BUILDING IN THE SOUTH DOSSIER

Builders from the South:
Ricardo Bak Gordon, Gonçalo Byrne, Manuel Aires Mateus,
Ana Vaz Milheiro, Manuel Graça Dias, Nuno Mateus.
Filipe Mónica, Architect and PhD student at ISCTE

Abstract

Between 27 June and 1 July 2016, the Summer Course "Building in the South", coordinated and organized by Paulo Tormenta Pinto and the Architecture and Urbanism Students Unit (NAU), was held at ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, in the Department of Architecture and Urbanism. In the first days, at the end of the afternoon, a group of guest architects, all of them with professional activity based in the city of Lisbon gave four conferences, offering us their wide theoretical and practical reflection about the territory of the South, more precisely the South of Portugal.

Keywords: Manuel Graça Dias, Ana Vaz Milheiro, Nuno Mateus, Gonçalo Byrne, Manuel Aires Mateus, Ricardo Bak Gordon.
Introduction

The interviews took place just before the conferences given by Ricardo Bak Gordon (born 1967), Ana Vaz Milheiro (born 1968), Manuel Graça Dias (born 1953), Gonçalo Byrne (born 1941), Manuel Aires Mateus (born 1963), and Nuno Mateus (born 1961). The interviews were preceded by an introductory framework, at the end of which the generic question was posed: "What does building in the South mean today?"

All authors took some of their professional work, projects and research to the conferences, framing them around the topic of the South and some of its derivations. On the contrary, the conversations transcribed here were carried out "without a safety net". The guests were challenged to give the interviews on-site just minutes before the presentations, and the results of the conversations - inevitably short – show the authors' most intuitive reflections on the subject. Perhaps it is due to this (or despite this) that the statements collected here reflect a great diversity of concepts and points of view on the question of the South in architecture, its specific importance as a geographic framework, or its role in conferring an intrinsic cultural specificity to the contemporary Portuguese architectural thought. From his experience as an architect and lecturer, Ricardo Bak Gordon spoke of the South as a place, and of the fundamental role that it occupies in the practice of architecture and the training of architects in Portugal. But he also mentioned how Portugal’s position in the largest European South contributes decisively to the advancement of the discipline in our country.

Gonçalo Byrne and Manuel Aires Mateus put the question of light at the centre of reflection, placing the history of painting and architecture side by side in the way they work with it, adapt to it, and how architecture finds in it contributions and strategies to affirm its own identity. On the other hand, Ana Vaz Milheiro and
Manuel Graça Dias, respectively, placed on the table two incisive and disconcerting dismantling views of the South “factor” as a historical and cultural identity agent of the Portuguese architecture and as the determining engine in defining the architectural object, in a common condemnation of possibly more simplistic and univocal interpretations of a complex reality. Finally, Nuno Mateus, from the extensive work of the ARX Portugal studio, told us about the different geographical contexts where they operate and how, together with other aspects, they inform and nurture their architecture projects.

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Framework

Filipe Mónica (FM): I start with a premise, which says that we tend to see the south from the north. We live in the northern hemisphere, where the largest terrestrial crust of the planet is located outside the water, where most of the world's population lives, and where a much larger percentage of the population has minimal living conditions compared to the southern hemisphere.

The south, seen from here, from the perspective of a European, Western culture, is always the "other". Portugal was conquered to the Moors from north to south. It did so with the support of the crusaders from northern and central Europe, who also went southward to the Holy Land with a view to conquering the infidel, the "other". This was in the thirteenth century.

The colonization of the world by Europeans began in the following century. Unlimited territories were conquered, which were administratively and conceptually infinite due to their size and especially due to the distance. Always to the south, from here to there.
Taking a leap to the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, within the limits of a neoclassical and enlightened Europe, we had another form of idealization of the south. The pilgrimages to Italy made by the young, cultured and wealthy elite from the centre and north of Europe became educational and artistic rituals of passage towards the roots of the western civilization. These voyages were the European Grand Tours Goethe (1749-1832) referred to in his "Italian Journey". And here too the South is the place "beyond" (in this case, beyond the Alps). And, therefore, it is a place of fascination, an innocent place. And Italy is the first-born, distant land. But it is above all else, “another” place. A place where one does not stay, where one comes from, a place where, as the word "tour" suggests, one “returns” to.

Sociologist Boaventura Sousa Santos (born 1940) has been studying this south phenomenon from a contemporary, postcolonial viewpoint. He tells us about the south created from this Eurocentric culture that sees it as an expansion and colonization territory. A south based on a hierarchical premise: the south after the north, below the north. And from this point of view, the south is often the irrelevant place, the incomprehensible place.

