

## Interview with architect João Santa-Rita

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### Interview

It is with great pleasure that today we have as our guest architect and lecturer João Santa-Rita. Welcome! We would like to start by asking you to tell us a bit about your academic background as a student, your architecture degree and if there were any outstanding lecturers or exercises that you still remember.

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for inviting me to participate in the *Estudo Prévio* journal. I am part of the group who graduated at the School of Fine Arts in Lisbon, the first real group in Lisbon, who, at the end of the seventies, started the degree at the Porto School and eventually graduated in the Lisbon School. Historically, what was normal was just the opposite. Lisbon architects, for not just quality but also for political reasons, went to Porto to complete the degree (because, supposedly, Porto welcomed students expelled from Lisbon).

Therefore, I started the degree in Porto. It was a short but very powerful period, especially since it was a very intense degree – curiously, it was similar to the degree we had at Autónoma when the degree was created - because, unlike the Lisbon degree, which at the time had two or three shifts, the Porto degree had only one, we had classes from eight in the morning until six in the afternoon.

But they were classes of great intensity, a lot of work was done in the studio, where we worked with the support of the lecturers. And that year I had two outstanding lecturers, Sérgio Fernandez and Luísa Brandão, without them I do

not even know if I would have completed the architecture degree. My intention was never to study architecture, I wanted to have studied naval architecture, that was where my interest laid, to draw ships... but Sérgio Fernandez and Luisa were exceptional lecturers and established a great connection between studying the project and the importance of drawing in the project's process.

Fernando Távora was also my lecturer. He was an exceptional man who told us of travels we had not yet imagined and conveyed knowledge we were not at all familiar with. He was an extremely knowledgeable man with great simplicity in communication and closeness to students. This happened at the end of the seventies, Távora must have been about sixty something years old, and any distance that could naturally exist between the Master and the new students was destroyed by his great proximity, his ease of communication and availability.

One of the most important moments in the Porto School was an open class where we all went camping to Santa Maria Convent for a week - the construction of the pousada hotel was beginning in Guimarães. We all went there, it was raining and cold, but we were young and resisted everything! And all this, having lunch together with the workers, was always very lively and with a very intense atmosphere. It was a very important occasion to understand the Porto School's milieu, the relationship that was established with the different contexts, with the accomplishment of a work and what was, of course, the way Távora conducted projects. For me, it was the most remarkable year.

After that, there was a phenomenon that happened until the mid-1980s, when almost all of us were integrated in a studio during the degree. And we moved about a lot between studios, a few days we worked in some, some days in others. If a studio was applying to a competition, we got together to participate and help. And I felt the need to be connected to the teaching of the school, but it was equally important that it naturally intertwined with the practice and learning in the studios.



In Lisbon the school was, in that period, much more fragmented. It did not have the cohesion that existed in Porto. One of the characteristics of the Lisbon school of that time was that the years were very diverse, the subjects were diverse and the continuity was lost very easily. And so it was also more natural to find it more difficult to find the same level of enthusiasm in the lecturers, which was something that was gradually lost...

What struck me the most in Lisbon was the continuity in the learning of Drawing. In fact, with Luísa Brandão in Porto, it was the major moment, but in Lisbon, Daciano Costa - who was also a man with a great ability to connect with the students - was essential to understand what this support was for, this tool as an extension of our thinking, trying to record it. History was also very important for me, especially in the year 3, because I discovered a number of things that until then meant very little to me, from the point of view of the connection with architecture. This was all due to Maria Calado, who is an incredible lecturer and has an impressive knowledge and enthusiasm, who challenged our minds. I remember that that year she introduced us to the books of Giulio Carlo Argan, especially about Neoclassicism and revivalism - readings that were part of the spirit of the early 1980s, late 1970s. She also introduced us to the so-called revolutionary architects, such as Ledoux, and architects who had begun the revisions of the Roman Architecture, in particular Piranesi. It was this 3rd year that made me feel even more passionate about the architecture degree.

And then, later, another lecturer who joined our degree, José Manuel Fernandes - curiously, later he became one of the founders of Autónoma and an essential pillar regarding the construction of the University - brought very individual ideas and topics about architecture, which turned out to be extremely important for the end of the degree.

