

THE FAÇADE AS TEXT: THE SEMIOTICS OF *AZULEJO* TILEWORK AND SOCIAL DISTINCTION IN FAFE

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a semiotic analysis of *azulejo* tilework on seven emblematic historic buildings in Fafe, constructed during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century. This study contends that *azulejo* tilework transcended its ornamental and protective roles, functioning as a visual text and a primary instrument of social distinction. Employing a semiotic analysis, the façades commissioned by “brasileiros de torna-viagem” are compared with those of the local traditional elite. To this end, interpretive reading draws on the concepts of “denotation”, “connotation”, and “myth”, decoding the visual syntax and cultural context of these constructions. The findings indicate the presence of two competing visual discourses. The first, the “Brazilian” narrative, utilises avant-garde *azulejo* tilework (art nouveau), exuberant relief work, or explicit colour references (green and yellow) to communicate cosmopolitan identity and the success of newly acquired wealth. The second narrative, associated with the established elite, responds through revivalism (Pombaline patterns) or the selection of prestigious productions, signifying learned taste, historical legitimacy, and wealth linked to cultural refinement. It is concluded that the tiled façade in Fafe functioned as a discursive space in which the elites of the *belle époque* publicly negotiated and competed for their identity and social hegemony. Thus, the study contributes to the fields of communication sciences and cultural studies by highlighting how urban visual culture and surface design give tangible form to power dynamics.

KEYWORDS

façade tilework, Fafe, Brazilians returning from Brazil, visual semiotics, social distinction

A FACHADA COMO TEXTO: UMA SEMIÓTICA DO *AZULEJO* E DA DISTINÇÃO SOCIAL EM FAFE

RESUMO

Este artigo propõe uma análise semiótica dos revestimentos azulejares em sete edifícios históricos emblemáticos de Fafe, construídos na transição do século XIX para o XX. O estudo argumenta que o *azulejo* transcendeu a sua função ornamental e protetora para se tornar um texto visual e um instrumento central de distinção social. Através de uma análise semiótica, lemos comparativamente as fachadas promovidas pelos “brasileiros de torna-viagem” e pela elite tradicional local. Para tal, a leitura interpretativa mobiliza os conceitos de “denotação”, “conotação” e “mito”, descodificando a sintaxe visual e o contexto cultural destas construções. Os resultados revelam a existência de dois discursos visuais em competição: o primeiro compreende a narrativa do “brasileiro”, que utiliza o *azulejo* de vanguarda (arte nova), de relevo exuberante ou com referências cromáticas explícitas (verde e amarelo), para comunicar uma identidade cosmopolita e o sucesso de uma “nova riqueza”; a segunda narrativa, representativa da elite estabelecida, responde através do revivalismo (padrões pombalinos) ou da escolha de produções de prestígio, conotando um gosto erudito, legitimidade histórica e uma riqueza culta. Conclui-se que a

fachada azulejada em Fafe funcionou como um espaço discursivo onde as elites da *belle époque* negociaram e competiram publicamente pela sua identidade e hegemonia social. Deste modo, o estudo contribui para os campos das ciências da comunicação e dos estudos culturais ao evidenciar como a cultura visual urbana e o design de superfície materializam dinâmicas de poder.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

azulejo de fachada, Fafe, brasileiros de torna-viagem, semiótica visual, distinção social

1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture, as a cultural practice, transcends its utilitarian function as shelter to assert itself as a powerful system of communication. Building façades, in particular, function as visual texts, signifying surfaces on which the social identities, economic aspirations, and ideologies of an era are inscribed and projected into the public sphere. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the town of Fafe, in the heart of Minho, became a privileged stage for this urban dramaturgy. This period was marked by a profound transformation of its landscape, driven largely by the capital of the “brasileiros de torna-viagem” (Bastos, 2012, 2014), that is, emigrants who, after accumulating fortunes in Brazil, returned to their homeland to invest and, importantly, to assert their newly acquired status. As Miguel Monteiro (2004) points out, “in the mid-19th century, Fafe is a land of wealthy Brazilians (...) people who dress impeccably, covered in rings and with children educated abroad” (p. 46).

This phenomenon of migratory return had an indelible impact, not only on the economic sphere through the establishment of the first industries, but also on the social and urban fabric through notable philanthropic works such as the Misericórdia hospital (Bastos, 2012) and the construction of “beautiful palatial residences” (Monteiro, 2004). These new buildings, characterised by an eclecticism that absorbed foreign models, introduced a new visual grammar into the town, and façade tilework emerged as the quintessential visual sign, an element that, beyond its protective function, became the principal vehicle for communicating wealth, modernity and social distinction.

Although the heritage of the “Brazilians” in Fafe is acknowledged for its historical and artistic significance, its analysis as a deliberate communication system — where *azulejo* serves as the central unit in a discourse of power and urban visual culture — remains relatively underexplored. This article addresses this gap by applying a semiotic reading to a selected *corpus* of seven historic buildings in Fafe. It is posited that *azulejo* functioned as the visual “language” through which both new and established elites negotiated their positions within the social hierarchy, transforming the town’s streets into a complex text of assertion and competition.

