




# Expression, Exploration, and Intuition in Nadir Afonso's Cities

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**Abstract.** Unquestionable *leitmotiv* of all his work, the urban reality provided Nadir Afonso with innumerable occasions for conceptual and material experimentation with which to give shape to his complex and highly personal interpretations. Beyond the thematic or chronological boundaries with which Afonso's work has been classified, the constant presence of the city on his thoughts and actions would provide the painter-architect with the keys to capture space and time with singular freshness. A transversal approach to a selection of his works reveals the progressive gestural evolution of his compositions, from the in-depth exploration and reformulation of the chosen theme to the mimetic translation of the intuitions inherent to the previous studies into large-scale final works. A restrained gestural expressiveness, consistent with the leisurely thought on the geometric beauty of the city, will give way to the radical expressiveness of the rapid stroke, common in small formats, to become the true protagonist of a particular production that takes the city as an excuse and the gesture as an argument.

**Keywords:** Nadir Afonso · City · Gesture

## 1 Introduction

*Architecture is Not an Art.* It was with such a categorical statement that Nadir Afonso entitled (1920–2013) his thesis defended in Oporto in 1948. The work derived from the project for the Duval textile factory in Saint-Dié, one of the most strictly functional works designed by Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and which Nadir developed in his studio in the Parisian Rue de Sèvres, where, thanks to the involvement of the Swiss master, he was able to combine his passion for painting with his work as an architect without having his salary diminished as a result. But his commitment to architecture, under exclusive conditions alongside the most influential architect of the 20th century, was not enough to satisfy his deep artistic concerns. Nor would he see his creative yearnings sufficiently rewarded in his subsequent collaborations with Oscar Niemeyer (1907–2012) or in his solo works. Disillusioned by the limitations of the discipline and determined to devote himself entirely to the creation of his plastic work, Nadir definitively abandoned the practice of architecture in 1965. Although he voluntarily distanced himself from the architectural creation and its transforming effect on the city, Afonso cast his keen gaze on the urban reality until it became the undisputed *leitmotiv* of all his work.

Approaching Nadir Afonso's wide and varied production is not easy and requires some guidance on his creative concerns. The website of the Foundation named after him [1] offers a chronological and thematic categorization comprising up to thirteen periods in which his catalogued work can be classified: early works, modernism, surrealism, baroque, pre-geometric period, Egyptian period, Espacilimité, ogival period, perspective period, anthropomorphic, organicistic period, fractal period and geometric realism. Such a meticulous taxonomy derives from the careful reviews of his works, especially that carried out by Professor Laura Afonso, the artist's widow, and President of the Foundation, in her dissertation *A crítica na obra de Nadir Afonso* [2]. The subtitle of said review - *O caso das obras de título cidadão* - certainly points out the prominent presence of the city in Nadir's work. Several studies and monographs have underlined this prominence, interpreting Afonso's research and findings from different points of view. Gómez Segade [3] traced an exhaustive portrait of the artist and highlighted, among other ideas, the grammar of geometry as an identifier of his work. Marques and Braz [4] went into detail on many of the city works by Afonso, interweaving plot and chronological links between them, derived from the theoretical principles outlined by Nadir, which are essential to understanding his pictorial production.

## 2 Discussion

The transversality of Nadir Afonso's cities surpasses, in our opinion, any attempt at temporal ordering, for despite the common features that some conceptual families reveal, we find in many of them exceptions that escape the accepted classifications, crossing borders to establish an autonomous category around the graphic expression of the city. In addition to these considerations, there are many cases in which the time elapsed between the previous study and the final work on the same theme exceeds the chronological limits of the above-mentioned periods.



**Fig. 1.** Nadir Afonso. Teerão. Left: study, 1988 (6.6 × 10 cm). Right: oil painting, 1998 (90 × 129.5 cm). Private Collection.