George Kubler (1912-1996), the American historian (who also came from the north), invented another "south" for us Portuguese (especially Portuguese architects), the south of Plain architecture, by making it precisely understandable, that is, nameable, the synthesis of what internal conjunctural

factors and external influences produced in Portuguese architecture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: a pragmatic and modest architecture, a useful and economical, undressed, white, clear and stripped-down construction.

The south is thus a relative place. There is almost always a south, wherever we are, another south. A south that, by contrast, is always a place of idealization and fascination, but also a rough and coarse place. In many points of view, it is the endless place, where space increases and time expands.

This introduction precedes, and in part contradicts, the south that we will examine here, which is our concrete south, the south of Portugal. It is also a "beyond" territory, Beyond-the-Tagus, which, similarly to what was mentioned above, encloses the phenomena of the other "souths" within our culture and our scale.

The territory of this south spreads out, the time widens, the climate becomes harsh and the nature rough, due to the horizontality of the ground and the verticality of the sun. Eduardo Souto de Moura (born 1952) tells us: "when I arrived to the south I had to make windows, if not one would roast". Álvaro Siza (born 1933) seizes the long time and the wide scale of the Malagueira territory, in Évora, in the design of the typologies, the blocks and the "aqueduct". And Victor Figueiredo (1929-2004), on the other hand, gave us in Polo da Mitra, also in Évora, the weight and the thickness in an unequal combat - because the resources are scarce here - with the roughness of the place.

We may say, perhaps, that the south poses us, in the crudest way, archetypal questions: about the limit and its absence, thickness and materiality, the essence

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of habitation and ways of life, territory and landscape. And, not least important, about form, light and shadows, the south being the place where Corbusier’s definition (1887-1965) of architecture as the “masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light”7 gains a special meaning.

The question that arises is not so much whether there is an essence of the south today, but whether it is possible to name a specificity in this act of “building in the south”? In your opinion, how does this work in this particular context from within, from its specificities?

What does building in the south mean today?

3.

Ricardo Bak Gordon

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RBG: I think a lot is said in the introduction, which, extensive and rich as it is, already tells us much about the specificities of the south. All of us in Portugal, in the north and in the south, have an education where the question of place has always been considered as a fundamental component of architectural thinking. That is, we Portuguese, who studied in Portugal, today continue to consider the place as one of the fundamental parts of the architecture equation. I often speak about the question of looking at the programme and the place, and this programme and place premise is a subjective equation, which always has these two components. From this perspective, it is very important for me to come to a seminar and to start from this geographic condition of the place - the South - and try to understand, in fact, what this place contains, or how this place compromises, conditions, or informs the project. And in that introduction much was already said. There is no doubt that there is a condition, even from the point of view of man himself and the way he inhabits the place, the space and the territory, which is different in the south and in the north. In the south there is a radicalization of the man's relationship with the place and the landscape. That idea of man against the world or against nature is more present in the south than in the north, probably because in the north there is a greater fusion between the condition of man and the condition of the place, stone, granite, landscape, green, which somehow melts the whole place a little, contaminates it all. And in the more arid and drier South, there is a great radicalization and clarification of what is the construction of man, his habitat ... And then this dry landscape, which was very well described there. And this continues to happen today. Today we have more technical conditions, we probably have a globalization of values that has not yet been able, and hopefully will not be able to do so soon, to cancel what is also the place. And a place that continues to operate, in a perspective of continuing to feel that there are construction values of the South that are going to be maintained, like those of the artificial construction, of the geometrically simple and pure forms, of the light, of a very contained and filtered interior-exterior relation ... Eduardo
[Souto de Moura] spoke of opening windows, of opening windows to the detriment of the absence of an ornamental cloth, in the sense of closing up the construction.

I continue to think that all these values are important: the tectonic sense of the constructions, the filtration, this filtration that is both climatic and also very sociological, in the sense of the condition of man in his last place, and which then applies and expands to the other constructions, to the public buildings, the plain architecture, the churches ... and also what we did later.

The architectures of Olhão, southern Portugal, for example. The collective architecture that, however, continues to be able to operate the same sense of architecture that is more intimate and more individual. I think these values hold, and can continue to build architecture. And what we can imagine, which is a reflection on the evolution of architecture in other directions, probably directions that may even be relatively experimental in the most contemporary sense of the word, do not question or need to question these fundamental and foundational values of construction, which I think are perfectly valid today, and probably in the future.