This research is guided by the following question: how did different elite groups in Fafe, specifically the “brasileiros de torna-viagem” and the local bourgeoisie, utilise

façade tilework as a visual sign to assert, differentiate, and compete for status and social identity? By analysing patterns, colours, styles, and their syntax on façades, the study investigates whether and how these ceramic coverings embodied the “myth of the Brazilian” — the narrative of the successful emigrant who returns to transform their homeland — and how they engaged with manifestations of power by the established elite. The analysis proceeds from formal observation to interpretation, without presupposing the absolute intentions of the patrons.

Accordingly, the study employs a qualitative methodology focused on the semiotic analysis of visual culture. The façade is conceptualised as a text (Joly, 1993/2007), and its language is deconstructed using the concepts of “denotation” (the formal description of *azulejo* elements), “connotation” (the associated cultural and social meanings), and “myth” (the ideological narrative constructed by these signs), drawing on the theoretical framework of Roland Barthes (1964/2018, 1957/2009). The analysis centres on a *corpus* of seven emblematic buildings in the town, demonstrating how architecture and its decorative elements actively construct social narratives and materialise ideologies.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. THE SEMIOTICS OF THE FAÇADE: READING ARCHITECTURE AS DISCOURSE

This article’s analysis is based on the premise that architecture can be interpreted as a language. In this framework, a façade is not merely a physical structure but constitutes a visually articulated discourse (Joly, 1993/2007). However, pertinent criticism exists regarding the indiscriminate extension of a purely linguistic model to architecture and visual culture. Pragmatic and phenomenological perspectives emphasise that the meaning of built space also emerges from action, experience, and interaction, rather than solely from a system of signs analogous to language. Nevertheless, for this study, which focuses on visual representation, semiotics provides conceptual tools to move beyond stylistic description and access deeper social and ideological meanings. The concept of the “architectural sign” is central: a structural or decorative element, such as an *azulejo*, comprises a signifier (its material form, colour, and pattern) and a signified (the concept it evokes, such as “wealth” or “modernity”).

Following Roland Barthes (1964/2018, 1957/2009), analysing the façade’s visual syntax is essential. This process involves not only identifying individual signs but also understanding how their combination and arrangement generate meaning. For example, a façade entirely clad in *azulejo* communicates a message of opulence distinct from one where *azulejo* is used solely as a decorative frieze. This syntax modulates the intensity of the discourse of assertion. The analysis therefore distinguishes between the denotative level (the objective description of the *azulejo* and its application) and the connotative level, which explores the network of associated cultural meanings. At the connotative level,

an art nouveau pattern signifies cosmopolitanism, while a relief *azulejo* indicates greater financial investment. Ultimately, this analysis facilitates the identification of myth, the ideological narrative that the discourse of the façade helps to naturalise and perpetuate, such as the “myth of the Brazilian” and its relationship with the traditional elite, materialising what Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1983) defines as “class tastes and lifestyles” that seek social distinction. Additionally, the approach incorporates the semiotics of culture developed by Yuri Lotman (1970/1979, 1994/2023), treating Fafe’s urban context as a complex “semiosphere” (Lotman et al., 1984/1996). This perspective enables a deeper analysis of relationships among cultural texts (the façades), examining how established signs of Portuguese architecture are recovered and reinterpreted through new aesthetic configurations and articulations of meaning.

2.2. THE ARCHITECTURE OF ASSERTION: STYLES AND SYMBOLS IN THE *BELLE ÉPOQUE*

The architectural language employed by the “Brazilians” of Fafe did not develop in isolation. It appropriated and reinterpreted the dominant styles of the *belle époque* (1871–1914), a period of great optimism, technological progress and cultural flourishing in Europe. Understanding these styles is essential to decoding the messages the façades convey.

The predominant style is eclecticism, characterised by the combination and reinterpretation of historical styles (neoclassical, neo-baroque and neo-gothic), often combined within the same building. This “stylistic freedom” suited a new elite such as the “Brazilians”, who, as Rodrigues (2021) notes, could choose and combine elements that best represented their self-image, often in monumental and grandiose terms. Eclecticism is, by nature, an architecture of ostentation, allowing owners to display not only their wealth but also their cultural capital through learned references.

Within the eclectic universe, and at times in opposition to it, art nouveau flourished at the turn of the century. This style, which featured prominently in the architecture of the “Brazilians” (Bastos, 2014), broke with historicism and sought a new ornamental language inspired by nature’s organic forms. In Portugal, *azulejo* provided one of the principal media for art nouveau. The choice of this style was not incidental; it signalled alignment with the international avant-garde of centres such as Paris, Brussels and Barcelona, communicating a cosmopolitan and modern identity.

Finally, another notable influence is the *chalet* typology. Inspired by the Alpine tradition (French and Swiss), the 19th-century bourgeoisie adapted the *chalet* as a leisure residence, associated with the countryside or seaside resorts (Rodrigues, 2021). It is characterised by pitched roofs with pronounced eaves, wood balconies and ornamental fretwork, and a picturesque, romantic aesthetic. Adopting the *chalet* typology in Fafe, as in the house of Manuel Rodrigues Alves (Pessoa & Santos, 2019), meant importing a lifestyle associated with leisure, sophistication and the European elite, clearly distinguishing it from vernacular and rural architecture. Its popularity among the “Brazilians” can be understood as another form of “social assertion within the community of origin” (Neto, 2016, p. 54).