Thus, the sketch of *Teerão* (6.6 × 10 cm) dates from 1988 (Fig. 1) and Nadir completed the corresponding oil painting (90 × 129.5 cm) ten years later, the gouache on paper of *Nova Lorque* (28 × 40 cm) was signed and dated 1995 and the homonymous oil painting on canvas (94 × 138 cm) was produced in 2003. In the case of *Madrid*, the initial sketch (28 × 40 cm) and the final acrylic painting (96 × 131 cm), dated 2001, are four years apart. Similar circumstances in different art works illustrate the constant presence, albeit with irregular pulses, of the interpretative challenge of the city, to which Nadir Afonso pays varying attention and with diverse intentions, at equally different times. We can guess that the temporal distances between the sketch and the final work were not always due to a conscious and paused process of reflection on the same theme, and perhaps they should be understood as a recovery of some of the previous studies that had been relegated to remain in an initial state, awaiting a new opportunity that a new period of the author's creative fertility would undoubtedly bring.

Viewing the group of urban-themed works from a certain distance, we find a varied graphic response by the artist which, in materializing them, suggests a deliberate modulation of their gestural expressiveness according to the different intellectual attitude with which Nadir interacted with the city throughout his prolific life. For reasons of length, it is necessary to make a concise selection, which we shall take as a sufficient argumentative reference for these variations.

## 2.1 Expression

The *Vila Nova de Gaia* sketch (1939, mixed media on paper, 13 × 13.3 cm) barely defines the framing with dry, rectilinear strokes that will mutate in the subsequent painting (1942, oil on canvas, 51.5 × 48.8 cm) into soft, linked brush strokes, full of undulating matter (Fig. 2).

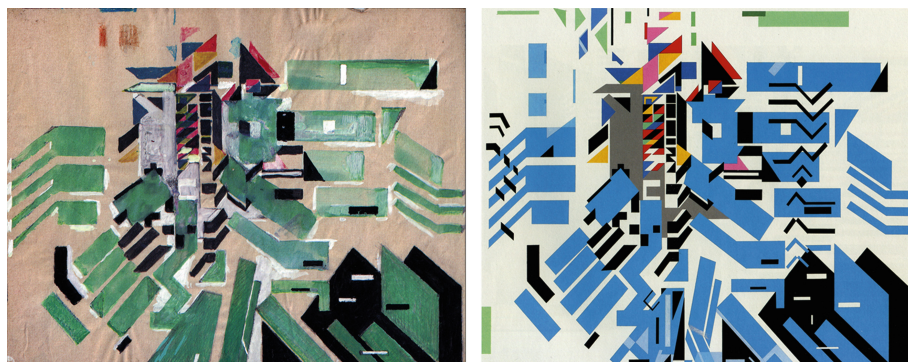


**Fig. 2.** Nadir Afonso. Vila Nova de Gaia. Left: study, 1939 (13 × 13.3 cm). Right: oil painting, 1942 (51.5 × 48.8 cm). Private Collection.

It is a piece that could be considered representative of a group of works in which the impressionist resonances of the final oil painting and the expressionist force of the initial sketch suggest a vitalist approach to the chosen themes. The gestural expressiveness of both states seems to be aimed at channeling Afonso's uncontrollable expressive potential at an early stage of his career, which would soon lead to questioning processes based on geometric grammar as an instrument for achieving beauty.

## 2.2 Exploration

The restful attitude that can be sensed in *Lisboa* (Fig. 3) permeates Afonso's work, both in the sketch (1967, mixed media on paper, 20.5 × 26.5 cm) and in the final work (1968, oil on canvas, 94 × 115 cm), where some questions seem to be endorsed while others evolve from a germinal state to a definitive solution through chromatic variations, the sharp outlining of lines and shapes, or the introduction of new elements that complete the composition.



**Fig. 3.** Nadir Afonso. *Lisboa*. Left: study, 1967 (20 × 26.5 cm). Right: oil painting, 1968 (94 × 115 cm). Private Collection.