**FM: At this point I establish a connection with the question of materiality and construction. Can we say that there is a specificity in the South? What do you see as being different in the South?**

**RBG:** I think that there is an important aspect here: all together we are the South. We, the whole of Portugal, are already the South of another region that you also mentioned, which is Europe, rich, informed and central, which makes us all together the South. And from the point of view of the way one looks at construction, which I recognize in Portuguese architecture, Portuguese architects have the capacity to believe that architecture can evolve continuously, and there is no anxiety or anguish of having to invent the world every day in the morning. And this applies very much to the building system. We make architecture and
believe that architecture can evolve continuously. That is, we admit and believe in the construction systems and construction processes that our previous generation peers used, and so on, and we think this is enough stuff to go forward and continue to investigate. And this means very simply that masonry walls, good carpentry, woodwork, metalwork, glass, paintings, and so on are building matter that is more than sufficient. It is not by chance, it is not only a matter of training, it is also a question of capacity and scope. That is, we do not have technology, we do not have industry ... and all this is part of the South, it characterises the South. And that does not prevent us from working hard and earning recognition from our external peers, in the sense that we are doing research and we are evolving regarding architectural thinking. And yet, it is an ongoing evolution. At one point in my life, I had a particular relationship with Brazil through the project of the Residence of the Portuguese Embassy and later through the relationship with Paulo Mendes da Rocha (born 1928) and with friends of our generation, such as MMBB, UNA, and Alvaro Puntoni (born 1965) ... And so I went to Brazil a lot for a while, and I was very impressed with modern Brazilian architecture’s capacity to achieve great results with very few resources ... For example, there were partners very close to us in Spain in the 1990s who used any material that was invented anew in huge amounts...

**FM: and also reinvented them...**

**RBG: ...**

To stretch it to the limit! And I think we all agree that since then not much has come out of it. They were so thirsty ... why? Because they had too much industry supporting them, and then they were almost swept away by the very industry of

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9 MMBB (São Paulo, Brazil) currently consists of Fernando de Mello Franco, Marta Moreira and Milton Braga.

10 UNA arquitectos (São Paulo, Brazil) is currently composed of Cristiane Muniz, Fábio Valentim, Fernanda Barbara, and Fernando Viégas.
building materials and technologies. As for us, we do not suffer from this problem, so we have been working continuously, and I think until now we can say that we have all had our path here .... It is a country where architecture is alive and will continue to reinvent itself!

4. Gonçalo Byrne + Manuel Aires Mateus

GB: Building in the South is explained in this text, and after an opening with such a wide range of topics, it is difficult to summarize.... Building in the South implies, in fact, the perspective of those who come from the north, that is, how to build in the periphery does not work if there is no concept of centre. Now, what has traditionally been building in the South? In terms of architecture, obviously it has been a constant that to a certain extent the southern part of Europe (because that is what we are talking about and that is where we are from, not to speak of Lisbon, which, in a certain way, is already in the south) is mainly a Mediterranean context. A Mediterranean context that is defined by many of the issues addressed in the introduction, namely in terms of traditional archetypes, mass tectonics,
compression tectonics, excavation tectonics ... A building process that, more than opening windows, as Eduardo ([Souto de Moura]) puts it, is based on "digging" patios, creating patios. Because the architecture of the South is an architecture relatively impenetrable to light, except from certain mechanisms that normally point to a reflected and indirect light, because there is obviously also the question of thermal inertia. The architecture of the South, the Mediterranean architecture, is closely linked to a type of anthropomorphism, of construction that tries to hold people’s lives or shelter them from these issues, and which have to do with obviously cultural, climatic, material, and light issues, among others. There is a classic circumstance, incidentally not mentioned in the introduction, which is when the Romanesque is "attacked" by the Gothic, which does not fully enter the South, the Mediterranean South, because there is excess light. Today, one of the myths of contemporary architecture is transparency, which in a way completely subverts this notion. What is curious is that a little like what happened, for example, in the evolution of the history of painting, in which light gradually overlaps shape, and colour overlaps drawing (and this is very evident when one examines the development from primitive painting to Gothic painting and Renaissance painting, and especially the transition to Impressionism, and when [William] Turner (1775-1851) arrives and the "explosion" is such that no there is no longer shape or colour, there is just light), one can clearly see a progression of light over shadow in contemporary culture. Hence the myth of transparency and all that other matters ... So the question is: what does this South represent in the historical myth, and when I say historical myth I am always talking about the past, what does this South represent from a perspective whereby the place continues, in my view, to be extremely important? We live in a multicultural world ... so if you ask me what the South is today, I would say that it is something that is under construction, that picks up on many of these constants that come from history, but obviously it is adding another type of conquest, which may come in at any other time ...
MAM: There is one interesting thing about the idea of the South, which is an idea by Susan Sontag (1933-2004), who says that every South has its north or every north has its South, so it is always a relative position\textsuperscript{11}. We always have the north, to which we attribute a value, some form of development, internationalization, globalization, and we attribute to the South an almost instinctively localism value. I think that the great interest we have in the South today is the learning of this localism. It is learning this idea that a new centrality is created from a specific condition. What we are seeing today in the interest about the South is a search for a clear identity, because this clear identity means a form of universal projection, which, in my view, is more interesting as experience than the less judicious acceptance of more global values. And this for architecture is very interesting in terms of research itself, because we focus on experiences and on a story that somehow can provide us with clues to a reaction in this context, but also clues to moving them to other contexts. But I have many doubts about this South-North thing. I really like Susan Sontag’s idea that this is just a relative position. There is always a north to the north of us and a South to the South of us. Therefore, we must pay attention to this, that in each place we have these two things, we must truly know how to decipher them, decipher their values and their chances of influencing our work.

