

## **Interview to architect Pedro Reis**

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**We are very pleased to interview architect and university lecturer Pedro Reis. Welcome! We would like to start by asking you to describe your academic background, where you took your degree in architecture, who were your most relevant professors and projects at university.**

Firstly, I would like to thank you for his opportunity to participate in a project at UAL that I consider very interesting and that helps us to further the concept of school and develop the activities taking place there.

I wanted to study architecture from a very early age. When I was a teenager, I already believed this was something I would like to study. I loved buildings, space.

I grew up in a very big house, a very beautiful house, in Silves, in the Algarve. It had been designed by an architect who was clearly influenced by Raul Lino; it was a very beautiful house, a special house. And from a very early age, I also felt the influence of several people around me, for whom architecture was something that made sense and that they believed I would like. Obviously, without knowing anything about architecture, I was already sensitive to space and liked buildings and construction.

I studied in Silves, in the Algarve, until the 9th grade and then came to Lisbon to study at a school for the arts, (Escola Secundária Artística) School António Arroio. That was also an opportunity to live away from home because I did not care for living in such a small town. I started living on my own at the age of 15, which was

not something very common at the time. That demanded a lot of courage and a lot of trust from my parents, not from me. I was too young to consider the risks. It just had to work out. And it did, I completed high school at António Arroio.

From then on, the important thing was to have good grades to enter university. At that time, it was already more difficult to enter Lisbon than Porto university, which was where I wanted to study. I knew nothing of architecture. I had some basic knowledge but, in fact, what made me choose Porto university was what I had heard from friends and friends' parents. The teaching there was stricter, it had a history of being a very different university from that of Lisbon and many future architects opted to study in Porto. And so, I went to Porto.

It was a new move to a new city. The idea of the city of Porto also appealed to me - the granite, the fog! I really liked that whole universe! And it was also very simple. I had colleagues who had gone, like me, to Porto, but there I met Rogério Gonçalves, José Adrião. As the school was relatively small, we knew students from different years. It was not common to make friends with people attending different years. But I, perhaps because I was rather autonomous, having lived on my own for several years, I became close to older students who were also more autonomous, which was also more stimulating for me... And I rapidly became integrated in both the city, the young students' environment and the school.

The first year at Porto was, in fact, extremely important. Not only because I was lucky to have a wonderful teacher - when I arrived I practically had no teacher at all because he was doing his PhD and was often away from the university, so I had to find other teachers who would supervise my work and assisted me in project - but he had a significant influence because of the course unit on Drawing. This course forced us to look and see and that was a revelation for me. The courses of Project and of History, taught by professor Fernando Távora, were wonderful and allowed us to view the world of architecture from a fascinating perspective - but the course on Drawing provided me with a tool to see the world

from a completely different point of view. From the moment we learn to draw, we learn to see. And that is a crucial project tool.

At the end of the 1st year I had to do military service for one year: When I came back, I was more mature and in my 2nd year class included different students. I met Nuno Brandão Costa, who later became one of my closest friends, Francisco Vassalo and many others. A new group of friends was formed, different from the one I had in my first year, but I kept my relations with older students from the senior years, such as José Adrião, Paulo Seco, Pedro Pacheco, Francisco Vieira de Campos and Cristina Guedes. Part of this group had founded an office, Atelier dos Almadas, which was a great place because we were all from other cities and the space at the school was rather small (the school was moving from the old Belas-Artes building to the new Pavilhão Carlos Ramos). This office was almost like a parallel school. At a second stage, I started doing projects there and that office became my second home. We had fun as well, of course, but work was the centre of our lives.

As far as the Porto School was concerned, it offered a work-based methodology, provided us with a series of tools to develop project and of reading material on the city, the territory, and social relations. That was the most important thing the school gave us. At the same time, however, it was very strict in the structuring of exercises, objectives and exploitation fields. From a point onwards, we started to read architecture journals and know other architects. There were also many conferences. There was an incredible one, which was very important for my generation, with Jaques Herzog, Peter Zumthor, Giorgio Grassi, David Chipperfield, who were architects designing their first major projects (except Grassi). That was very new and had an impact on this generation.

