

“Faro still has an under-the-radar architecture experience”

Nicknamed the ‘Palm Springs of Portugal’, Faro is home to around 500 examples of South Modern architecture. As the city celebrates its Modernist Weekend festival in November, we speak to the people preserving it for future generations to admire



Words by Norman Miller

If you're strolling around Faro, don't forget to look up. You'll see abstract-patterned tiles, offering modern takes on historic Portuguese decorative tradition. Latticed exterior façades filter strong sunlight, while letting in a cooling breeze – echoing Arabic mashrabiya screens, or Brazilian cobogós. Bold primary colours and softer pastels zing in the Algarve light, and slender columns prop up raised living spaces, inspired by the functional, minimalist designs from legendary modern architects like Swiss-born Le Corbusier and the USA's Frank Lloyd Wright.

In the 1960s and 70s, youth culture in London, Paris and New York meant music, cinema and fashion.

Here Casa Gago is one of Faro's most famous South Modern buildings

PHOTO: BERNARDO LÚCIO



But in Portugal's Algarve, that era's drive for creativity was channelled into architecture. The key pioneer of Faro's distinctive style, dubbed South Modern, was Portuguese architect Manuel Gomes da Costa, who designed around 300 public and private buildings in Faro. His work took the Modernist principles of natural light, modern materials and geometric forms and gave them an Algarvian twist, taking style inspiration from Portugal's former colony, Brazil.

In nearby Portimão, fellow local architect Antonio Vicente Castro designed some 120 buildings now classed as South Modern, while Gomes da Costa's counterpart Joel Santana – better known for his modernist churches in Lisbon – carried out the 1970s transformation of a former shipping company office on Faro's Rua Francisco Gomes. Striking for its grey, straight-lined façade with red geometric tiles featuring circles and squares, the building has become a modern homage to the lesser-known architectural style.

In 2021, the building was restyled into a chic apart-hotel called The Modernist by the trio of women that head up Faro's influential PAR 'architecture platform'. Founded by Joana Carmo Simões and Susana dos Santos Rodrigues in 2006, they were joined by Vânia Brito Fernandes in 2009 to create a Three Musketeers-style team.

"We live by the spirit of 'all for one, one for all'," says Vânia. "The three of us are always involved in

every project." Joana adds: "Three heads are better than one. Plus, it's more fun."

Their redesign of The Modernist's building was carried out for French couple Christophe and Angelique de Oliveira. After working in real estate and hospitality in Paris, they decided to pursue a different way of life elsewhere, and landed on Faro as a sunny, welcoming and well-connected city surrounded by beautiful nature.

They chanced upon the abandoned building, which has since become the place to stay for savvy, cultured travellers – plus the main venue for Faro's annual Modernist Weekend (7-9 November). It's a growing festival dedicated to celebrating and learning about the South Modern movement.

A patient five-year transformation by PAR saw each of The Modernist's six apartment-style rooms bathed in

light from enlarged windows, plus the addition of patios and a rooftop terrace with panoramic views to the Ria Formosa Natural Park. In keeping with South Modern's commitment to showcasing local connections, interior details feature wood craft and fabrics sourced from within 96km of Faro. "We combined the Modernist memories embedded in the building with local materials, to intensify the building's original identity," says Susana.

For owner Christophe, The Modernist is part of a wider ambition. "Our goal was to make Faro a



Above left
Susana dos Santos Rodrigues, Vânia Brito Fernandes and Joana Carmo Simões
Right
The recently renovated The Modernist



PHOTOS: ALEXANDRE BOGORODSKIY, THE MODERNIST; BERNARDO LÚCIO, AMERIC WARME-JANVILLE



Clockwise from above
South Modern masterpieces Hotel Aeromar, Casa Gago and Edifício Pires Brito; a South Modern home in Faro



source of inspiration across Europe," he says. "But everyone coming to Faro today still has this under-the-radar architecture experience."

If you're hunting down South Modern icons in Faro, The Modernist is just the beginning. Vânia points to Casa Gago (Rua Humberto Delgado 17) as one of Faro's most emblematic creations. She describes the house built by Gomes da Costa for a wealthy Venezuelan client as "a distinctly Modernist project with Latin American influences, but also strong regional awareness." Think cube-like living spaces, encased in latticed screen façades, lifted high on slender concrete columns.

If there's one street that sums up the South Modern style, it's Rua de Berlim. Arcing around the Mata do Liceu park, many of the street's chic villas were built by Gomes da Costa during a prolific decade between 1959 and 1969. Originally, the villas were intended to sport Modernist flat roofs, but objections from city planners prompted Gomes da Costa to come up with wonderfully asymmetric, slanted roofs. Check out the beauties at Rua de Berlim 13, 15, 37 and 57, and you'll understand why the South Modern style's unofficial cheerleaders – PAR and its clients – are so keen to preserve its heritage.

"We want to spread awareness about South Modern architecture," says Christophe, "not just for its quality and creativity, but also to save buildings from demolition, and develop conservation campaigns." parplataformadearquitectura.pt; themodernist.pt

✈ Wizz Air flies to Faro