The school, for me, was much more striking with regard to colleagues and to this approximation to Drawing and to history topics, instilling in me the desire to

deepen my knowledge of it. There was also an important event in the Architecture degree, which took place in years 4 and 5, which was the first Architecture major international conferences in Portugal. These were times when the disclosure of architecture was very slow in Portugal. Not even the studios found it easy to obtain publications, books, etc. Not to mention that before 1974, many of the books had to enter Portugal under car seats because they were considered subversive... Robert Venturi's "Complexity and Contradiction" was subversive... The major conferences that took place in the School of Fine Arts brought together people like Peter Eisenman, I think Aldo Rossi too, Charles Jencks, Charles Moore, I do not remember if Robert Stern and Paolo Portoghesi also came... They all went through the School of Fine Arts and this marked us a lot from the point of view of the isolation we felt regarding the rest of the world... it was difficult to get here and it was also difficult to get out of here, it was not easy to cross Spain and the Pyrenees to reach the other side of Europe.

It was the first time we listened, live, to a group of architects. There was even a daily newspaper that followed a controversy between two of these architects and published something concerning their distinct stances on interventions in Lisbon and this was not, in fact, something we were used to in our daily lives. And they were important because they made us aware of different ways of experiencing and thinking about architecture, in some cases in radically different ways. But there was always this question about what had most weight in our training. If it was really the school or if it was the training outside the school, in the studios.

I, of course, was quite close to several architects. From the outset, to my father (José Daniel Santa-Rita), but also to Duarte Nuno Simões (my uncle), Alberto Oliveira, and Manuel Vicente. They were people whom I worked with and knew well and with whom I naturally maintained a dialogue... Therefore, there is always the question of what, for me, weighed more, whether it was the academic training or this personal training. I was talking to Gonçalo Byrne the other day and said to



him: "I remember one project you were involved in and which today would be almost impossible (but this shows the proximity among architects in those years): one of the teams formed for the Martim Moniz project competition consisted of my father, Bartolomeu Costa Cabral, Manuel Vicente, Raul Hestnes Ferreira and Gonçalo Byrne!" This is something almost unthinkable today! What a team! With such a powerful and diverse range of architects!

João Santa-Rita was part of the first group of lecturers who put UAL's Architecture degree together. You surely brought several ideas that were the consequence of the experiences you had...

Yes. I did not attend the initial, restricted meetings with the three founders of the degree, but I was always present at the various meetings held to create and structure the degree, to discuss what the subjects would be and how they were to be taught and integrated. Right from the start, questions were raised. One thing is an ongoing degree that is subsequently restructured, but a degree starting from scratch is something else. They were memorable meetings where we discussed the best of each lecturer and the pertinence of certain attributions, always looking for those who could best meet the defined objectives. Even some aspects that might seem contradictory regarding lecturers who had very different backgrounds and different ways of producing, and how they could come together, were very much discussed. At the beginning of the degree – a bit by chance - I ended up coordinating the topics involving Constructions. What interested me most in this subject, since I believed in the importance of linking it to the knowledge of History, was, in some way, to teach it at the beginning of the training, unlike what happened in other degrees. I wanted students, regardless of being prepared or not, to experience this confrontation with the aspects that inform the materiality of the architecture as early as possible. This turned out to be introduced and, I think, accepted by everyone. At one point it created a certain distinction in the structure of UAL with regard to other degrees. In fact, I do not know if, still today, it is the only degree that has this subject since the first semester (because now



it's all semesters). It was a very stimulating time. We spent a few months thinking about the degree, exchanging ideas and coming up with solutions and this allowed - thanks to the intervention of José Manuel Fernandes, Manuel Graça Dias and João Luís Carrilho da Graça - thinking about the degree. Perhaps thanks to this it is still very successful today. Despite all difficulties, it allowed launching a degree with solid foundations. All of us, in a more or less continuous way, had been associated with teaching throughout our lives, and brought to the degree what each one ideally imagined could be the teaching of a particular subject. I personally did not think about what I liked to teach, I thought about what I liked to learn. I thought, "What did I miss out when I was studying these subjects?", "What would I have liked a teacher had told me?", "How would I have liked if a teacher had related to me in a subject as specific as it is?", "What leeway do I have to innovate teaching in subjects to which it is more difficult to attract the interest and the availability of the students, since they do not immediately understand their purpose and usefulness?". And it is necessary to underline something that is extremely important, which is the anticipation of the materiality of architecture, before a phase of two-dimensional representation, and how it is transmitted to the students, from the beginning. And that's what I was looking for. Even because, I admit, I did not like studying at the School of Fine Arts. Maybe I'm being very unfair to many colleagues and lecturers, but I never had a great relationship with the school. I did not like the schedules much, nor to comply with them or to do the tasks. I understood learning in a freer way than what happened in practice. Even in a school like Fine Arts, and there were colleagues in engineering who said we did not have hours for anything, I would say yes, we did not have hours and that the ones I had, were hard for me. So it was very difficult for me to create connections with the school itself, except with the group of friends, which was the most important. But, in fact, it was not an easy relationship. The world of the studio was more important from this point of view. It was a more stimulating form of learning.