At the same time, I have always wanted to know new things, to travel and be in contact with other contexts. Not only as a tourist, but to know new ways of working, how partnerships are organized. Therefore, in my 4th year, I wanted to

go to London. I took the chance to do Erasmus (it was probably the 2nd year Erasmus existed); there were no candidates. So, I ended up with a double grant. I went with Francisco Vassalo, who also got a double grant, and we spent a year in London. We studied at Southbank Polytechnic, which is currently a university. It was a great adventure because we were in a totally different teaching system. There was no real work methodology, there were offices and several project guidelines with very different themes and multiple approaches, completely different project themes... For me this was a breadth of fresh air. Suddenly, I could approach a project from a completely different perspective, spend a year thinking about how we relate to the world and, based on that experience, start a project.

Exploration was core and that was both refreshing and stimulating. We could know the city, whose architecture is completely different from that of Porto.

I had already been in London as a tourist and I had already been working there, in the Summer of my 3rd year. I always worked during the Summer, before studying architecture I worked in archaeological fields, I worked two Summers doing architectural survey in the Algarve, with architect José Alberto Alegria – because I knew Jorge Carvalho and Teresa Novais who were working at Chipfield and Foster and so I worked at Staton Williams' architecture office, a great office that produced great quality architecture. I had those summer jobs... making scale models, etc.

Afterwards I went back to Porto and I came upon a new change - architecture was no longer taught in Belas-Artes, in Campo Alegre, but in the new Faculty of Architecture designed by architect Álvaro Siza. The internship was also moved to 5th year and so I did my internship in the office of architect Fernando Távora. It was an absolutely fantastic internship, with an extremely wise, intelligent and sensitive person who was the first to show me how a project is developed and construction supervised. Yet, more than what was learned in terms of project, being with architect Távora was, in fact, the most relevant.

After the internship, the 6th year was more focused on urban planning, on large-scale intervention. At the same time, I started to work with architect José Fernando Gonçalves, on a project for architect Souto de Moura for the Centro de Estudos Empresariais (centre of business studies) in Maia. As I had already spent a Summer in the office of architect Souto de Moura finishing (drawing in ink) a project under implementation for Pavilhão de GeoCiências of Aveiro School the opportunity arose to continue that project and I ended up working for architect Souto de Moura for four years.

**I know that you went to another country after those four years in the office of Souto de Moura. Have you always wanted to find new sources of inspiration?**

Yes. For me, the experience with Eduardo Souto de Moura was very important. I started in a project that was already in its implementation phase, almost starting its construction and, in a certain way, I was the person who knew the most about the project and had a first hard contact with the reality of construction. I had just finished university and I was required to supervise a rather large construction, that of Centro de Estudos Empresariais in Maia, a construction that was never completed... But that was my first contact with reality after having to design, to provide a response... That gave me the confidence to start developing a series of other projects at the office and I also had the opportunity to work, together with Eduardo, on a series of projects, from houses to large buildings, and in all phases of the projects. Eventually I left because I wanted to do other things. I liked working with Eduardo, we are still friends, but I had other personal challenges and change was important for me. But he was undoubtedly the most important architect in terms of my training.

Next I went to New York! I went there because I wanted to change my life. The initial idea was to move to Lisbon but then I realized I wasn't going to do anything in Lisbon. At the time, there was no architect I thought would make sense I would work with. After being with Souto de Mouro, I was still a bit caught up in all that intensity! We worked long hours, every day. We devoted ourselves to the office, my life was practically only work, and I loved it. But it did not make sense to work with another architect in Lisbon after having worked with Souto de Moura. So, I decided to go to New York.

It was a huge leap. Not in terms of work because I worked at a small office (my choice) while I was there. As soon as I got to New York, after having worked with Eduardo, I had a passport... I had not realized it but, after one week, I had lots of job offers. I had the option to work in large offices, such as SOM, but I was not interested in that. I had no intention of staying long in New York and I wanted to immerse in project, in the relation among all actors during the project and construction phases. So, I chose a smaller office, that of Toshiko Mori, who is a Japanese architect who had long been working in New York and had made a series of houses in Florida and some interior design projects in New York and would possibly do new projects in Florida. That was the most important for me because I could follow up on a project in the space of two years; that was more useful than being in large office and design bathrooms, for example.

