

Theory and History of Conservation

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An overview of conservation and restoration practice in Portugal.

1. Introduction

The evolution of architectural conservation and restoration in Portugal, from the post-World War II period to the present, reflects a complex interaction between ideological frameworks, international doctrines, and national identity. A key obstacle in the early development of conservation practices was the delayed emergence of the architect-restorer as a distinct professional. This was primarily due to two interrelated factors: architectural education in Portugal remained conservative and without offering a structured curriculum in conservation or heritage-related disciplines; and the *Direção-Geral dos Edifícios e Monumentos Nacionais* (DGEMN)¹ — the institution responsible for national heritage preservation — appointed architects to heritage projects who were often required to address complex issues and undertake projects beyond their formal expertise.

2. Post-war restoration and nationalist ideology

In the post-war period, under the Salazar's *Estado Novo* regime (1933–1974), architectural heritage in Portugal was used as a tool for nationalist propaganda. The DGEMN planned a questionable program of monument restoration grounded in a stylistically purist approach that aimed to reintegrate the monument into its “primitive beauty, purging it of later excrescences and repairing mutilations suffered either by the action of time or by human vandalism²”. These interventions, influenced by Viollet-le-Duc's principles, prioritized stylistic coherence — especially for medieval or Manueline elements at the expense of later additions — over historical authenticity as advocated in the Athens Charter (1931). The symbolic coherence was aligned with the regime's goal of moral and material “national regeneration”³. Buildings that embodied these ideals were prioritized, while other were ignored. Monuments like the Jerónimos Monastery, the Belém Tower and several national castles (Figg. 1-2) were stripped of later additions to conform to an idealized medieval or Manueline aesthetic⁴, reconstituting an ideal of perfection, which often resulted in something that the monument had never been⁵.



Figg. 1-2. Fortified manor house of Porto de Mós, before and after the restoration works. Source: *Direção-Geral do Património Cultural – SIPA*.

Even so, the work carried out by the DGEMN made a notable contribution to the preservation of national monuments.

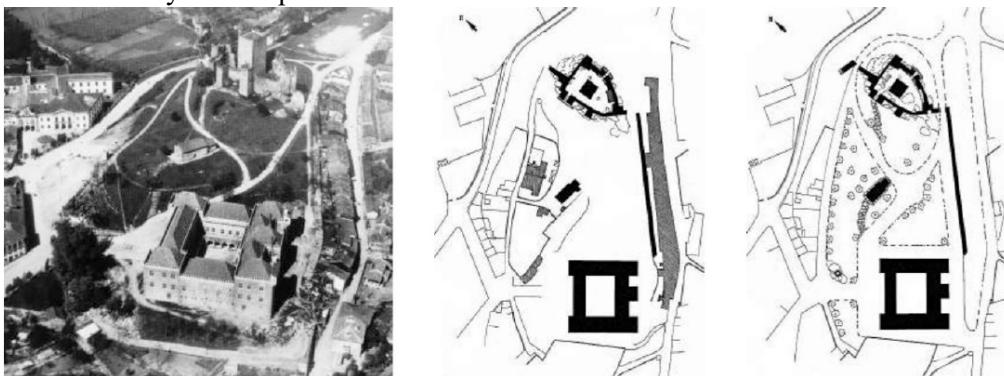
The restoration work carried out by the DGEMN in the first half of the 20th century was guided by a methodical and systematic process, recorded in dossier (Fig. 3) — *boletim* in Portuguese — that illustrated the before and after phases of intervention⁶.



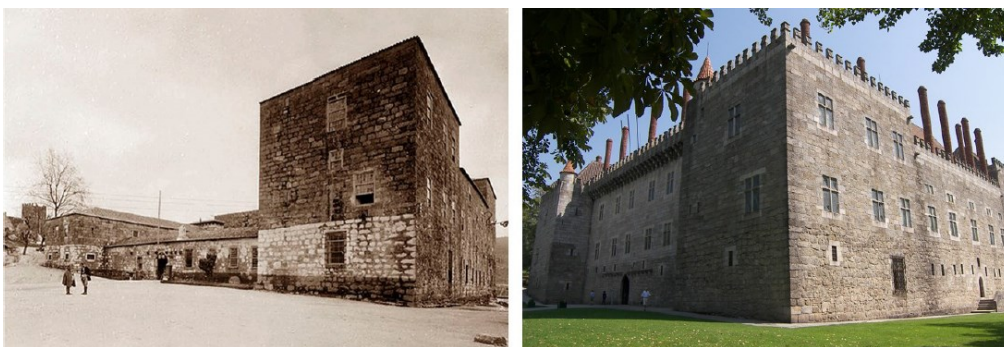
Fig. 3. DGEMN's Boletim of the Paço dos Duke of Bragança. 1960.