These three elements — eclecticism, art nouveau and the *chalet* typology — form the visual lexicon through which Fafe's property owners constructed their discourse of assertion on the façades of the town.

2.3. FAFE AND THE “BRASILEIROS DE TORNA-VIAGEM”: THE SOCIAL PHENOMENON AND URBAN IMPACT

The urban landscape of Fafe at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries is inseparable from a social phenomenon that reshaped its identity: mass emigration to Brazil and the subsequent return of a new, wealthy elite. Living in “precarious conditions”, successive waves of peasants, predominantly from the rural areas of Minho, “embarked during this period on a transatlantic journey to Brazil”, driven by the “high cost of living and low agricultural wages” (Bastos, 2014, p. 3). Between 1831 and 1926, more than 7,000 emigrants left Fafe directly for Brazil, an impressive number for a population that, at the dawn of the 20th century, stood at around 25,000 inhabitants (Bastos, 2014).

Their success, mainly through commercial activity, enabled some of these emigrants to return as “brasileiros de torna-viagem”. As the historiography notes, their return brought not only capital but also an “enterprising and philanthropic bourgeois spirit”, marked by wealth, a “taste for travel and a cosmopolitan fascination with French culture and language” (Bastos, 2014, p. 4). This group did not merely reintegrate into society; it profoundly transformed it. As José Rodrigues (2021) describes, these “Brazilians” were those who, having amassed fortunes, “built residences, purchased estates, established the first industries, contributed to the construction of philanthropic institutions, and participated in public and municipal life, invigorating economic, social and cultural life” (p. 54).

Their influence can still be seen in landmarks that remain in the town today, including the first major textile factories — the Bugio factory, founded in 1873 by José Florêncio Soares (Leite, 2010), and the Companhia de Fiação e Tecidos de Fafe (Ferro factory), established in 1886 (Rodrigues, 2021) — as well as the Misericórdia hospital (1863), the public garden (1892) and the theatre-cinema (1924; Bastos, 2014). Residential architecture, in particular, became the principal stage for displaying their success. The construction of “palatial houses”, “large in size, surrounded by tropical gardens and enclosed by iron gates”, represented the “personal assertion and social advancement of their transatlantic owner” (Bastos, 2014, p. 15). Figures such as José Florêncio Soares, who left at a young age and returned as the “second-largest taxpayer in the municipality” (Pessoa & Santos, 2019 p. 107) and a pioneering industrialist (Pessoa & Santos, 2019; Silva, 1995), embody the trajectory of this new social type, which used architecture to represent its financial and social success.

2.4. FAÇADE TILEWORK IN THE 19TH CENTURY: BETWEEN FUNCTION AND SYMBOL

Large-scale industrial production by factories such as those in Sacavém, Devesas and Massarelos made *azulejo* a more accessible building material. At the same time, ceramic façade cladding was seen as a modern, hygienic solution that protected buildings from

damp and made them easier to clean, reflecting growing concerns about public health in expanding cities.

However, *azulejo* quickly transcended this practical function. The enormous variety of patterns, colours and techniques — from simple patterned tiles to complex and expensive figurative panels or relief tiles — turned it into a sophisticated marker of social distinction. The quantity of *azulejo*, the complexity of the pattern, and the originality of the chosen style immediately communicated the property owner's status. Most building initiatives driven by a desire for public assertion adopted approaches that absorbed foreign fashions, coinciding with a commitment to change (Neto, 2016). The “brasileiros de torna-viagem” of Fafe appropriated this visual language, already culturally established in urban centres such as Lisbon and Porto, and elevated it to a new level of ostentation, using it as the main discursive tool to inscribe their story of success onto the city's very fabric.

3. THE CORPUS OF ANALYSIS: EMBLEMATIC BUILDINGS IN FAFE

To undertake the proposed semiotic analysis, a *corpus* of seven emblematic buildings in the town of Fafe was selected, most of which date from the period of major urban transformation between the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. The selection of these properties was guided by their historical and architectural significance, the prominence of their *azulejo* cladding and, in most cases, their direct association with the social phenomenon of the “brasileiros de torna-viagem”. To facilitate comparative analysis and ensure coherence, the *corpus* was limited exclusively to private residences. The authors collected the information through direct observation and systematic photographic documentation of the façades. To move from visual denotation to social connotation, the authors ensured interpretative validation by triangulating these observations with local historical sources. In seeking the greatest possible symmetry of data across the cases, the authors of the architectural designs or the production methods of some *azulejos* are not always identified, owing to the absence or inaccessibility of surviving historical documentation for the entire sample.

3.1. HOUSE OF COMMANDER ALBINO DE OLIVEIRA GUIMARÃES (CURRENT TAX OFFICE)

The first building in our *corpus* is the important property that currently houses the Fafe Tax Office (Figure 1), located on 5 de Outubro avenue (formerly Station avenue). Built around 1908, it was one of the residences of Commander Albino de Oliveira Guimarães (Pessoa, 2013), a central figure within the community of “brasileiros de torna-viagem”. Commander Guimarães was one of the city's most influential benefactors, playing a prominent role on the founding committee of São José hospital and helping to finance the construction of the public garden, among other initiatives. His residence is therefore an architectural testament to the economic power and social prominence achieved by this new elite.