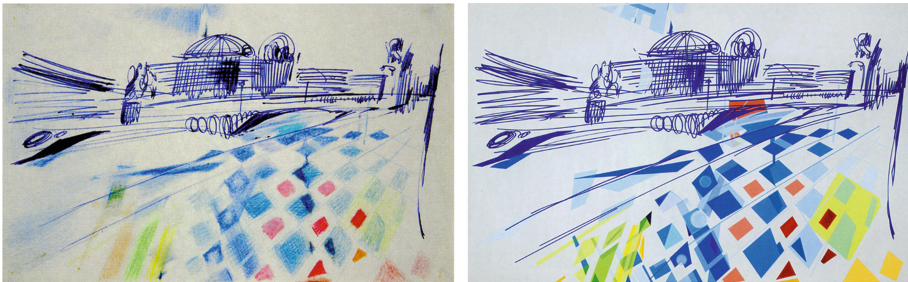
Related to *Lisboa*, works such as *Labirinto* (1969) or *Varsóvia* (1978) confirm that the clearly expressive modes of previous periods give way to a necessarily leisurely drawing, prone to the profound questioning that emanates from Afonso's theoretical positions on the mathematical geometry of urban settings. The determination of precise forms and tones, or the compositional balances and imbalances of these works, require a self-imposed emotional and gestural control from the previous studies, where the scope of the exploration undertaken in each case is accurately selected. The formal construction of strict geometry is revealed in these works, not only as an instrument that Nadir uses to determine the interpretation of the urban space but also as a method of investigating its qualities.



### 2.3 Intuition

A tireless traveler, Afonso had spent decades of his life between France and Portugal. From the 1980s onwards, Chaves and Cascais were the reference places for Nadir, who voluntarily distanced himself from anything that might hinder his work. From the distance of his personal refuge, he would undertake the last stage of the endless work on urban themes where, visited, recreated, or imagined, dozens of cities would move from the small study on paper to the large canvas, conforming a highly personal way of understanding the graphic expression of the urban reality.

In the case of the above-mentioned *Teerão* [see Fig. 1], despite the technical and dimensional distance between the study and the final work, the intuitions of the former are reflected in the latter, translated into geometrically outlined forms and flat inks, including the translation of vigorous zigzag strokes and waves of color that anticipate resources that Nadir would later exploit profusely. The *Siene et Le Grand Palais* of 2001 (Fig. 4) is a good example of this and illustrates the naturalness with which Nadir Afonso will transfer to the canvas (92 × 132 cm) the characteristic gestural expressiveness of the initial sketch (11.5 × 18.5 cm), where the author's determination is as intense as the time of realization is short.



**Fig. 4.** Nadir Afonso. *La Siene et le Grand Palais*. Left: study, 2001 (11.5 × 18.5 cm). Right: acrylic painting, 2001 (92 × 132 cm). Private Collection.

Similar appreciations arise from the contemplation of *Mármara* (2010), where the work (acrylic on canvas, 174.5 × 234 cm) and its sketch (gouache on paper, 28 × 39 cm) embrace with identical naturalness the resolute outline of a gesture confident in the accurate representation of the city (Fig. 5).

This casual gestural expressiveness is the main feature of the last creative period of an artist who seems to have reached the highest level of evolution for transferring his first impressions of cities to the finished work. They are the instinctive strokes of someone who, after decades of theoretical reflection and pictorial practice, has chosen intuition as the supreme value of artistic expression. In the works mentioned here, and in most of his extensive production on urban themes, the sketch has ceased to be the catalyst for a theme to be developed and has come to constitute the complete work on its own, only awaiting its transfer to permanent materials and sizes.



**Fig. 5.** Nadir Afonso. *Mármara*. Left: study, 2010 (28 × 39 cm). Right: acrylic painting, 2010 (174.5 × 234 cm). Private Collection.

While most painters cautiously conceal their initial drafts of carefully elaborated works, Nadir exhibits and gives full value to his intuitive approximations to the city, transferring the graphic registers of small format from the initial sketch to the large canvas with hardly any alteration. A comparative analysis of these works with their respective previous studies is very enlightening in this regard (Fig. 6).