2.1 Paço dos Duques de Bragança, in Guimarães

The restoration of the Paço dos Duques de Bragança in Guimarães (1936–59), led by Rogério de Azevedo (1898–1983), exemplifies the questionable interventions of the DGEMN (Figg. 4-8) on heritage. This vast palace complex, with a quadrangular plan and corner turrets, was begun in the 15th century but never completed. In this case, the symbolic significance of Guimarães as the core of Portugal resulted in a “creative” restoration. Surrounding buildings were demolished to enhance the palace’s monumentality and adapt it for official state functions.



Figg. 4-6. Paço do Duque de Bragança: Photographic view of the site before the restoration works (1936–1959) and architectural plans showing the building’s state before and after intervention.



Figg. 7-8. Photos of the fort before and after the restoration works. Source: Direcção-Geral do Património Cultural - SIPA

The architect's initial aim was to carry out an intervention based on Luca Beltrami's theory of historical restoration. Rogério de Azevedo identified the typological roots of the courtyard of the Paço dos Duques de Bragança in Guimarães by appropriating the concept of “type” to establish a network of formal relationships with other analogous

buildings. He rebuilt the missing part of the building as they should be in the 15th century. In this context, typology was not understood in terms of an organic structural analysis or as a tool to comprehend constructive processes, but rather as a repertoire of formal references — predefined models from which restoration could draw aesthetic and compositional coherence. However, ‘From simple restoration, which aimed to be faithful to an artistic language based on historical objectivity, quickly progressed to interventions whose results were highly subjective’⁷.

3.1 Modernism and the Venice Charter: Fernando Távora’s shift in conservation principles

The 1960s marked a turning point as Portuguese architects began engaging more with modernist principles and international conservation frameworks. The Venice Charter (1964), with its emphasis on authenticity, reversibility, and respect for historical layers, gradually influenced professional discourse.

Architect Fernando Távora emerged as a reference figure, advocating for a synthesis of modernist innovation and contextual sensitivity. The architect himself acknowledges to be exploring a model of intervention different from the usual one in the of *Casa da Igreja in Mondim de Basto* project (Fig. 9-1): “what was important in this work was to establish a restoration criterion different from that which was currently being used [...].