And now teaching forced me to reflect on how to draw students' interest and attention. At first it was very intense and lively, we even had a workshop that allowed us to do many innovative jobs, in carpentry and blacksmithing. I remember one year when a group of students executed, in steel, part of the structure of Corbusier's Swiss pavilion on a scale of one to two. All this leaves me with great memories of a way of teaching that was very close to the students.

When you finished the Architecture degree, what did you do next?

During the degree, our life involved attending school and participating in academic life with work and learning in the studios, as I mentioned. When I left school, I had a very little linear year or two. I ended up participating in many things with several colleagues and architects. I also made some partnerships with other professional areas. And I lived these two years between 1983 and 1985 very much like that... I had the opportunity to do some works, mainly reformulating apartments in Lisbon and the construction of houses that were never completed near Azeitão... And then I went to Macao.

I had known Manuel Vicente (MV) for many years, my father and Manuel (MV), besides being great friends, had even had a studio together in the 1970s and the 1980s... I ended up, in some way, provoking a trip to Macao! I showed up there during a Easter holiday... I was working with Manuel Graça Dias (MGD), who was preparing one of the great Architecture exhibitions in Portugal, with Carlos Duarte, the exhibition *Tendências da Arquitectura Portuguesa*.

One of the represented architects was Manuel Vicente and the material for the exhibition had to be prepared. Manuel Graça Dias dared me to collaborate in the preparation of this material, to make contacts with the various studios and to ensure that they sent the drawings, photographs, texts and information on time, to enable Manuel (MGD) and Carlos Duarte to discuss the selection and presentation of the material. This was very pleasant for me because it helped me to get to know Manuel Graça Dias better and to know his way of doing things in Architecture. And one day I told him: "Look, Manuel (MV) is not sending anything,



but don't worry, I'm going to spend a few days in Macao and I will try to bring or at least put the material together there!" And that's what I did! I went there for a fortnight and spent about 70% of the time working and gathering all that material... what a wonderful holiday! Meanwhile, I ended up getting involved in a competition; about 4 or 5 days before I was due back, Manuel (MV) received an invitation to participate in the competition for the World Trade Centre in Macao and we went to the studio and put up the proposal together! A few months later Manuel (MV) called me (at 4 in the morning) to say that he had won the competition, asking if I wanted to go there for a while. Things happened like this, in a very natural way. I thought about it a lot and asked my father to help me to take control of some of the works and projects I was already doing - a small hotel under construction, more houses for a few friends. And I thought I was only going for a few months to collaborate in the preliminary study and then return. I ended up staying almost two years in Macao.

I think a lot of us would not leave, we stayed here because we had work and friends and our life was just starting. I, in fact, wanted to leave Portugal. It was not something I was impelled to. Those years were also difficult times in Portugal, until the mid-eighties or so. They were very lively years because there was a lot of work in the studios, but there was also money shortage in the country... It was very difficult to get paid. I received payments through promissory notes, the studios were paid in promissory notes, the state paid one or two years after the work had been done... There was a lot of money shortage, but, unlike today, there was encouragement. But that was not exactly what made me leave. I wanted to study abroad, unfortunately I could not go where I wished, and the second option was to leave to work.

It turned out to be extremely important for my training, because it was a very different relationship with Architecture, with the way of doing things... We had three or four very important occasions in the studio that really marked us a lot: the second competition for the Praia Grande Bay, a competition Manuel (MV) entered into with my father for the Aga Khan Foundation Centre in Lisbon (which



is not what is built today)... Everything was striking even from the point of view of the ease with which things happened in Macao! There were very different resources from those in our country, and this allowed things to be put into practice much more easily. And Manuel was very present in the studio, his mark could be felt, but there was also great freedom! This allowed us, those who were there, to create deep roots and friendships and to work extremely hard! I remember that we spent three or four nights without sleeping to finish competitions and we did not rest! And that allowed us to participate in a lot. Then it enabled other things... When I arrived in Macao, Manuel had undergone surgery and was very weak. He had to come to Lisbon for a relatively large convalescence, and this required all of us, who were young, around 25/26 years old, to assume huge responsibilities in the studio. I remember I had a power of attorney to sign contracts, terminate contracts, secure the studio's payments, deal with money, etc.! All this responsibility frightened me!