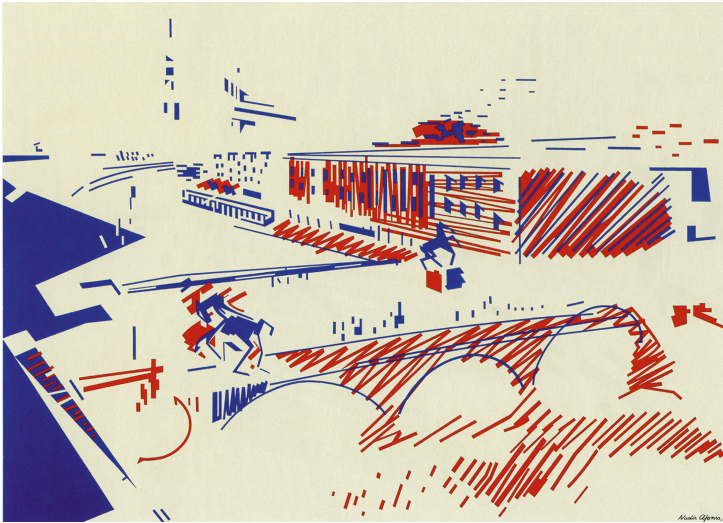


**Fig. 6.** Graphic parallel of the selected works. Top, left: *Vila Nova de Gaia* (1942); center: *Lisboa* (1968); bottom: *Teerão* (1998). Top, right: *La Siene et le Grand Palais* (2001); bottom: *Mármara* (2010). Author's own elaboration.

Once again making use of the advantages of the graphic parallel [5], we can confirm the marked proportional leap between painting and sketch in the artist's later works compared to his first compositions. Thus, the oil paintings *Vila Nova de Gaia* and *Lisboa* are about four times the size of their previous studies, while *Mármara*, *La Siene et le Grand Palais* and *Teerão* are, in their final configuration, six, seven and thirteen times the size of their germinal idea. João Pinharanda [6] partly reveals the creative process

of the last Afonso, who used mechanical procedures to test the final dimensions and the flat colored shapes of his linear and surface elements.

Even if it was not usual, Nadir Afonso could introduce minor alterations whenever, in his observations, he found a minor element of a work that was not well defined. In doing so, we can never be sure of having a finished work in front of us, Pinharanda states. And he is certainly quite right, for, although the final realization of these pieces has the usual appearance of a finished work, the fresh immediacy of the sketch from which they originated prevails over any other consideration, possibly giving the uninformed viewer a sense of the provisional nature of a work still in progress. On the contrary, Nadir's great discovery consists in the direct extension of the intuitions expressed in small formats, transforming the instrumental nature of the gesture into an authentic shaper of the artistic work. A resource explored in works such as *Pontes de Leningrado*, 1989 (Fig. 7), where the figurative elements of the city are still recognizable, which will emerge with force in later works and culminate in *A cidade incerta*, 2010 (Fig. 8), where the idea of the city surpasses the limitations of known reality.



**Fig. 7.** Nadir Afonso. *Pontes de Leningrado*, 1989. Oil on canvas (92.5 × 122 cm). Fundação Nadir Afonso Collection.



**Fig. 8.** Nadir Afonso. *A cidade incerta*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas (174 × 247 cm). Private Collection.

### 3 Conclusions

From his early works to the definitive consolidation of intuition as the predominant value of his final production, Nadir Afonso evidences his active nonconformism with the findings obtained from his persistent pursuit of beauty. The expressive emotivity of his early years, where material experimentation and manual work dictate the guidelines of the graphic vocabulary used, or the paused geometric reflection of his subsequent interpretations, are but stages in a process leading to the final refinement of a completely free attitude that makes pure gestural expressiveness the true protagonist of the work.

The meticulous translation to large canvases of the instantaneous outline of the sketches and previous studies seems to certify, from the hands of the artist, the validity of his synthetic vision of the city in his intuitive approximations. There are countless works in which, based on the law of compensation, integration and disintegration of spaces enunciated by Afonso himself [7], this borderless gestural expressiveness, capable of capturing space and time with unusual freshness and interpretative intensity, is experimented and perfected, taking the city as an excuse and the gesture as an argument.

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This paper is intended for academic purposes, and the images are included as required elements to enable the reader to understand its content. They are edited at a small size, as the interested reader can refer to the bibliographical sources and web resources listed as references.

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