FM: We are here to concretely address the South of Portugal, this specific geographic area. Both of you have a practice centred on the fundamentals of the discipline, of the design and construction, as well as extensive experience in the field of housing, both collective and single-family. Can we say today that there is a specific inhabiting of this South? Is there a way to inhabit it? Is living in the South different from living in the North?

MAM: I think Goncalo answered that very well. Living in the South has to do with the choice, or the idea, of privatizing a relationship with the sky, therefore with a light, with an "explosion" of very direct and vertical light. This is the idea of the identity of living in the South, the idea of living around the patio, as Goncalo said. We do not build using glass, which is one of the myths of today, the transparency we have is a real transparency, and it is a transparency of emptiness. I like this idea, because the transparency of glass is an ambition that historically begins with the great exhibitions of Paris and London, which goes through the great ambition of the virtual image, but has never been translated into a truth, it has always been a kind of mirage. This idea of the relationship between the South and light is a very authentic relationship, because it is a relationship that has to do with history, the whole history of the house-patio, which crosses all cultures - Roman, Arab, all our cultures, everything that has always influenced us - and that at the end of the day gives us this idea. I think Goncalo put it very well, it is a very right relationship with this idea of the "explosion" of light. But in that sense of a true and private relationship with the patio. And I think that is the lesson of construction in the South (which I really think should extend to the north, I think it should not just extend to the South).

GB: Can I just add a small issue regarding what Manuel said, and to this issue of relativism? It is obvious that, for example, those living in the southern hemisphere have an opposite version. This in fact is a heliocentric problem that has to do with the presence of the sun, as the attraction of the sun is made from South to north. But what I wanted to say was a curious thing about this question of the evolution and conquest of light. The discovery of light, historically, when speaking of the transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic, is something that is done mainly from the North. The North is eager to have light because it has little of it. Because

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12 Paris Universal Exhibition, 1889.
13 London Universal Exhibition, 1851.
the Mediterranean - I agree with Manuel - has much more of a problem framing the sky, or a light that is conditioned in order to enter the house, than that of an opening to the light. Just look at the English neoclassical architecture. English neoclassical architecture has windows four times larger than its Italian neoclassical counterpart. Take a look at John Carr’s hospital (1723-1807) in Porto\textsuperscript{14}, for example. Or at Colégio de Jesus\textsuperscript{15} in Coimbra, for example, which has a Pombaline facade made by an Englishman, and oversized sash windows (when you arrive in Coimbra you realize that only an Englishman could be behind this. We know who he was, he was a military engineer, William Elsden (? -1779)). Because, in fact, that is the paradox. When the Gothic reaches the South, it begins to be rejected. It does not penetrate because there is too much light. This transparency that we see today, for example, and which today is a universal recipe, when it enters countries like Saudi Arabia is total absurdity. It is absurd from the energetic point of view. And this paradoxical situation seems interesting to me. Obviously, these two environments generate different cultures, historically.

**MAM:** There is something very amusing Gonçalo, let me just add this.... It is very funny that in classic painting the representation of the light is in the north, which is horizontal. It is a strange surprise, we do not understand horizontal light. No one represents light in a horizontal way...

**GB:** Except for intimate interior painting, we have the case of Georges de La Tour (1593-1652), in France, but this is already mannerism ... and Caravaggio (1571-1610), in Italy...

**MAM:** But our idea of light is a vertical thing, but not for a Nordic, for whom it is a horizontal thing...

\textsuperscript{14} John CARR. Santo António Hospital. Porto. 1769-?.