It also shows how Manuel related to people and trusted them. And how we also had to know how to manage that responsibility and to honour it. What did this also allow us to do? To perceive, from a very early stage, the mechanisms we would not have understood if there had not been such a contingency. On the other hand, in Macao - unlike Lisbon, where there were many projects but only a small percentage were actually built - a large percentage of the projects were built. This means that in these two years the studio had a set of buildings under construction, of some dimension and all very different: institutional and private, housing interior projects, museums, television facilities, housing, social housing, offices... For a young architect, all this was very relevant. I remember that on the second day of my arrival to the studio, I was placed in charge of an execution project for a bank branch and also of the follow-up of a work! I also remember that in this execution project I had to draw a series of window frames, which at that time were made of iron or wood - I did some details, and Manuel criticized me a lot, because my details would not resist the first winds, Macao was not like

Portugal, there were typhoons! And so this was a very remarkable experience that allowed me to see Architecture in a different way!

Was this distancing from Portugal important to you? To create an identity distinct from the family context? Did you feel this need?

I do not know if I was really aware of it or not. I went to Macao because I wanted to be familiar with Manuel's way of thinking and working and I knew that there were things that interested me that I did not find in Lisbon. But I can give you a better idea of what motivated me to leave. On the one hand, I was very much interested in learning what was being done at some schools in the United States. California fascinated me. There were some young architects who were beginning to become noticed and I was interested in their constructive freedom, in the way they had a relationship with a kind of non-ephemeral but at the same time ephemeral architecture, through its own materiality. Architects like the Morphosis and Frank Gehry's some early work in the early 1980s. At the same time, the East had a completely different scale. Hong Kong, which is a strange city because it does not have what we expect to find in a western city - it lacks squares and piazzas - has intensity, there is an intensely dense structure that works very well with the topography, the landscape, the commercial dynamics and the very life of the city... And I must say that I really enjoyed Macao from the very first day! In fact, I have been lucky enough to go there regularly and whenever I come back I miss it a lot and always say that I could have lived there for the rest of my life without a problem. The weather does not bother me. I like it to be small but intense, today it has a cosmopolitan character that was lacking at the time. Liking Macao was also important to build affinities with the territory. Obviously, my departure to Macao helped me a lot to understand what I was interested in. What I wanted and how I got closer to Architecture. And one of the things that marked me, certainly, was the very learning of that city, which was very different from Lisbon. And it was important, above all, to distance myself from the culture that existed in Portugal.

There were things that interested me a lot, and I do not know if I have been able to incorporate them in my work or not, which are related to my interpretation of certain aspects of history and the relationship between buildings and places and the very nature of their materiality. I needed to distance myself from work, from the commissions I was starting to have in Portugal. I was working in a studio and I had time to draw. And it was curious because this year there was an exhibition in Macao about Manuel Vicente, organized by Rui Leão and Carlota Bruni, and they invited over twenty very different people who had been associated with Manuel (MV) to write and design a set of panels that illustrated what their work in Manuel Vicente's studio had been and what their work throughout life had been since then. And I sent two panels, which paralleled the drawings I made for the projects in Manuel Vicente's studio and the drawings I worked out freely at weekends and in the evenings, thinking about a set of possible interventions for Macao. And it pleased me, almost 30 years later, to intertwine these two moments.

About your experience as a lecturer, you talked about the Technology subject but now you are teaching Project (year 2) to substantially different students. Tell us a little about this challenge.

The teaching of Architecture can evolve - but there are issues that are, in fact, constant. They are part of the great body of teaching architecture. There are always new topics and new issues, history itself has evolved, there are new points of view, different from the points of view of 20 or 30 years ago, there are new materials from a technological perspective and all this is fundamental... But I would say that there is not a substantial distinction between how to teach Architecture a few years ago and now. The themes are all there, there is no rejection of the topics, instead there are more topics! But the others continue. It is evident that there is evolution of thought and of how to think architecture, and this, of course, is reflected in the teaching, but in the way the topics and subjects that arise in relation to them are approached.