Figure 1. House of Commander Albino de Oliveira Guimarães (current Tax Office). Location: <https://goo.gl/maps/oJzPXs7uduQ3Za1u8>

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

Architecturally, the building is a two-storey vertical palatial house, with a composition marked by strong horizontal lines. The broad, symmetrical façade is entirely clad in a green patterned “*azulejo* skin”. This full application of the ceramic cladding is interrupted only by the window and door openings, framed in dressed stone, and by narrow balconies with ornate iron railings. The *azulejo* is industrially manufactured and features a repetitive geometric/stylised pattern characteristic of production at the time. The choice of green lends the building a distinctive sobriety, setting it apart from other constructions that opted for more vibrant colour palettes.

3.2. HOUSE OF ANTÓNIO JOAQUIM NOVAIS COUTINHO (CURRENT CLUBE FAFENSE)

The second building in our *corpus* is the current Clube Fafense (Figure 2), a century-old social meeting place located in 25 de Abril square, in the heart of the town. Commissioned in 1882 by the “Brazilian” António Joaquim Novais Coutinho, who made his fortune in Pará, the building is a notable example of a “vertical palatial house” (Rodrigues, 2021). Its significance for our study lies in the way its façade communicates, almost literally, the identity and provenance of its owner.



Figure 2. House of António Joaquim Novais Coutinho (current Clube Fafense). Location: <https://goo.gl/maps/3v435sZTBcGeoA387>

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

Architecturally, the building has an imposing three-storey volume, with a richly ornamented façade that “is crowned by a stone balustrade” (Bastos, 2014, p. 16). The most prominent feature is its *azulejo* cladding. Unlike other buildings that opt for a single colour, the façade of Clube Fafense is covered with polychromatic patterned *azulejos*, featuring shades of “yellow, green and blue, symbols of Brazil” (Bastos, 2014, p. 16). This chromatic choice is an unequivocal visual statement, directly alluding to the flag of the empire of Brazil, the country where the owner built his fortune.

In addition to the colour, the building’s western façade features an *azulejo* cartouche bearing the date of the cladding’s application (“1882”) and the initials of its patron, “AJNC” (António Joaquim Novais Coutinho). This element functions as the author’s “signature” in his architectural “text”, leaving no doubt as to who was responsible for the work and reinforcing the association between the building and its owner’s personal success. The *azulejo* pattern, inspired by geometric and vegetal motifs, covers the entire surface, creating a vibrant and opulent visual effect characteristic of the architecture of assertion associated with the “Brazilians”.

3.3. HOUSE OF CONSTANÇA LOBO (CURRENT KINDERGARTEN)

The third building in our *corpus* is the house of Constança Lobo (Figure 3), a late 19th-century property that currently houses the Kindergarten of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Fafe, located on João XXIII street. Rodrigues (2021) classifies this building within a typology he designates as “other” (p. 55), distinct from the more prominent palaces and vertical and horizontal palatial houses.



Figure 3. House of Constança Lobo (current kindergarten). Location: <https://goo.gl/maps/i7Hd5xAErDNRBYcE8>

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

Its structure, described as an “original body with a rectangular façade and horizontal development” (Rodrigues, 2021, p. 55), is enhanced by patterned *azulejo* cladding covering the upper floor. The *azulejo* is industrially manufactured, featuring a small modular motif in shades of blue and yellow on a cream background. The *azulejo* application is not total, being concentrated on the upper floor, creating a contrast with the dressed stone framing the round-arched windows and the balustraded parapet at the top. This choice reflects a more restrained decorative application. The inclusion of this building in the *corpus* will make it possible to investigate whether this visual discourse, which balances the modernity of *azulejo* with a certain restraint in its application, represents the taste of the local bourgeoisie or a less ostentatious form of status assertion than that displayed by the grand palatial houses of the “brasileiros de torna-viagem”.

3.4. HOUSE OF SANTO NOVO (CURRENT MUNICIPAL HOUSE OF CULTURE)

The fourth building in our *corpus* is the house of Santo Novo (Figure 4), one of the oldest and most imposing palatial houses in Fafe, built in 1869 and now home to the Municipal House of Culture. Its construction is attributed to José Leite Pinto Saldanha de Castro (Câmara Municipal de Fafe, n.d.), and its inclusion in the *corpus* is fundamental because, unlike many other notable buildings in the town, its origins are not directly linked to a “brasileiro de torna-viagem”, thus representing the taste and power of an already established local elite.



Figure 4. House of Santo Novo (current Municipal House of Culture). Location: <https://goo.gl/maps/tQ73MzPSxJgfF1pB7>

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

The building is a “vertical palatial house, with neoclassical lines” (Rodrigues, 2021, p. 54), with a robust, symmetrical and highly restrained façade arranged over three storeys and crowned by a triangular pediment with a clock. The entire façade is clad in patterned *azulejo*, which, according to the heritage assessment, which lend the structure remarkable brightness and a sense of visual lightness. This cladding is particularly interesting for our analysis because it replicates a Pombaline pattern from the second half of the 18th century.