\textsuperscript{15} William ELSDEN. Colégio de Jesus of the University of Coimbra. 1772-?.
GB: Clearly.

5.
Ana Vaz Milheiro + Manuel Graça Dias

MGD – First declaration of interests: I have never built in the South! I have never built south of Lisbon, except the Theatre in Almada\textsuperscript{16}...

AVM: Which is already beyond the Tagus ... on the other side of the Tagus ... on the wrong bank of the Tagus (laughter).

MGD: This mythical South with the so-called flat ground... all this conversation is fine, I have nothing against it, but one can also say the opposite. It can be said that Humanity was born in the South, came from South Africa, rose through

Europe and then moved on to Asia, and to America, and went down to the South America ...

We can make up much rhetoric about it! Surely there are immense inequalities, perceptible when we compare the Northern Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere (although we have Australia counterbalancing it, in some way). But it will be a story that has to do with economics, not necessarily with architecture, as far as I know ... The point in which it involves architecture is in the eventual fight against exclusion, in the fight against scarcity through architecture, for sure. Certainly different architectural programmes in the Southern Hemisphere ...

These are very broad themes.

Let us imagine that we are talking about the poorest area in Africa, poorest places in Latin America: here yes, there will certainly be constraints to the architectural activity. But architecture, from my point of view, is always a response to the conditions we are offered. I find it somehow demagogic to introduce distinctions. It is what makes [Alejandro] Aravena (born 1967) a hero because he builds for the poor and someone else a villain because he builds for the rich; most likely [Norman] Foster (n. 1935)!

Architecture always has a problem and this problem encompasses many variables, including, of course, all the economic conditions surrounding it. Certainly we have some room for manoeuvre to suggest beyond what is asked of us, and it is in the quality of what surpasses what has been entrusted to us that the quality of architecture lies. And in the adequacy of this excess, of that little extra. And probably with many varied nuances, depending on the area of the globe where one is operating. I would not like to value architectures from the North and South in the perspective of the difficulties that many countries in the southern hemisphere are experiencing. And when, finally, the emphasis is placed on southern Europe and southern Portugal, and on the option of closing windows or opening glazed spaces ... well, we are dealing with a problem that is also present in the Southern Hemisphere. Of course, in Brazil it makes no sense to open large glazed areas facing the north (now, that I have students from the two
"hemispheres", I am always reminding them of this duality: all the reasoning that makes sense in the Northern Hemisphere should be thought "in reverse" when they reach the Southern Hemisphere...

**AVM:** But the opposite also makes sense...

**MGD:** In short, the "modern tropical" was born in Brazil and was exported to Europe from Brazil...

**AVM:** From the South to the north ...

**MGD:** And also from the South to the north! Nuno Teotónio Pereira (1922-2016) once said: "We spent a great deal of time believing in rules of the type, 'turn the bedrooms to the east, the living rooms to the west, the kitchens to the north and run away from the South'; This was the silliest thing we could ever have accepted! But some guys from northern Europe came to us with these theories, and we all got on board, I just realized the stupidity of what I was doing when I lived in a house in Lisbon, facing west. Actually, in Portugal it is not especially comfortable to live facing west or east. And, in certain situations, it may be interesting to be facing north. It will also have to do with personal idiosyncrasies: a collaborator found it scandalous to hear me say that I really enjoyed having the bedroom facing north (and I like it!), or the west (because I do not intend to be there at that time), because I do not like having the sun in the windows when I wake up! Having the bedroom facing the east, for me, is a very unpleasant situation. Of course, in winter, there will probably be another tolerance, and we will say something else; it's all very personal and private and quite variable. But for what matters to us, which is to build in the South of Portugal, surely some care will have to be taken, in terms of relation with the climate. But it will not be much more than that. It is as stupid to
resort to high-tech in any little village in the United Kingdom as in any little village in the Alentejo, and not because it is in the North or South. It depends a lot on the contexts, it depends a lot on the kind of urban involvement we have, and it depends on the money that has been allocated to the job, on the symbolic goal of what we want to build. And in the middle of all this, there must also be a reason for not turning glass curtain walls to the sun! There are specificities imposed by the climate, I have no doubt about it, but this does not justify organising a conference on this! It would be like having a symposium about "Building with a lot of money" or "Building with little money" or "Building by the sea" or "Building on an island" ... We can say what we want, but we will only be referring to one of the stuff!

AVM: Yes, they are excuses.