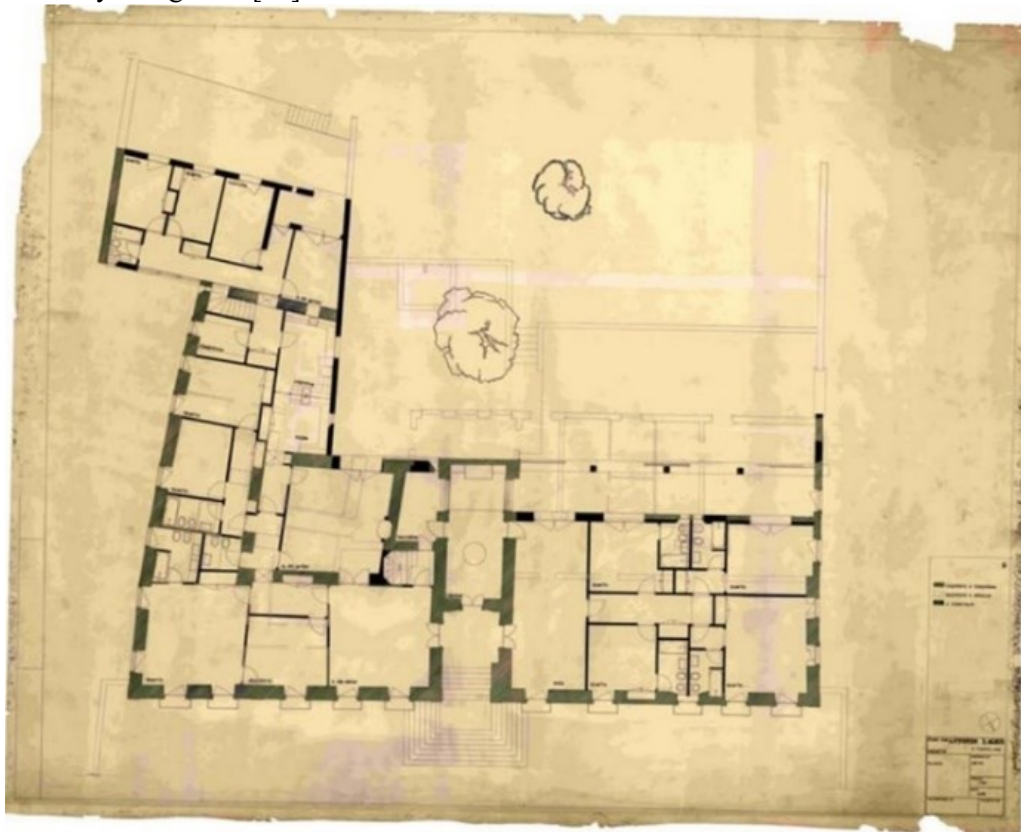


Fig. 9. Plan of the Casa da Igreja renovation. Grey areas: to be preserved; black areas: new construction; dashed lines: to be demolished. Source: Arquivo da Fundação Marques da Silva.

I tried to use a ‘healthy’ restoration criterion: neither denying the past, nor attempting to rehash it⁸”. In fact, he applied advances of better living standards and construction techniques of the Modern Movement directly on the historical pre-existence, integrating contemporary glass volumes while preserving the building’s historical essence⁹.



Figg. 10-11. Fernando Távora in the backyard of Casa da Igreja. The same patio today. Source: Arquivo da Fundação Marques da Silva.

3.2 The reuse as medium of heritage preservation

In these decades Portugal started to spur efforts to define more systematic approaches to architectural intervention — particularly through the reuse and re-functionalisation of built heritage, aimed at both recovery and long-term preservation. These strategies emerged not only from conservationist imperatives but also in response to socio-economic pressures: limited state resources and the growing demand for public infrastructure, both of which had been evident since the 19th century. Key to this process was the nationalisation of monastic and religious properties in 1834 and again in 1910, which made vast building stocks available for new uses.

Convent buildings were among those most significantly transformed. Originally conceived as self-contained, introverted complexes centred around cloisters and communal interiors reserved for religious life, many were gradually adapted for civic functions. These new uses re-integrated the structures into the socio-economic dynamics of the urban fabric, allowing them to regain symbolic and spatial relevance within their communities. In contrast, rural monastic buildings experienced a markedly different fate — many were auctioned off, left in disrepair, or converted for private residential use, often with minimal consideration for their heritage value.

Castles, due to their more rigid and militaristic architectural typology, offered less functional adaptability than convents or palaces. However, some degree of reuse was achieved, primarily in the cultural and touristic domains. Castles frequently hosted museums of their past — heritage sites curated for historical narrative and public display.

A significant conceptual shift occurred with the creation of the “pousada de turismo” — a typology of heritage hotels conceived to embody Portuguese cultural identity and hospitality. This model opened new avenues for the occupation of architectural heritage, particularly military structures. The inauguration of the Pousada de Óbidos in 1951¹⁰, housed within a sixteenth-century castle, marked the beginning of the integration of lodging facilities into classified monuments (Figg 12-13).



Figg. 12-13. Paço dos Alcaides inside the Castle of Óbidos, before and after the restoration works. Source: Direção-Geral do Património Cultural – SIPA.

Urban palaces built during the early modern period were often repurposed to meet the institutional needs of their local contexts. Depending on their location and size, these palaces were typically adapted to serve as municipal buildings, administrative offices, or other forms of public infrastructure. In contrast, the national palaces — such as those of Belém, Ajuda, Sintra, and Queluz — retained their original ceremonial and state functions. Consequently, they were not subject to re-functionalisation but instead underwent major renovation and museological restructuring, particularly during the

1940s to 1960s, when regional museums and exhibitions were introduced as part of broader cultural policy.