That work was important because I learned about how a work is supervised, the relation with construction companies, the issue of legislation, which is something you must understand, a huge restraint for the project, a real challenge. At the same time, the work in Florida provided me with an opportunity to know a bit more of America. It was very interesting.

That period in NY was a time to discover the city, start to understand the importance of architecture at such a large scale as in the city of NY... Know Mies and a series of important buildings... In fact, at that time, contemporary



architecture was not very interesting in NY, the architecture from the 1950s and 1960s was much more interesting...

Besides, Toshiko was a teacher at Harvard, later she became the head of the architecture department, and I even had the chance to review students' projects. It was a great experience but I felt that "either I stay here for the rest of my life or I have to move".

And as I was experiencing this need to change, the destruction of East Timor occurred. I was at a time of change, planning to come to Lisbon and then I decided that my things would go to Lisbon but I would travel to Timor. In a certain unromantic way, I believed that, after having read (Ruy) Cinatti and having studied at Porto and spent two years designing houses for millionaires, who would only use them for a week, I wanted to find a new reason for my work and a new approach, connected to solving problems that were crucial for people's lives. That was what I had missed in my NY experience.

I came to Lisbon, I stayed here and applied to contests with José Adrião and Pedro Pacheco for a month or two but I rapidly travelled to Timor and started to work.

I was then invited by the United Nations to set up the country's reconstruction plan. With the destruction, after the referendum, a United Nations mission was implemented for the transition of power, to reconstruct the country and organize the territory before a new Timorese administration would take over. Therefore, the mandate was clear: to rebuild basic infrastructures, reconstruct and construct buildings so that a new administration could work - there were no courts, hospitals, schools or prisons - and a structure was needed to conduct all this work. Initially, the scope of this mandate was somewhat difficult to grasp by the UN, the more so because the UN were used to peace-keeping missions and to reconstruct a country and implement a transitional administration is more than a

military and administrative operation. But soon they realized it and that was when I came in. Obviously, because I had already some experience, I had the advantage of being Portuguese and speak the language, I also knew English as a work language, that made everything possible.

We defined a strategy from scratch. First, we conducted a survey of all the destroyed buildings, we analysed possible rehabilitation - many buildings had not only been badly constructed, they had been partly burnt and the structures were deformed, many could not be rehabilitated. However, we made a plan, defined which buildings in the city... We are talking at a very small scale! Timor had 800 thousand people at the time. We are talking about a whole country but it was something relatively small.

And this was not effectively project work. It was a kind of supervision work for which my training as an architect was crucial in order to define a strategy and build what I thought was essential, i.e., build the correct equation. We needed to understand the issues, how to formulate the equation and then try to solve the equation. There were two important things for me: first, everything had to be done in a short period of time - very short because the mission was two years long and we had to have all buildings functional where people would be able to work. Then there was the issue of funding - several funds contributed to the reconstruction, some belonged to the UN, other to the World Bank, and you had to manage them. Besides, there were several types of projects - large scale and smaller scale - and, at a certain point in time, I realized that if all those projects were incorporated in the UN, then we would have public tenders and only large companies would apply, all of them foreign companies, all the funding entering the country would leave the country. So, what I tried to do was define different packages within the UN. What I mean is, I grouped buildings whose reconstruction was more challenging and, in that case, there is no alternative than to assign this work to big companies which could respond rapidly; those buildings whose repair was of a smaller scale would be reconstructed by local companies. There was much

workforce in the country managed by several Indonesian companies, two or three of which had a basic structure. My work was to travel through all the districts and explain to people and draw into action those with a bit of know-how, fostering them to get together and create small companies that could apply to those tenders.

Working for the UN was rather interesting because I had to set up a team and this team included engineers from Nepal, architects from all over the world... Many times, the system sent them to places they knew nothing about, which made setting up the team a rather difficult task. I felt the UN found it hard to find the right people for the right place. And the work could not be done if we could not join these people around a common objective so that they could feel useful. Our work was twofold! Eventually, things improved and gradually the team members were more adequate to the job at hand. Yet, I must say it was a struggle. From the beginning, we wanted to have people from (or who had some connection to) Timor involved, who had some training or experience.