MGD: In each one of these activities one has to consider all the others; this is, above all, what I would like to emphasize! Before (or in parallel with) trying to get the best exposure, we must take into account what is around us, what the lot looks like, how the building next to it is, how the building in front of it looks like, what street is that, how can we make that street look more interesting than it is. There are "thousands" of things that go through a project! How will the apartments they are asking me to make look like? Where will I put the entrance? How will I put the exit? What will that object be at the end of the day? With this money, what do I do? There are so many variables! And then, in the middle of it all, it's facing north, or it's facing south, or it's facing west.... We have to solve all these problems. And the best orientation is one of them. And there are no rules on this! There is no telling: in the South, you will need to whitewash the walls and make small spans because Architect Souto de Moura said that spans in the Alentejo were small...
AVM: That they need to open windows.

MGD: Of course! But to the north, you also have to know how to "open windows"! I also do not find it interesting to open shop windows to the north! It depends, doesn’t it? In a domestic-urban context, opening "shop windows" is like Jacques Tati’s (1907-1982) film. It doesn't matter if it is to the North or to the South: it is "stupid" from the point of view of the intimacy that the house should guarantee! From here we have an endless speech!

AVM: I will try to say what I think about it. Portuguese architects basically have a vision of the territory, of their national territory, which still has to do with the country that the geographer Orlando Ribeiro (1911-1997) gave us. Orlando Ribeiro really addressed this geography between the north and a South very clear, a north of the country and a South of the country. A granite north, more densely populated (which, of course, is not quite so because if we go to Trás-os-Montes the premises change). But he drew us an image, a geography. Then the architects of the Inquiry17 clang to this geography and reinforced it, bringing the materials that prove it. Because obviously the Inquiry, like everything we do, was something that was already defined. The conclusions had been drawn previously, and the images sought, intuited. Those that were disclosed and selected were intuited, and place in those two books, which constitute even the book of the North and the book of the South (even this geographical division was the division that the geographer gave us, who was in fact an extraordinary man). And the architects accepted this circumstance, and, more than that, they emphasized it, and gave it the images. And from there on, also, generically speaking, they practiced it, that is, they emphasized this mark even more. This is a DNA that we all have, even when we no longer read Orlando Ribeiro, and even

when we no longer read, except in a mythical way, the Inquiry, or not even know what the Inquiry is. We all talk about it, and most people do not know what it is, in fact. But it does exist, it is something mythical that is inside us, that we carry. When in 1972 (later published in 1978) George Kubler (1912-1996) looked at us, the country was undergoing a very special moment. There was a revolution that brought us into the modern world, to a certain modernity of which we only had more or less fragmented predictions, of which eventually only some elites had access to, but not the majority of the Portuguese. There was a tremendous shock, which was the decolonization, and suddenly, we have a country that was a "country-empire", with a presence in various territories, and that South disappeared, we are left destitute of that South, and we had to build another entity, after 1974. And George Kubler gave us something we needed, which is why he became so important to us, and the idea of a plain architecture becomes in fact an emotional factor for architects. Most Portuguese architects support the idea that there was a period in our history where we had an architecture that worked with the shortage, which was economical, unornamented, that always rejected the more playful, more excessive, richer dimension of architecture, which is not true! Even the George Kubler period included things that did not fit this theory, this narrative. The history of the 1970s and 1980s is a history of narrative construction. Nowadays our historians have even contradicted the research dimension and the concepts that Kubler dealt with. Only it’s so strong for us!

**MGD:** So flattering...
AVM: It is so strong for us, architects, the idea that our architecture is Plain, that it has a category, that it has personality, that it has a specificity ... that even if the historians tell us that it does not have, or that it is not really like that, we don't care! They can keep their positivist history to themselves, and we keep our Plain architecture! It is part of our affectivity, it is part of what we consider a field of expression, a demonstration of our Portuguese spirit.

There is also another very interesting phenomenon in this period, apart from the "Critical Regionalism"\(^\text{18}\) (in which we are suddenly placed in a category of "eccentric" beings, we do not belong and we are critical of the centre), and it more or less coincides with this discovery, which is the moment when in fact Portuguese architecture somehow reacts to what is happening outside. There is a moment of affirmation of a certain national specificity and of a certain locality, which the 1980s promoted, and which will, in fact, be the winning faction, let us say, of the history of the architectural culture of that period. Therefore, all the movements, all the directions that point outwards, will be retracted during the 1980s in the name of this Portuguese specificity, of this idea of our Critical Regionalism, of this idea that Portuguese architects would deal better with it because of our cultural specificity, with the themes of locality, the scarcity of materials and technologies (a certain idea that comes from [Nuno] Portas (b.. 1934) that we are technologically not very effective, and therefore the best is not to go that way\(^\text{19}\)). And so this obviously favours the discourse supporting those poor technologies, which even Kubler says have always been present in our history, which are not a novelty, and are specific to us. He speaks of our specificity! This is highly flattering, as Manuel [Graça Dias] says. But it is also the

\(^{18}\) Term introduced by Alexander TZONIS and Liane LEFAIVRE in 1981 and disseminated by Kenneth FRAMPTON from 1983 onwards. See

right moment, it finds our own history, the moment we are living in the 1970s, in the 1980s, and will really determine what is the trend that later becomes dominant in Portuguese culture: the white, the horizontal, the flat, the seemingly smooth, without excess, the anti-ornamental...