Monastic buildings that had been expropriated and transferred to state ownership were often recognised as particularly suited to social and educational functions, given their spatial and symbolic characteristics. In this context, they were frequently adapted into schools, hospitals, or care institutions. However, the insertion of explicitly cultural or touristic functions into these religious complexes only gained traction in the 1970s. Landmark examples include the transformation of the Convent of Santa Marinha da Costa in Guimarães and the Castle of Vila Nova de Cerveira into pousadas, reflecting a new phase in public heritage policy that embraced tourism as a vehicle for architectural preservation and sustainable reuse.

4. The first debates of the new era. The case of Lisbon's "Casa dos Bicos"

The 1974 Carnation Revolution marked the end of Salazar's *Estado Novo* regime. This event catalysed a democratic restructuring of heritage management, decentralizing authority and broadening conservation's scope to include anonymous architecture and industrial sites.

Within this evolving context, the conservation of Lisbon's *Casa dos Bicos* (built between 1521 and 1523) exemplifies the epistemological tensions in applying international conservation principle, where the conjectural reconstruction of lost elements clashes with emphasis on material authenticity and minimal intervention. Commissioned by Afonso Brás de Albuquerque following Italian Renaissance influences, the structure's diamond-faceted façade and Manueline motifs of the windows survived the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake but suffered partial collapse, leaving only two floors intact¹¹ (Figg. 14-15). After centuries of utilitarian use, including as a codfish warehouse, the *Câmara Municipal de Lisboa (CMLisboa)* acquired the property in 1960, initiating a protracted restoration process under the nascent *Instituto Português do Património Cultural (IPPC)*¹². Architects José Daniel Santa-Rita Fernandes and Manuel Vicente¹³ led the 1982–1983 intervention, commissioned by the *CMLisboa*, reconstructing the interiors, the two upper floors and Manueline-style windows, including a Renaissance loggia. For the interior, they designed a monumental staircase (reminiscent of the original one, which has since disappeared) and a series of rooms for services, determined by oblique lines in a largely deconstructionist design. They chose to recreate the missing part of the façade by reproducing the texture of the walling in the same way as the original. Lacking precise data for the restitution of the decorated Manueline windows, they recreated them using an evocative modern design, having the modelling done in steel, while maintaining the presumed proportions (Figg. 16-17).

While the project adhered to Article 9¹⁴ of the Venice Charter — mandating distinguishable modern additions — the speculative reinstatement of historical features sparked debate over compliance with Article 12¹⁵, which prohibits conjectural reconstruction. Critics argued that the intervention prioritized stylistic coherence and national heritage narratives over the Charter's emphasis on preserving the "valid contributions of all periods," effectively erasing post-16th-century stratigraphy.



Figg. 14-15. Photograph of the façade prior to the 1982 restoration, alongside an 18th-century azulejo panel depicting the façade as it appeared before the 1755

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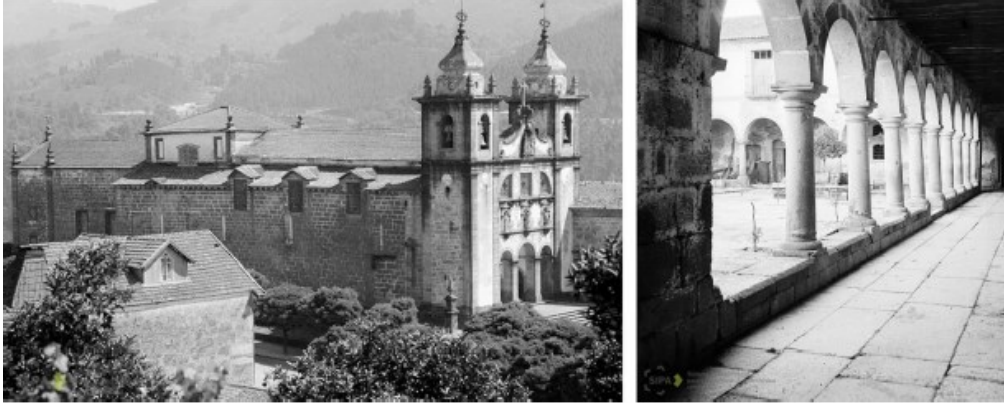
5. Santa Maria do Bouro Convent, Amares. The intervention of Eduardo Souto de Moura

The decade of the 1990s marked a decisive institutional turning point, especially with the consolidation of the IPPAR, which took on not only the stewardship of significant monuments, but also a broad theoretical and operational agenda.

