportions, but it cannot read atmosphere. It cannot tell you whether a room is cool or warm, loud or quiet, alive or inert. It doesn't show you the weight of table where meals are shared. The quality of light at the hour you eat. The smell of the kitchen that reaches the room before the food does. The sound a house makes when it is full of people and when it is quiet. Vision is only the introduction.



THE HOUSE AS SOUND

Every room has an acoustic signature.

A room with bare stone walls and a timber ceiling absorbs sound differently from one lined with plaster and curtains. A tiled floor carries footsteps. A rug swallows them. The thickness of a Portuguese masonry wall means that sound from outside - traffic, wind, rain - arrives muffled, at a remove. The room feels quieter than it has any reason to be.

This is not an accident. It is mass doing its work. And once altered, it is rarely corrected without consequence.

Removing mass, changing surfaces, introducing new materials - each decision recalibrates how the space holds or releases sound.

What is lost is not always immediately perceived. But it is felt over time.

Listen to a room before you change it. Stand in the centre and speak at a normal volume. Does your voice carry or disappear? Does the room feel like it holds sound or releases it? A room that is acoustically harsh - where every sound is sharp, and surfaces reflect rather than absorb - will never feel restful, regardless of how it looks.

THE HOUSE AS SMELL

In the same way the scent of a loved one lingers in our memory, the smell of a house is one of the first things to be remembered. And yet, it is rarely considered as a design language.

The natural smell of a Portuguese home is not neutral. Aged pine has a resin that releases in warmth. Stone carries a mineral coolness that is almost a smell. Old linen, washed and dried in Atlantic air, has a specific quality - clean but not synthetic, alive rather than processed.

These are not smells to eliminate. They are the olfactory signature of a space that is made from real materials behaving honestly. What you introduce should continue that conversation, not replace it. When scent is used to mask rather than extend, the space begins to separate from its material reality

*Lavender from the Alentejo, dried and placed without performance.
Beeswax on old wood surfaces. Mandarin and cedar essential oils in
winter. These are not trivial; they are the connecting layer of a
space that has been thought through with cohesion.*

A home that smells of nothing has not yet been inhabited. A home that smells of synthetic fragrance is compensating for an absence.

*The right smell is the one that makes you breathe more
slowly when you enter, and remember the space when you
leave.*

THE HOUSE AS TOUCH

Surfaces are experienced before they are seen. The hand on a wall, the foot on a floor, the back against a chair - these contacts happen constantly, unconsciously, and they communicate in ways the eye cannot.

A heavy linen curtain in your hand. A solid ceramic object on a shelf. A thick wool rug underfoot. These are not luxuries: they are the difference between a space that feels substantial and one that feels provisional.

A surface that looks warm but is cold to the touch registers as a contradiction. The body notices. And it remembers. When surfaces contradict what they suggest - visually or materially - the space becomes subtly unstable. Not enough to identify. Enough to resist.

Run your hand along the surfaces in your space. Which ones give you something back? Which ones are simply there?

The senses you are not designing for are often the ones that determine if a space feels like somewhere to be, or somewhere to pass through.

The experience of *inhabiting* is inseparable from the experience of *being*.

A home does not become itself all at once. It becomes through time, through the meals shared at a table that acquires meaning with each one, through the mark left on a wall that was never repaired because it was always more honest without repair, through the morning light that you have learned to follow from room to room because you stayed long enough to understand where it goes.

Materials, proportions, light, and use do not operate independently.

They form a framework, whether it is recognised or not. When that structure is coherent, the space settles. When it is not, no amount of correction at the surface level will resolve it.

The more you are present in a space - fully present, not just occupying it - the more it becomes yours. Not through accumulation. Through depth. Through the willingness to let the space reveal itself slowly, on its own terms, in its own time.

*This requires a particular kind of courage:
to sit with what is unresolved.*



It also requires the ability to decide what should remain unresolved - and what should not. Because atmosphere is not the end. It is the condition. These qualities - time, imperfection, honesty, continuity, sound, smell, touch - are not decorative. They are the spatial intelligence that design constructs.

Without them, a Portuguese home is correct. With them, it belongs.

Not all implementations lead to coherence. Decisions made without a clear reading of the space do not fail immediately. They accumulate. And over time, the space begins to resist what has been imposed on it.

The home you are building is not a project with an endpoint. It is a practice of attention, of presence, of allowing what is already there to come forward and meet you. The space reveals itself through imperfection. And so do we.

When that happens - when the threshold stops being an entrance and becomes a return, when the space quietly confirms that you are where you need to be - you encounter the Portuguese feeling of *pertença*.

The feeling of being held by a place.

Not the act of owning, but the state of arriving -
and knowing you are already home.

My work is to read what is already there and bring it into *coherence*.

Not by adding identity. By revealing it.

Every space already contains the conditions for belonging. The materials present, the light that enters, the proportions of the rooms, and the history of the building. These are not obstacles to work around.

This is where atmosphere moves from perception into discernment.

Not as a matter of taste.

As a matter of reading, translating, and deciding, within the conditions that are already there.

To read the existing conditions and translate them into decisions that deepen rather than disrupt.



With over a decade of experience in architecture and design, I specialize in cultural translation for international homeowners. My practice takes shape through materials, craftsmanship, and spatial principles that honor the country's heritage while meeting international standards and individual needs.

Mar Jabouille

Join me on [Instagram](#) and [YouTube](#)

The structures that deliver it

DESIGN STRATEGY SESSION

IN-PERSON | INTERPRETATIVE | DECISIVE

You've found your home in Portugal. The space holds potential you can sense but not yet articulate. This session reads your space and translates it into clear, grounded design direction.

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PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES

GUIDES | TOOLS | AUTONOMY

Tailored guides and tools created to help you navigate Portuguese homes with clarity and autonomy at your own pace.

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INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

TAILORED | MOVE-IN-READY | COHESIVE

Relocating, investing, or building a life in Portugal from abroad. You want your home conceived as a whole, executed without fragmentation, and delivered ready to inhabit.

[LEARN MORE](#) —————>



Buying property in Portugal is not only a financial decision. It is a cultural one. Without inherited literacy, most buyers evaluate surfaces instead of systems. This is not a checklist for reassurance. It is a framework for discernment.



Renovating in Portugal means understanding different building eras, regional construction habits, and licensing rules. This is a 3-layer viability assessment framework. Surface. Performance. Structure.

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