And, of course, the degree began with a certain scale, it has evolved and now, somehow, has redefined itself. There are more students coming from abroad than Portuguese students. There is a big difference regarding the group of students from a few years ago, who were educated in Portugal and whose high school knowledge we knew about. Now, there are students with different levels of education, even with different cultures. We have a large contingent of students from Angola in the first cycle. This obviously poses a great challenge to the degree. For me, it is not exactly a novelty, since I taught between 1996 and 2001 with Pancho Guedes at Lusófona University, and it was a reality more or less similar to that of UAL's, nowadays.

And do these students bring or construct their references in a more global, international way, regarding what happened in the past?

I do not feel it in year 2, but it's only natural that, in later years, that happens. First of all, we always have this eternal question with Architecture: it is very difficult for a year 2 student to attain distinct levels of knowledge, from the fields of Arts, Literature, Philosophy, Thought, etc. It is very difficult to acquire knowledge and even cross information. A student may be very interested in reading several authors, but then he understands at once how this culture, even for something as direct as writing, can contribute to the Project subject. So, this question about the weight of their references still seems to me very poor in the early years. Speaking openly, what we tell students is that they lack culture! But I also think that the students from previous years lacked it too! Perhaps what happens is that for the others some topics were at least familiar. They did not know them as well as we hoped, but at least they had come across them in various ways before, either on a study visit or because the history teacher had already spoken to them about those matters... Not now. Now, for many, they are entirely new topics because the culture of the places they come from is distinct from ours. Of course, our teaching is much based on Western culture. We do not study Chinese architecture, for example. And so we always have this issue, if we ever receive

Chinese students in years 1 or 2, it will make a lot of difference for them to learn Architecture through examples, centred on a certain geographic and cultural reality distinct from theirs. And so, these are always issues that we have to fine tune... This then impacts on everything, including on the Project subject itself. There are references that are totally different and, of course, this also generates more questioning on the part of the students.

As for Project, I started to teach Project classes at UAL with Manuel (MV) and with Madalena (Cardoso Menezes). The syllabi were very comprehensive and allowed very pertinent and valid exercises, also very diverse ones, but they were done with large groups of 50/60 students. This meant that in groups of this size there were always students who levered others and therefore the class naturally raised its quality, because some feel impelled to follow the work of others... This gave a perspective of the degree, or rather, of year 2, when we got to the end of the year and had a student body that had a perception of the city, had reflected on its various components, looked at very different realities, worked on some programmes and acquired a set of skills. All this left us reasonably hopeful about their moving on to year 3 and afterwards to the master degree. That is what I think has radically changed the university panorama, we have to pay more attention to the acquisition of skills and tools, which we hoped, for better or worse, to have been acquired before. In this aspect there is a great gap between the past and the present.

And, due to all this, did the subject have to be adapted?

Yes, it had to be a bit tailored. There are things that have to be done initially to help students acquire tools from the point of view of drawing, representation, modelling... Almost everything is new to them. And this somehow requires rethinking how to approach subjects that allow acquiring more comprehensive knowledge and obtaining a more precise notion of the relation of an object with any context. But, above all, I would say that the way I have always been involved in architecture teaching has remained the same – after all I had already taught



Project in several schools - I always gave priority to things that started with an intervention in the city and then came down to an object that came out of this broader intervention. Basically, I hope that students will learn to redefine scale and context so that in year 3 they may have other skills and are able to deal with challenges of a different nature. Still, what really characterizes a school is the fact that students may have different lecturers with distinctive approaches and from that point of view I look for singular things. For two years I carried out an exercise that aims to engage students in aspects of Western culture and introduce them to what may be the great themes of space and architecture. It was also a way to get students to think and rethink the representation of architecture, simultaneously allowing them to evolve in some aspects, such as representation through drawing and models. This exercise involved selecting 3 or 4 etchings of Piranesi's Prisons (Carceri). The students were invited to study the etchings, to assign a scale, to understand the paradoxes and contradictions of those representations, what they represented, the context in which they were made, what they meant at that moment, how they constituted and constitute a constant reference. Students then had to make a kind of extension of that etching, to imagine and complete what was beyond the image, and to think how it could be kept within a certain casing and how it could interact with the spaces of the city.

Over these years, the degree has been changing due to the circumstances you speak about, but, at the same time, leaving the university to enter the labour market is also different. What paths are available to students after they finish the degree?