**MGD:** Opposed to Siza’s plasticity, always...

**AVM:** Yes, yes... no doubt, but all this becomes a kind of idea of what Portuguese architecture is. So everyone is waiting for a Portuguese architect to make a smooth, white wall over a landscape that is more or less empty, still wild, still rude because it is not surrounded by technological artefacts...

**MGD:** And if surrounded by cork oaks, even better!

**AVM:** And, of course, the landscape of the Alentejo is not yet "spoiled" by the emigrant, who manifests himself exuberantly, and evidently rejects this idea of being poor - because for him the stone wall is a pauper’s wall, and therefore he plasters it and places the signs of his well-deserved social and economic rise on it... The South is not yet "spoiled," so to speak, with these signs, and suddenly becomes a kind of mythic landscape to which we all adhere...

**FM:** And resists until now in our imagination...

**AVM:** And resists in our imagination, no doubt...

**MGD:** In such a way that making houses for the upper class in the middle of an Alentejo hill surrounded by cork oaks can really be considered a major step in the career of an architect: environment friendly, friend of people and of "regionalism"!
AVM: Cultures need mythical dimensions. And the South is our mythical dimension. Because even Kubler's Plain architecture is not only the architecture of the South. But it is a construction that invaded our schools, invaded our criticism, and even gave us an identity that put us on the map. And everyone is obviously very surprised when one is Portuguese and does not work on the dimension of this imaginary. Now, however, we must have a vision a little more critical of what the South is. This South is not so homogeneous or uniform, nor is it so specific, as unique as it has become in our imagination. And that’s what is interesting. For example, if we look at the most interesting works of some architects who are very associated with the South, for example, the swimming pools by [João Luís] Carrilho da Graça20 (b. 1952), and even those first works before the pools. If we go to Vidigueira we see [Goncalo] Byrne (b.1941)21.... We see that they are works that, being in the South and apparently working with these materials, do not seem to fall into this kind of Portuguese mythical projection. On the contrary, they throw clues in other directions, in other much more complex dimensions. Because the problem, which I think Manuel [Graça Dias] has with this, and that I also have a little bit (I, unlike Manuel, like myths very much, and I'm always trying to find the next), is that one cannot have too simplistic a view of things. And the white stone wall over the harsh Alentejo landscape is not Portuguese architecture. It is not, nor has it ever been! It is much more complex than that. And just to finish: first, civilization was born in the Fertile Crescent, which is far from the north. And then, as Manuel quite rightly said, there are indeed inverse movements that actually have to do with the capacity of cultures to reinvent themselves. Brazil, or Latin America, for example. The ability to reverse the colonizing matrix, which is what modern Brazilian architects do. They took this matrix, and so confused us that we no longer know who invented modern architecture. We do not know if the architects of the vanguards of the

1920s did it, or if it was Lúcio Costa (1902-1998) and Óscar Niemeyer (1907-1912) who invented it when they made the building of the Ministry of Education and Health\textsuperscript{22}. It is these dimensions and nuances which then fuel these successive myths.

6.

Nuno Mateus

NM: It is a broad theme ... I would say that there is no South, only “Souths” ... more specific ... The generic South, seen from our point of view, is always the place of light intensity and the place of scarcity, which will be necessary and closely linked because in one way or another the wild intensity of the light is reflected in nature, in the scarcity of resources that are then used in buildings. The South has a condition that differentiates it from the north regarding the necessity and the thought of the architectural space, which has to do with the notion of a certain modesty and the search for an interiority, different from the construction of the territories in the North, which due to the scarcity of light, forces

\textsuperscript{22} Lúcio COSTA, Ministry of Education and Health. Rio de Janeiro. 1936-1945
us to open the spaces externally a lot more. There are other variables that are also very specific. The landscape is one of them. The South in which we have operated is essentially a coastal South, which is very different from an inland South in terms of the relief, the nature, and the sand...the presence or the proximity to the sea. In the cases of the projects that we have been working on, these factors have been very striking in the search for the definition of the architectural space. We have not had so much experience in the interior territory, where this introspection and protection turns out to be much stronger. Evidently, the stripping that results from scarcity, and necessarily from an idea of implicit economy, also ends up taking us very much to a structuring idea of essence, and to this tension between essence and abstraction, and to a very narrow choice criterion of what we think and define in terms of space and form. I do not know...the theme is too broad...