The *azulejos*, hand-painted in cobalt blue on a white glaze, recreate a diagonal rhythm composed of stems alternately overlaid by two flowers of different sizes, each with four petals, and, at the centre, another eight-petalled flower. Although the 19th-century factory that produced them remains unidentified, their manufacture points to major ceramic centres in Porto or Vila Nova de Gaia. The deliberate choice of a revivalist pattern, evoking the aristocratic aesthetic of the 18th century, constitutes a distinct visual discourse. Rather than pursuing art nouveau or asserting a transatlantic identity, the façade of the house of Santo Novo signals a desire to align itself with a historical lineage and learned classicism, positioning its owner as a guardian of established tradition and “good taste”.

3.5. BUILDING AT 58 MONSENHOR VIEIRA DE CASTRO STREET

The fifth building in our *corpus* is located at number 58 Monsenhor Vieira de Castro street (Figure 5). Its distinctive façade introduces a new aesthetic vocabulary into our analysis, distinguished by its unique ceramic cladding. The façade features a restrained, elegant application of relief *azulejo*, moulded and hand-painted.



Figure 5. Building at 58 Monsenhor Vieira de Castro street. Location: <https://goo.gl/maps/wBHnBKLv3FRWaBun6>

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

The dressed stone framing of all openings (doors and windows) creates a harmonious dialogue between the stone's robustness and the ceramic's delicate decorative quality. The date 1885 is visible on the parapet, dating the building to the mid-19th century. The choice of relief *azulejo*, a more complex and costly technique, strongly indicates status and refined taste, positioning this building as a notable example of the period's architecture of social assertion.

3.6. BUILDING ON ANTÓNIO SALDANHA STREET

The sixth case in our *corpus* is located on António Saldanha street, a central thoroughfare in the town, and stands out for having one of the oldest and most prestigious *azulejo* coverings in Fafe (Figure 6). Its cladding consists of relief *azulejos* manufactured by the prestigious, now-defunct Massarelos Porcelain factory in Porto. This was an elite choice, as wealthy people highly prized relief *azulejos* from the mid-19th century onwards (Guerra, 2010).



Figure 6. Building on António Saldanha street. Location: <https://goo.gl/maps/TgE3X84SSgrgNXAJ6>

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

On the façade, the *azulejos* are not applied as a continuous “skin”, but rather fill the wall panels between the robust dressed stone framing the windows and balconies. This syntax creates a visual dialogue between the solidity of the stone, a symbol of traditional construction, the decorative richness and vibrant colour of the ceramic, a sign of modernity and status. The date 1862, visible on the parapet (Figure 7), confirms its antiquity and its importance as one of the earliest visual “texts” of this new architectural language in Fafe.



Figure 7. Building on António Saldanha street. Location: <https://goo.gl/maps/TgE3X84SSgrgNXAJ6>

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

3.7. JOÃO ALVES DE FREITAS MANSION (CURRENT MUNICIPAL ARCHIVE OF FAFE)

The seventh and final building in our *corpus* is the imposing palatial house that currently houses the Municipal Archive of Fafe (Figure 8), located on Major Ferreira street. Commissioned between 1905 and 1912 by the “esteemed merchant in Manaus and Pará, João Alves de Freitas” (Bastos, 2014, p. 15), this building is one of the city’s most emblematic examples of “Brazilian” architecture. Classified as a vertical palatial house of eclectic and revivalist inspiration, it is often noted for its “distinctive characteristics” (p. 16), including a broad façade and a tropical-inspired garden.



Figure 8. João Alves de Freitas mansion (current Municipal Archive of Fafe). Location: <https://goo.gl/maps/CcXWNE5rboBfkvve7>

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

Unlike other buildings that rely on extensive *azulejo* cladding, this building uses *azulejo* more restrainedly and deliberately, serving as an accent of colour and sophistication that enhances the robust dressed-stone structure. The *azulejos* are in the art nouveau style and feature botanical motifs. These panels, with floral motifs in shades of yellow and burgundy, form vertical friezes flanking the main entrance and marking the upper division of the façade.

This restrained application of *azulejo* does not diminish its discursive significance. On the contrary, the choice of an art nouveau pattern, the period's avant-garde style, powerfully signals modernity and cosmopolitan taste. Its combination with the nobility of the dressed stone creates a balanced visual “text” that simultaneously communicates solidity and wealth (through the stone) and sophistication and alignment with international fashions (through the *azulejo*). The palatial house thus functions as a synthesis of the ambition of the “brasileiro de torna-viagem”: to assert his monumental status, while doing so through the most modern and elegant visual language of his time.

4. SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE FAÇADES: THE GRAMMAR OF SUCCESS

In this section, we will read the visual text of each building in our *corpus*. We will analyse how the *azulejo* elements — their colour, pattern, texture, and syntax — function as signs that construct a discourse of power, status, and identity within Fafe’s urban landscape. The transition from empirical observation to the interpretation of meaning will be guided by the application of the concept of “myth” (Barthes, 1957/2009). To avoid generic formulations, this analytical tool will be structured around two macro-categories in constant tension: the “myth of the Brazilian” (whose variations range from exuberant cosmopolitan assertion to the pursuit of bourgeois respectability) and the “myth of the established elite” (centred on legitimation through historical erudition). Through semiotic deconstruction, we will seek to uncover the grammar local elites used to communicate their aspirations and assert their social position at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

4.1. HOUSE OF COMMANDER ALBINO DE OLIVEIRA GUIMARÃES: THE DISCOURSE OF RESTRAINED WEALTH

In the house of Commander Albino de Oliveira Guimarães, the full application of *azulejo* is an immediate sign of opulence and economic power. Covering a façade of this scale with a noble and modern material such as *azulejo* represented a considerable investment, a public assertion of wealth intended to be seen and recognised by the entire community. This syntactic choice transforms the façade into a surface of pure prestige.

The *azulejos* are relief tiles, as shown in Figure 9, adding another layer of meaning. Relief *azulejo* was technically more complex to produce and consequently more expensive than plain patterned *azulejo*. Its use connotes not only wealth but also refinement and a taste for detail and texture. The textured surface gives the façade a visual vibrancy that distinguishes it from simpler claddings.



Figure 9. Green azulejo

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

The choice of a monochromatic green is aesthetically striking. As noted above, it departs from the traditional blue and white, as well as the polychromy associated with other “Brazilian” buildings. In this context, green connotes restraint, distinction and understated luxury. It is a colour associated with nature, but also with stability and seriousness, consistent with a bourgeois aesthetic that values order and solidity.

The repetitive pattern, botanical in inspiration but stylised geometrically, reinforces the message of order and industrial modernity. It is not the organic and asymmetrical line of pure art nouveau, but rather a design that, although decorative, maintains a regular and predictable structure. This connotes a taste for visual discipline and rationality.

The façade of the house of the Commander Albino de Oliveira Guimarães materialises the myth of the Brazilian in its expression of consolidated power and bourgeois respectability. The visual discourse focuses not on novelty or aesthetic rupture, but on monumentality, material quality, and order. The message is that of a man who has reached the top of the social scale and now manifests it through grand architecture that is at once modern in its technique (industrial relief *azulejo*) although restrained in its aesthetic expression. It is the language of someone who no longer needs to “shock” to assert his status, preferring to communicate it through solidity, scale and a form of luxury that, although evident, is presented under a veil of respectability and traditional good taste.

4.2. HOUSE OF ANTÓNIO COUTINHO: THE ASSERTION OF TRANSATLANTIC IDENTITY

As in the house of Commander Guimarães, the full application of *azulejo* at the house of António Coutinho (Figure 10) functions as a sign of opulence and economic power. The façade becomes a canvas of prestige, where the cost of the cladding, compounded by the pattern’s complexity and the use of relief, signals high social and financial status.



Figure 10. Azulejo on the house of António Coutinho

Credits. Josué Duarte, 3 October 2025

The cartouche bearing the initials AJNC and the date 1882 functions as a sign of authorship and appropriation. The owner does not remain anonymous; he signs his work. This act connotes individualistic pride, an assertion that permanently marks the urban landscape with his name and legacy.

Colour is the most powerful sign on the façade. The deliberate choice of yellow, green and blue is not aesthetically neutral; it is a direct chromatic reference to the “symbols of Brazil”, namely the flag of the Brazilian empire. This colour palette functions as a personal flag. It explicitly connotes the origin of the owner’s fortune. The “Brazilian” does not disavow his history in Brazil; instead, he celebrates it as the source of his power and identity.

While the façade of the house of Commander Guimarães represents the myth of the Brazilian in its sober, consolidated phase, Clube Fafense materialises the myth in its most exuberant, proud, and literal form. The discourse here is not one of discreet integration into the local elite, but one of distinct assertion. António Coutinho uses the façade to assert that he is a “Brazilian” and to emphasise that his fortune was made in Brazil. The *azulejo* is not merely a modern form of cladding, but a banner of his trans-atlantic identity. The façade becomes a biographical text celebrating the narrative of the successful emigrant. It is the language of a new wealth that not only competes with the traditional elite in opulence, but does so with its own visual “accent”, proud of its “exotic” origins and distinctive trajectory.

4.3. HOUSE OF CONSTANÇA LOBO: THE DISCOURSE OF BALANCE AND RESTRAINT

At the house of Constança Lobo, the decision to apply *azulejo* only to the upper floor and between the dressed-stone elements is the most significant sign. The granite structure, the region’s traditional and prestigious building material, is not concealed; instead, it frames and disciplines the *azulejo*. This connotes respect for traditional building practices and a form of discreet luxury. The message is not one of rupture, as at Clube Fafense, but of harmonious modernisation. The choice of a small-scale, industrially manufactured pattern in shades of blue and yellow (Figure 11) connotes an embrace of modernity. It signals that the owner is up to date with new trends in urban cladding, but does so without resorting to an exuberant or customised design. It connotes a taste for standardised elegance, made accessible through industrial production.



Figure 11. Azulejo on the house of Constança Lobo

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The façade of the house of Constança Lobo articulates the discourse of an established elite or of an owner who values solidity. While “Brazilian” palatial houses use *azulejo* to communicate new, cosmopolitan wealth that takes precedence over everything else, this building uses *azulejo* as an adornment that enriches the traditional structure. This is the visual language of a local elite that, in competing for status, may have chosen to distinguish itself from the “exuberance” of the “Brazilians” through a discourse of sobriety, balance and classical good taste. It is a clear example of how the same material, *azulejo*, can articulate very different ideologies of status, depending on its syntax on the façade.