At a second stage, we refurbished schools, a plan funded by donors and managed by the World Bank. Territory occupation was part of Indonesia's plan; political domination was ensured through military presence but mostly through schools, education and the setting up of several companies and industries and the creation of jobs. There were schools and houses in every neighbourhood for the military in Timor... There was a lot of construction from the 1970s until the end of the 20thc, but most of those schools made no sense any more. Therefore, there was a survey to decide which schools would be closed, which could be improved and which could be eliminated. What we did was basically design a plan regarding different project phases and only then was architecture called upon. Up to this moment, we were simply defining minimum standards of construction, technical infrastructures and finishes. In terms of the schools, we were starting from scratch.

There had been another team before, which failed its mission because it had arrived with a predefined plan. And what did I do? I set up a team of people from Timor with architects and engineers I took with me from Portugal and Australia and, in a way, we deconstructed the school model. We tried to understand the models that were already known in the territory, we checked the Indonesian models, other models used by the World Bank in similar situations, previous models, even those used at the time the territory was under Portuguese ruling and we analysed the advantages and disadvantages of each one and how we could create a model that could adapt to the different topographies of the country, one which would result from this discussion and from this project. A model that would be accepted by everyone as the project for a school in Timor, which was what we were doing, really. I kicked off the project but then returned to Portugal. However, that work was done and has been done.

Afterwards, with the UN, we improved the project further because everything had to be very simple to construct. At the same time, we were building the schools we were training the construction teams, improving the quality of the construction made in Timor. Because that was, in fact, what was lacking. The country would not be able to develop if we did not deal with all elements and actions involved in construction. The team I set up became autonomous and after the independence of Timor, I decided to move to Lisbon.

**Did you decide to start your own office then? The moment when you came back to Lisbon? Tell us about that.**

My time in Timor was very intense. We worked from seven in the morning till midnight, every day, for a bit more than two years. It was very intense because there was this huge energy in the city.

I will never forget that, when we arrived, the city still smelled of smoke and fire; the tropical rains made the smell of burnt wood linger and for months that was the smell of the city. Until, one year later, the first birds came. It is an amazing thing! Suddenly, we heard birds in the city, and after two years, the city had really been reborn. And we had not even realized it! It was a very special mission because it brought together very young people who felt driven to action and that brought about the best the UN had to offer. We felt that, because everybody wanted the mission to be successful, we were super driven. And it gives great pleasure to feel that your work has an immediate impact on people's lives. Unlike what happens in an architecture project, which take very long to complete, we knew that our mission there had to be short and that made the results not only immediate but also rewarding; we knew that people's lives had improved and for the better.

Then I came to Lisbon! I had to start my life again, I hadn't been in Lisbon for a long time and I decided to start my own office. I had a small project, a friend's flat... In the next few months right after that I applied for a tender for the Contemporary Art Museum in Elvas with a multidisciplinary team including equipment designer Filipe Alarcão, designer Henrique Cayatte and architect João Regal and we were lucky and won! That was my starting project.

I had little experience in doing personal project, I had always worked in offices so this was, in fact, my first project. And it was a great one! After that, things just happened, I designed a few houses, applied to some tenders and was lucky to win a few...

**That experience in large team coordination (in other offices) makes you want to expand your office or rather the opposite, to keep it small? Is the office you worked for in New York your type of office?**

That is a crucial issue. It is one thing to manage a company or organization for which you have no responsibility in terms of financial management or costs - working for the UN or for any other organization, profit is not our objective, someone will focus on that while you just focus on doing your job - and quite another when you are talking about a big office and you need to understand how to manage everything money wise. However, if that was what I was looking for, a big office, I would have done it. But that was not the case. I have always wanted to have a relatively small office, I can then be involved in all stages of the project, from design to construction supervision and, particularly, in dealing with clients, which is one of my favourite things, one I consider very important. Not that I have anything against big offices, I think it must be great to design huge projects that have a lot of impact but, in fact, small scale is what I want.