I may be wrong, but I believe that the training of architects is something more or less universal. That is, there are colleagues and universities that believe that training should focus on a certain reality. The truth is that reality is a circumstantial thing and can be changed at any time. Training is not for a static reality... At present, in Portugal as in many European countries, there is not much more to do than the renovation of existing buildings. This does not make us lecturers



oriented only to this reality. This possibility for intervention has always existed, but the truth is that this concern has not always been part of our view of reality, understanding what exists, understanding how we live now and understanding, above all, a reality like the European, how one intervenes in a context in which many questions arise. The same is true from the point of view of professional possibilities. As I said, some issues are new. The reality is not more complex but I have no hesitation in saying that it has a different complexity. Our reality is very different from what it was 20/30 years ago. Some days ago, for a job I'm starting, I was curious to look at the list of projects to be elaborated and I came to the conclusion that the project involves 27 specialties! This means that probably 30% of the time will be spent managing teams, and checking if the twenty-seventh is up to date, if the twenty-fifth has not forgotten three papers... and then incorporate all that information into one project! It is very different! The same project, 20 years ago, had four specialties, four technicians involved and that was it. So, from this point of view, those subjects that will contribute to the project are taught with greater attention than in the past. And even, perhaps, with greater competence. There are technology topics that I believe are being taught with another competence. Many of them have nowadays a scientific knowledge that they did not have before, when the knowledge was more empirical. And, in order for architects to maintain their integrative vision, it is evident that universities ended up including this type of knowledge in the syllabus. And that sounds good to me because it is, in fact, a possibility that allows architects, when leaving university and deciding to start their professional activity, to end up having several options. Because Architecture allows this. Architecture allows not only possibilities outside of its field - we all have colleagues who turned out to be fantastic professionals in completely different areas, in writing, television production, as film setters, musicians, as people connected to fashion - because the degree also allows a very particular understanding of other realities, along with more concrete aspects related to Architecture, but never only limited to the Project subject. And, indeed, there are people who want completely different things. From this point of view, it



is only natural that the degrees integrate another set of new subjects. One question I have is related to the relationship between what goes on inside the university and what goes on outside. For example: I think that one of the great gaps that universities seem to have are visits to building works. João (Caria Lopes) was a lecturer a few years ago when the Technologies subject had something called Work Diary. In year 1, the students began to visit building works. Regardless of the quality of the work, since it was impossible to find 30 works of the same quality, it allowed students to have, from the start, a common language, to know what they were talking about, to perceive what work is about. There was a path that was trodden, they understood the works being conducted and their progress, they learned what was the reality of a work was all about. All this has changed. Three or four years ago we did some visits to Parque Escolar and it was much more complex... to ensure that everyone has insurance and a helmet, vest, boots, that no one can be late. And the visit is like an ant path because it is difficult to make the visit with the work in progress - if you interrupt the work the inspection comes and says they are late because they received the study visit! This is a completely different reality! But it's something that is needed! I do not know how this can be solved, whether through protocols with two or three large construction companies... It is not easy to take a large number of students to study visits, especially in an ongoing way, because that is what matters!

But I realize that for a work to have UAL or Lusófona asking for ten visits, in Lisbon alone, if all universities ask for ten visits, that makes sixty visits per year and they say, "Well, either we stop the work or we have to ask the developer two extra months to encompass the study visits!".

But I think it was an important aspect because, since the professional options are so diverse, I found it important that the students had that opportunity. Especially because I am convinced that students with a degree in architecture continue to have a global view of the construction process, of what architecture is and of what a building is, and this allows them to be better prepared. They are more integrative, they do not have a very specific vision.

On the other hand, there are many things that architects can do today. For example, in the field of 3D visualization, which is a huge world, there are many people who make it their activity. There are also more ephemeral works and there are the planning ones, for example, which are fundamental. And in this area architects are very important in the role of looking at and intervening in the territory. In this regard, the current exhibition at the CCB by João Luís Carrilho da Graça is an example of this. The territory of a building turns out to be an entire city, then there is the specific place, but ultimately, it's the city that matters.

And even due to these peculiarities, our profession has met with a lot of recognition abroad, because we have a very diverse territory, a very distinct history, we have very different cities and very different realities, which allows us to have a very particular training in the way we look and know how to see, which in some way makes us capable of intervening in very different contexts and have this capacity to easily grasp them. Perhaps other countries are more attached to a less heterogeneous reality, and this does not enable them to do this. And then, the training we have had over the years is very similar from school to school - we do not have schools in Portugal with very specific and even very fractured teaching in the way architecture is taught, as some countries do, such as the United States, or even some schools in Europe, as at one time the Netherlands or even England had. But we have a cohesive and very well structured teaching, with a strong faculty in the way it brings together other subjects and even in the way it teaches Architecture, particularly the project subject. This has been a positive aspect for our students when they leave university.