4.4. HOUSE OF SANTO NOVO: THE DISCOURSE OF TRADITION AND HISTORICAL ERUDITION

Through the *azulejo* used at the house of Santo Novo (Figure 12), we can identify the sign of Pombaline revivalism. At a time (1869) when the industrial production of *azulejo* was beginning to dominate, and new eclectic fashions were emerging, the choice to replicate an 18th-century pattern was a deliberate act. This Pombaline pattern evokes the aesthetic of Lisbon’s aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie after the 1755 earthquake. By using it, the owner symbolically associates himself with this lineage, with a nobility of taste, in opposition to the “new wealth” of emigrants.



Figure 12. Azulejo on the house of Santo Novo

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This façade is the antithesis of Clube Fafense. While the “Brazilian” uses vibrant Brazilian colours and art nouveau to “shock” and assert his newly acquired wealth, the traditional elite responds with the sobriety of blue and white and the erudition of the 18th century, suggesting that its status is longstanding, legitimate and culturally superior.

The choice of hand-painted *azulejo* rather than an industrial product connotes exclusivity and artisanal luxury. It reinforces the idea that the owner does not embrace “mass-produced” products, preferring the unique value of handcraftsmanship, a sign of more traditional and refined wealth. The cobalt-and-white palette is the most classical and “noble”

in Portuguese *azulejo* tilework, evoking the tradition of the great panels of the 17th and 18th centuries. This choice connotes classicism and restraint, reinforcing its opposition to the polychromatic buildings.

The façade of the house of Santo Novo materialises the myth of the established elite. Its visual discourse is not one of assertion (as in the case of the “Brazilian”), but of confirming a status that presents itself as historically and culturally legitimate. The message it seeks to convey is that its power does not derive from Brazil’s recent, exotic wealth, but from a historical and cultural rootedness in Portugal. *Azulejo* is not used as a sign of industrial modernity, but as an erudite reference, a proof of legitimacy that new money, by itself, could not buy. We are therefore faced with a clear competition between tastes, in which a taste for luxury (based on tradition and erudition) opposes a taste for ostentation (based on modernity and novelty).

4.5. YELLOW, GREEN, RED AND RELIEF: A SIGN OF REFINEMENT

The *azulejo* on the building at 58 Monsenhor Vieira de Castro street (Figure 13) is a complex sign that communicates several messages simultaneously. As in the case of the house of Commander Guimarães, the use of relief *azulejo* is an immediate sign of refinement and higher cost. The three-dimensional texture captures the light dynamically, connoting luxury and a deliberate aesthetic choice. The yellow and green palette is vibrant and luminous, associated with nature, prosperity and a less restrained taste than the classic blue and white.



Figure 13. Azulejo on 58 Monsenhor Vieira de Castro street

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The design, although repetitive, is highly elaborate. The floral forms are organic and suggest the influence of the period’s decorative movements, such as historicism or an early phase of art nouveau, which valued nature. The pattern moves away from the purely geometric, suggesting a taste for natural beauty and ornamentation.

The presence of a finishing frieze with a different pattern is highly significant. It reveals a hierarchical façade composition, comprising a base (the frieze) and a body (the main pattern). This connotes order and classical architectural composition, even when using decorative *azulejo*.

Its façade materialises the myth of legitimate and cultivated wealth. The façade communicates a form of wealth that is simultaneously material (the relief), artistic (the pattern) and, above all, cultivated and legitimate (the classical composition). It opposes the discourse of the *nouveau riche*, suggesting that true status lies not in money itself, but in the ability to frame it within tradition and learned order.

4.6. BUILDING ON ANTÓNIO SALDANHA STREET: THE DISCOURSE OF METROPOLITAN TASTE

The façade of the building on António Saldanha street is one of the earliest and most sophisticated examples of *azulejo* cladding in Fafe. Its owner chose for his residence a form of cladding that, at the time, signalled considerable prestige and good taste, not only in Fafe but also in the country's principal urban centres. As one of the oldest forms of cladding in the town, the choice of relief *azulejo* (Figure 14) in 1862 is a sign of innovation and refinement. It was a more expensive, modern technique, suggesting high financial status and attention to artistic detail beyond a simple flat pattern. The three-dimensional texture gives the façade a tactile quality of luxury.

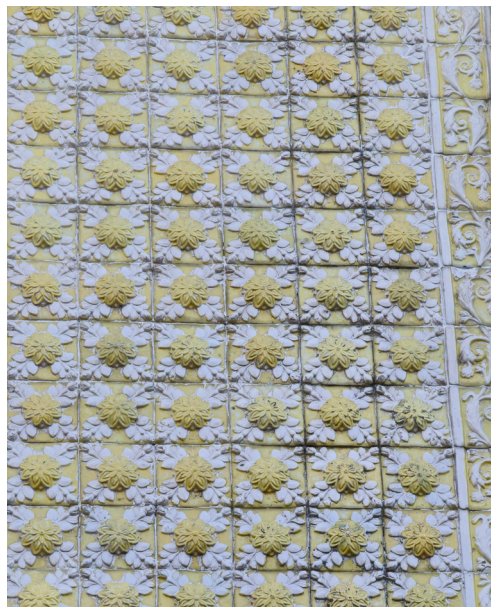


Figure 14. Azulejo on the building on António Saldanha street

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The yellow-on-white palette is luminous and cheerful, connoting prosperity and wealth. Yellow is a solar colour associated with abundance, making the building stand out elegantly within the urban fabric.