**You have told us about your experience as a student, in Porto, where there was a defined methodology and as an Erasmus student in England where there was more freedom. Previous interviewees mentioned that they wanted to give students what they did not have as a student, they try to be the teacher they themselves never had... How have these experiences influenced your teaching?**

I have never wanted to give students what I never had. I think I was lucky to attend a school that provided me with very consistent training, which was in Porto university. It left a mark and I recognize its advantages in the way I design projects, in terms of the methodology; I also recognize that it was oblivious of other possible approaches. Because it left marks, it conditions the way I work; there are many options I do not consider simply because I know that is not how I go about things.

The relation between my experience as a student and my approach as a teacher is rather straightforward. I think it is crucial that students feel that the teacher is



leading research and is guiding their development, it is the teacher who should define and open possibilities for the students. Methodology is often that.

For example, I started teaching 1st year students at Moderna university, at the invitation of professor Ricardo Carvalho, who was also a teacher there. José Adrião also taught at Moderna. Right then I could realize there was a wide scope for research and that it could be conducted right in the 1st year.

The 1st year is, for me, a very special year for a student because, if it is a successful year, if the teacher is good and the student is interested, it is the year we can make students feel fascinated by architecture! It is the year we can leave a seed and that seed will grow as the students learn more and more.

Later I was invited by (Manuel) Graça Dias to come and teach at Autónoma University and I was his assistant. We had very interesting exercises, I developed others and we tried to provide students with different exercises that would allow them to understand architecture's capacity for change. How architecture can, in fact, change people's lives and how a space with different configurations can influence the way we live it... We aim to provide students with the tools that allow them to understand the world around them and how they can change it. This understanding is crucial! Then, we must obviously introduce culture! Architectural culture. They must look at the world around them, not with teenagers' eyes but as young adults in a process of discovery and training for their future profession.

**In the past few years you have started to teach 4th year students, haven't you?**

Yes! The 1st year is very intense! And when we get to a point when we no longer feel 100%, we feel tired, then it is time to change. I thought a change to a different stage of the learning process was important; in the 4th year, students know more



of architecture, they want to do research more (which is not true for 1st year students), so I have been teaching 4th year with professor Nuno Mateus.

We have developed an approach which we deem very stimulating for students – to develop a work methodology on several European cities and, potentially, anywhere in the world. How the territory can be known and understood, how to approach change systems in the city, morphological systems, topography, how we can understand the city initially and then, later from an operational perspective, an approach that is very similar to what is done in an office and thus provide the students with a series of tools that allows them not only to have a work methodology, how to gain the confidence to understand they can work anywhere in the world and have the tools to understand and, from there, design a project. That is, for me, an increasingly more important learning process because, with globalization, we have to be able to work in different places. And I think the school should prepare students for that. Or, at least, make them realize that an architect's place of work is the world. That, I think, is essential.

**Obviously, there have always been architects travelling to different places and countries but, since the 1990s, mobility is very different from before. At the same, what was typically done in an office has also changed. What advice would you give to senior students today? If you completed your degree now, what would you do? What does a student have today that you didn't? What are the tools needed for a student to choose his career path?**

I think the tools are essential. I think we can all delude ourselves into thinking that, with little knowledge, we can go anywhere in the world and do great things but that is not true. It is not true because you need to have rather consistent knowledge and the confidence to arrive at a place and know what you can do and see how you can do what you want to do. Because there are things to be done



everywhere in the world! Now the important thing is to understand what can, in fact, change people's lives and have an impact in your own life.

The advice I give is invest in consistent training. You must have a real project experience in an office you like and that does good quality work. Because that is the basis for looking back and going anywhere in the world and have the confidence to go on new adventures and know other systems. And I think that is crucial because nowadays there is this idea that we can go anywhere, do extremely interesting things that get media attention and that are talked about on the Internet but which have little impact on people's lives. I think that architecture today gets too much media exposure. I think it is wonderful how architecture photography has revolutionized the way architecture is communicated but I think it gets too much media attention, it is almost a parallel discourse. There is a reality, which is architecture, the reality of buildings, which has an impact on people's lives. Another thing is the whole universe that occurs in parallel. And sometimes we are talking about two different things and that is not architecture. Architecture is not a bubble!