With the experience you have had with the Presidency of the Architects' Society (O. A.), did your idea of the profession change? Or rather, what is the current state of the profession in Portugal?

It is not because one is inside or outside the O.A. that one has a different view of the profession. It would only be very different if I was too far removed from the project, but as I have always been an architect and never ceased to be, the reality

that I imagined of the profession is not much different because I preside the O.A. I have more information about the profession and, above all, how the profession actually stands the European context. And I had a great surprise - because we tend to think that what happens in our country is unique, whether good or bad - which was to realize that, from the point of view of architecture, the world has a misrepresentation of what the importance of the architectural reality is. That is, there are countries where Architecture is a very esteemed reality, but in most countries architecture is not at all esteemed, in all senses. In terms of the process, it does not matter what one does, or how one does it, what matters is doing, that things are done, rather than the quality itself and the conditions that underlie it.

Is architecture a discipline or does it also imply an undervalued image of the architect himself?

I think that for most people, the discipline does not exist, which is the first big problem. If one does not even understand the role of the architect and how architecture can have added value for a society, then the discipline does not even exist! The appreciation of the architect is not so much in itself, but in what he does. And as long as we do not appreciate the space where we live, where we are, it is difficult to appreciate who is behind it. And this is felt in everything! One feels it in the devaluation of the mechanisms, of the realizations, of the actual work. It can be felt even in the way work is distributed. And we know that competitions are always controversial, there are always conflicting ideas, but competitions that are based on the quality of the project is a reality that has a lot of meaning for us, because one is just discussing what is best for a given reality. At this point, we know that this is not the reality, we have even reached the most critical stage, regrettably, when it becomes almost an auction. In subsequent phases of the competition, one could offer this more and consider less...

I think these are signs of great cultural failure and that will certainly result in great discomfort. Because, deep down, we are eventually more demanding than our close ancestors were. We have notions of what the community is and what it is

to be and what it is to participate that are completely different, but we end up being less. This is often seen on the part of the decision maker, who has a lot of clout on these issues, on many occasions leading to true setbacks in many matters. I think this comes much from this lack of recognition of the importance of architecture for the construction of our reality. But the fault is not only on the part of the decision-maker, we, architects, are to blame, as we are also part of this problem. Some days ago I was at the Danish Architectural Centre (DAC) and I was puzzled because they have a reasonable quality centre and are building an even larger centre. It is a Rem Koolhaas project at Copenhagen's port. I have a question: "How can an architecture centre in Denmark – since there are several in France, in London, there is the House of Architecture in Portugal... – can currently embark on such a huge work? It is that much of the success of the DAC results precisely from the way it was able to link all the different aspects and components of society with its programmes to promote architecture. What does this mean? It means that it is not a centre exclusively for architects, it is a centre for all people, for all professionals. It has very diverse events, which, although directed to architecture, reaps a wider interest, such as thematic visits... It is a centre where 4/5-year-old children are welcome – they are in the nursery and can go there to play in the studios – and even older citizens can go there for visits or lunch. And what does this mean? It means that the DAC is very important for the community and that its activity is amply recognised. Of course, we know that this is easy in countries that have cultural levels and habits different from ours, even from the point of view of their relations and the way they construct their daily lives and society relations, but it's a reality that makes us think, doesn't it?

But the truth is that we are among the European peoples where the relationship with architecture is very intense, because we have cities with very old centres, with a lot of history, and also with many recent achievements. Still, the truth is that, on a day-to-day basis, the relationship with architecture is one of total disinterest. There is no concern, at all levels, for the quality of what is offered. It's all a little indifferent. It's this kind of "whatever" that is very perplexing. In