The Portuguese conservation practice matured into a globally recognized field guided by minimal intervention, material honesty, and critical engagement. In economic and policy terms, heritage conservation became increasingly tied to broader agendas, including cultural tourism, urban regeneration, and European funding cycles (notably under the successive QCA¹⁶ and Portugal 2020 frameworks)¹⁷. Education expanded through specialized postgraduate programs, multidisciplinary research, and international collaboration. Professional standards rose, and a new generation of conservators became more aware of ethical and socio-political issues in intervention. Methodologically, this involved a greater reliance on detailed historical and material diagnostics, often incorporating archaeological analysis and archival research, as well as a more rigorous application of conservation science.

Pritzker Prize-winning architect Eduardo Souto de Moura epitomized this ethos in projects like the *Santa Maria do Bouro Convent* (1989-1997)¹⁸, where modernist concrete elements dialogue with medieval ruins to create a luxury hotel. Founded in the 12th century as a monastery of the Cistercian Order, the Convent underwent numerous additions over time. However, by the late 20th century, following the extinction of the religious orders in 1834, the monks were expelled, the property was sold at auction, and a long period of decay began. It was in this ruined state that Eduardo Souto de Moura first encountered the building (Figg. 19-20). “The project tries to adapt, or rather use, the available stones to build a new building. This is a new construction, involving various testimonies (some already existing, others to be built), and not the reconstruction of the building in its original form. For the project, the ruins are more important than the ‘Convent’, as they are available, open, manipulable

material, just as the building has been throughout history. With this attitude, we don't intend to build an exception, but rather to fulfil a rule of architecture, almost always constant over time. During the project, the 'design' tried to find the right balance between form and programme. Faced with two hypotheses, we chose to refuse the pure and simple consolidation of the ruin for contemplative use, opting to inject materials, uses, forms and functions 'entre les choses' as Corbusier used to say. The 'picturesque' is an accident that happens and not the will of a programme"¹⁹ (Figg. 21-23).



Figg. 19-20. Pousada de Santa Maria do Bour, Amares. The state of the Convent prior to Souto de Moura's project.



Figg 21-23. The Pousada as it looks today, integrating new and existing elements. The orange groves courtyard, a detail of a balcony, and the façade of the church..

6. Arquipélago Centro de Artes Contemporâneas by Menos é Mais Arquitectos, and João Mendes Ribeiro, in Ribeira Grande, Azores

The multi-award-winning project for the *Arquipélago Contemporary Arts Centre*²⁰, located in Ribeira Grande on São Miguel Island in the Azores, stands as a recent successful example of architectural conservation and adaptive reuse in Portugal²¹. Designed by Francisco Vieira de Campos and Cristina Guedes of Menos é Mais Arquitectos, in collaboration with João Mendes Ribeiro, the project transformed a 19th-century alcohol and tobacco factory into a dynamic cultural hub. Completed in 2015, the intervention exemplifies a sensitive dialogue between heritage and contemporary architecture. "The *Arquipélago* acquires its identity through the quiet variation between the pre-existing and the two new buildings"²².

Jean Nouvel said that “Portuguese architecture of recent decades has a robust charm. It uses familiar idioms in situations that give them new-found strength”²³. The power of simplicity, the strength of the material and the force of scale are requisites that, when put together, are capable of amplifying their effect”²⁴. The design of the Arquipélago reflects this characteristic. It maintains the industrial feature of the original complex, characterized by volcanic stone masonry, while introducing new volumes constructed with exposed concrete incorporating local basalt aggregates. These additions, marked by abstract forms and textured surfaces, are strategically positioned to complement the existing structures without overshadowing them. The architects employed a "quiet variation" approach, ensuring that the new constructions harmonize with the old, preserving the site's historical essence while accommodating modern functionalities. Sustainability was integral to the project, with passive design strategies such as thermal mass provided by dense concrete walls and a rainwater harvesting system enhancing energy efficiency and environmental responsiveness²⁵ (Figg 24-29).