As one of the oldest façades, this building helps to establish the myth of the original Brazilian in Fafe. Its visual discourse is one of the earliest to use *azulejo* as a tool of

cosmopolitan distinction. The owner uses his *façade* to signal that he has returned from Brazil and that his status matches that of the upper bourgeoisie. Unlike the historical revivalism of the house of Santo Novo, this building seeks legitimacy not in the past but in the present. And unlike the art nouveau exuberance that would emerge later, this discourse is based on the quality of a “branded” product (the Massarelos flower). It is the language of a first-wave “Brazilian”, establishing his power not through rupture but through importing a prestigious sign already validated by the country’s urban elites.

4.7. JOÃO ALVES DE FREITAS MANSION: THE DISCOURSE OF AVANT-GARDISM AND SOLIDITY

At the João Alves de Freitas mansion, the most significant syntactic choice is the integration of *azulejo* into the dressed stone. Granite, a prestigious, costly and traditional material in the region, forms the structure and body of the building, connoting solidity, permanence and enduring wealth. The *azulejo* does not cover the *façade*; it is embedded within it like a jewel (Figure 15). This syntax connotes a form of luxury that need not be ostentatious in surface area, but rather in value and integration.



Figure 15. Azulejo on the João Alves de Freitas mansion

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The choice of design is the strongest sign of distinction. The design is purely art nouveau, the period's European aesthetic avant-garde. This connotes absolute modernity, cosmopolitanism and a high level of cultural capital. The owner is not using a catalogue pattern or invoking the past (as at the house of Santo Novo); he is commissioning a design that aligns him directly with Paris, Brussels, or Barcelona.

This façade materialises the myth of the modernist and sophisticated Brazilian. João Alves de Freitas constructs a discourse that positions him at the top of the social pyramid, not only economically but also culturally. The façade combines the solidity of the established elite with the cosmopolitanism and cultural wealth of the new “Brazilian” elite. In doing so, this palatial house asserts itself not only through its scale but also through taste, presenting itself as the ultimate expression of modernity and sophistication in Fafe.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study set out to read Fafe's urban landscape as a text in which façade *azulejo* functions as the principal sign within a complex discourse of social distinction. The semiotic analysis of the *corpus* of seven emblematic buildings provided support for this thesis, suggesting that the choice of ceramic cladding in Fafe during the *belle époque* was far from being a merely ornamental decision. On the contrary, all indications are that it was a deliberate act of communication, a tool of social engineering through which the town's elites, the “brasileiros de torna-viagem” and the established local bourgeoisie, publicly negotiated their status.

We found that *azulejo* was the common language through which wealth was asserted, but that it was “spoken” with distinct “visual accents”, revealing the different origins and aspirations of each group. Our analysis identified two central competing narratives, or myths.

The first, the “myth of the Brazilian”, materialised in buildings such as Clube Fafense and the João Alves de Freitas mansion, privileges rupture, novelty and the explicit assertion of transatlantic identity. It uses avant-garde signs, such as art nouveau, or literal references, such as the colours of the Brazilian flag. It celebrates new wealth, cosmopolitanism, and modernity, using the façade to tell a story of individual success and rupture with the established order.

The “myth of the traditional elite”, by contrast, materialised in buildings such as the house of Santo Novo and the building on Monsenhor Vieira de Castro street, articulates a counter-discourse. Its assertion of status rests on erudition, material quality, and order. By replicating 18th-century Pombaline patterns or framing costly relief *azulejos* within a classical syntax of friezes and dressed stone, their owners signal a taste for luxury that opposes ostentation. The connoted message is one of legitimate, cultivated and historically rooted wealth.

In response to our initial research question, the streets of Fafe did indeed become a stage for visual competition, in which *azulejo* was the principal discursive weapon. This article suggests that semiotic analysis can be a valuable tool for decoding architecture, highlighting how aesthetic choices (colour, pattern, texture and syntax) are, in

fact, profound social and ideological decisions. Our contribution lies in showing how the city's ceramic skin constitutes an archive of the social attitudes and tensions of the period, a text that records the rise of a new elite and the strategic response of the old one.

We recognise that this study was limited to a *corpus* of seven buildings. Nevertheless, it opens the way for future research. A comparative analysis of other “cities of Brazilians”, such as Viana do Castelo or Aveiro, could reveal whether this grammar of *azulejo* was a national phenomenon. In addition, a semiotic analysis of the interiors of these palatial houses, as suggested by Pessoa and Santos (2019), would help us understand how these discourses of distinction translated into the private sphere. In short, the *azulejos* of Fafe, far from being a decorative silence, continue to speak to those willing to read them.

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