architecture nothing is whatever! Some days ago, when I was visiting Copenhagen, I went with a person who said, "This even upsets you because it is rare to enter a building that does not have quality!" Everything has a kind of established quality standard. And that reflects the concern of those who do the best they know, it shows the concern of those who enjoy finding things that have quality and where they feel good. For us it's all a bit indifferent... Although this has changed a bit recently. And I think it has changed because younger generations move about more and end up bringing more references and being more open to leading that change. We (architects) certainly do not give up doing things with quality and do not give up understanding that what we have to do modifies the environments, modifies the city – it has all this degree of intervention - but for those who are on the other side, it is also important to realize what it means. And we all have stories to tell, like at the work the director says he now wants the walls so and so, and we reply telling him that we are the architects and in turn they tell us that they are in charge... These are stories we all know about, from the smallest work to the biggest... But this only mirrors this lack of recognition. If I go to my doctor who will operate me, I do not dare say, "Oh doctor, this time, sorry, but I do not agree that the scalpel comes in here, and I think you should cut left to right because I did not like any of the cuts you made on me... This now has to be performed with other blades or something else and sorry, you will not perform the anaesthetics like you did before, you make it last a further hour and a half, and before entering the OR, give me a discount!"

The truth is that something as important to wellbeing as Architecture cannot be immediately understood, nor is it a matter of life or death. The difference, instead of happening immediately, will be noted throughout history and throughout our lives. From this point of view, Europe has ceased to be a benchmark. Maybe it's a mistake for all of us because we have Europe in high regard in many matters. But it has ceased to be so from this point of view because, on behalf of many things, it is devaluing a few others. And the countries that devalue, to a certain extent, the quality of their architecture, devalue it because it is already rooted in



their society. The reality, from this point of view, is very adverse, for some things that we, architects, defend. The world of architecture must be very attentive and concerned about what a European vision of these professional areas is. The excessive desire to bureaucratize everything, a lot of paper to fill, many letters, a lot of reports to write, requirements and rules for everything... Merely in order to make someone accountable when things go wrong... Quality is only for 3 or 4 more visible and more important works and everyday life is a little indifferent.

Given all these challenges that we are talking about, do you foresee a dark future for architecture or do you believe that there is a way through?

If I did not believe in architecture, I would stop being an architect! That is, I do not think I have a pessimistic view. I think I try to have a realistic view, with a great deal of optimism because, deep down, that's what makes me want to do things and enjoy it. Only with optimism can we fight what is most negative and adverse! But we can not delude ourselves and think that it is a world full of positive and easy things because, in fact, there is a lot of negativity in the middle and to counteract it requires a lot of perseverance and the work of many. And what affects me the most is that is not a question of having negative or positive things, it's the fact that many negative things seem natural to many people, and sometimes even to those who are responsible for the decisions. But architecture will always exist! Of course, it evolves, as it has always evolved. And, of course, many things will change, as has also happened throughout history. I do not see destruction coming. One may think that what is being done could be done better. Throughout 40 years of history, from the 1970s onwards, much has been done. Many schools and equipment have been built, better conditions have been created, health centres, universities... and now, with the decreasing student population, there are problems, but the universities are there! There will be other things that have yet to be done. One cannot think that whoever is going to make a new railway station is a criminal and only wants to benefit from public funds. There will always be a need to do things... One concrete example is that we



receive more international students than we did before, as we know, and we do not have sufficient facilities, including for Portuguese students, as other countries have, we are very poorly prepared, and students eventually organize themselves and rent apartments... Maybe these are areas where universities have a major flaw, they do not have the so-called student residences. Therefore, there are always areas where we have to invest if we want to attract another type of audience. But we also know that there is much to be done in this country. We just have to go through our cities and realize that there is, in fact, much to be done. Now, the nature of work is different, the interventions are different. And this is important for anyone who is studying here... The truth is that from this point of view, as I said, we have a country much better equipped than we had. But there will always be faults, shortage of libraries, cultural spaces, a national museum. For example, there is no national architecture museum, it simply does not exist and it has been postponed repeatedly! And this denotes the little importance and value of architecture! I do not know how many countries in Europe do not have an architecture museum, I believe just a few, but I know that Portugal is one of them. Another curious thing that has to do with this is the fact that Portugal had a resolution of the Council of Ministers on a national policy for Architecture and Landscape only this year, which is something that architects have defended for many years. That denotes how these themes are devalued. And if we also want to believe that Architecture is valuable with implications, good or bad, in the future, it is very important to create policies for its implementation and for the participation of the architects in many of the decision-making processes. This obviously requires this recognition and then the museum is the first step. And how long have we been talking about the museum? Initially, it was going to be housed at the Portuguese Pavilion... The fact is that the Pavilion has been there since 1998, almost 20 years have passed... and we have enough collections, production and international recognition for Portuguese Architecture to have its own museum... But it has not, and that's the problem!