Figg. 24-29. The 2015 Arquipélago Contemporary Arts Centre project

Notes

1. Established in 1929 and extinguished in 2007
2. SILVA, H. HENRIQUE GOMES DA (1935). *Monumentos Nacionais. Orientação técnica a seguir no seu restauro. Boletim da DEGMN: A Igreja de Leça do Balio*. Lisboa. Thesis. P.19-20
- 3 SALAZAR, A.O. *Discursos e Notas Políticas, 1938–1943*, volume 3 (Coimbra: Coimbra Editora, 1944) p.259.
4. PEREIRA, P. *Acerca das Intervenções no Património Edificado. Alguma História*. [pages with no number].
5. DE CARVALHO, R. A. *Ideology and Architecture in the Portuguese 'Estado Novo': Cultural Innovation within a Para-Fascist State (1932–1945)*. *Fascism*, 7(2), 141-174. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00702002>
6. The DGEMN's *Boletins*, published from 1935 onwards, documented the interventions and methodologies applied to each monument. Typically, the project manager in charge would first provide an "interpretation" of the monument's current state, followed by an architectural survey of the building. Then, they would produce a drawing representing an idealized version of the restoration project—removing any elements added after the monument's original construction phase, whether structural, decorative, or related to furnishings.
7. PEREIRA, P. *Acerca das Intervenções no Património Edificado. Alguma História*. [pages with no number].
8. PORTAS, N. *Arquitecto Fernando Távora: 12 anos de actividade profissional*. *Arquitectura*, 71, p. 11–33, 1961.
9. ORDÓÑEZ-CASTAÑÓN, F., CUNHA-FERREIRA, T., SANTIAGO SÁNCHEZ-BEITIA S., *Towards a new approach of architectural heritage intervention in Portugal: Fernando Távora and the refurbishment of the casa da Igreja of Mondim de Basto (1958–1961)*, in *Structural Studies, Repairs and Maintenance of Heritage Architecture XVI*, WIT Transactions on The Built Environment, Vol 191, © 2019 WIT Press, doi:10.2495/STR190161, pp 187-198.
10. The adaptation of the Paço dos Alcaides began in 1948 under the direction of João Vaz Martins.
11. DGEMN/DSID. Santa-Rita Fernandes, José Daniel. *Casa dos Bicos Restoration Report*. Lisbon: CMLisboa, 1983. http://www.monumentos.gov.pt/site/app_pagesuser/sipa.aspx?id=2489
12. ROSAS, F.. *História de Portugal*. Lisboa, Editorial Presença, 1993.
13. Casa do Bicos: D. Santa-Rita, M.Vicente, proj. 1982; constr. 1983
14. Proceedings of the IInd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historical Monuments (1964).p.2.
15. Ibidem, p.3.
16. The Quadro Comunitário de Apoio was an instrument that regulated the application of EU funds in each country until 2006.

17. It is a Partnership Agreement adopted between Portugal and the European Commission between 2014 and 2020.
18. Client: Enatur - Empresa Nacional de Turismo, S.A. Project budget: 7.980.766,35 euros.
19. Description provided by the project team and available at <https://www.archdaily.com.br/br/769336/reconversao-do-convento-de-santa-maria-do-bouro-numa-pousada-eduardo-souto-de-moura-plus-humberto-vieira>
20. Client: Regional Directorate of Culture (DRaC) of the Regional Government of the Azores.
21. Distinctions: 2020 Secil Architecture Prize; Portugal, 2017 BigMat '17 International Architecture Award 2017 finalist; Luxembourg; 2016 BIAU 2016 award, X Bienal Iberoamericana de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, São Paulo; 2016 Winner Premis FAD d'Arquitectura i Interiorisme, Barcelona; 2016 European Prize finalist for Urban Public Space 2016, Barcelona; 2016 RIBA Award for International Excellence 2016, London; 2016 RIBA International Prize shortlist 2016, London; 2014 Nominee for European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture - Mies Van Der Rohe Award 2015, Barcelona.
22. Menos é Mais Arquitectos, project presentation available at www.menosemais.com
23. Domus, N. 1071, September 2022. P.99.
24. Ibidem.
25. Domus web, https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2015/03/24/arquipelago_contemporary_arts_centre.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

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