FM: In your work you pay special attention to the territory, to the broad context in which you construct. There is always a territorial reference. Obviously this is not specific to the South, but given the specificity of the South, how does it influence your projects?

NM: The notion of territory is fundamental to us, as for most architects. The impact of a building goes far beyond the threshold or lot because it interacts with a much wider territory. And often knowing how to position itself in the territory is the great performance of a building. For example, it is what motivated the search in a case that I bring today to this presentation, which happens to be in the north, which is the Costa Nova Health Centre and Socio-Cultural Centre\textsuperscript{23}, which places us specifically in a certain type of territory and in a wood building culture, but especially in a wider territorial context, which is the relationship between the

\textsuperscript{23} ARX Portugal. Costa Nova Health Centre and Socio-Cultural Centre. Ilhavo. 2015-2016.
Aveiro lagoon and the Costa Nova sea, and a particular urban settlement with its back to the sea, facing the lagoon. And the building seeks to decode this inversion and set us against an apparently hidden coastline. But evidently that happens in the situations we have had, of houses that are much exposed to the light, and are therefore closed up in the South, and opened up in the north, or because the territory is more interesting from this point of view, or because the quality of the light itself is softer and steadier throughout the day and allows types of opening that a South facing house simply does not allow.

**FM:** Interpreting your research, which is very clearly portrayed in the exhibition you had in the CCB\(^{24}\): there is great research of the shape, a research of the object in its relations with itself, with its programme, with its function. But also, obviously, with this question of the exterior and the territory. Can one say that in the South, all this research results in a different form than in the north, that is, that this results in a specificity?

**NM:** What we observe in our country’s popular architecture, and generalizing a little, is that in the North the architectural materials are generally more resistant, they are materials that are apparent and give us textures and a microscale of the surfaces that the South does not have, because it typically has architectures made of poorer and more fragile materials, made of plain planes, with rammed earth wall construction that has to be continuously protected with plaster and refer us to abstract surfaces where the light changes multiply. In the north, the way of trimming the stone, of cutting etc., introduces a character that the architecture in the South traditionally does not have. Therefore, this also results in a perception of stripping, of essentiality and economy. It is evidently linked to

its own resources. Today it is clear that we can build a concrete house anywhere. But we are not talking about this dimension... it is the appropriateness, the natural rootedness of architecture that we observe in the records of time ... The South is therefore the territory of the light changes, which themselves construct a narrative of the experience of space, self-nourished and very contained in terms of resources, of incredible telluric and experiential beauty! The rest almost seems to be excessive. As architects, it stimulates us to be also the filters of the thought of the new constructions, of the various programmes, of the various amounts of information given to us, which we have to synthesize, decant, and make choices...Because the architecture of the South, in Alentejo and the Algarve, is itself very synthetic. And it is very interesting to see how it responds historically to a certain type of human activities, which result from the man’s subsistence relation with the territory: the Algarve, for example, with its flat roofs to dry the fish and the fruits, to collect the scarce water in cisterns etc., which generates very simple architectures, but very effective and adequate to the needs.

FM: Do you see yourselves as architects of the South? I ask because your training was obtained in Lisbon, but then you, Nuno especially, exited immediately in search of other references and other universes that are clearly far from this South... 

NM: Travelling is always a means to find ourselves ... I needed to go to New York to realize that I was fundamentally Catholic (not necessarily an individual who goes to church but someone who has a cultural education from birth and who relies on certain values that are only evident when confronted with friends who are Jews, or Buddhists, or Muslims, or belong to other faiths, etc.), and that our identity rests heavily on a number of basic teachings that build our structure of

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thinking, of acting, of behaving, things we do instinctively without realizing ... Regarding architecture, I very evidently see it from a certain point of view, but it is clear that we seek to train and be trained to look specifically at the places where we operate, that is, to change our point of view constantly. One sees other things. The architecture that we have nowadays is circumstantially very concentrated in Lisbon, it was never the case, but at the moment it is almost all in Lisbon. But what has been done is scattered, much of it is in the north: Ílhavo, Aveiro, Porto... but also in the South. We have been all over the country and we try to look at it in its specific forms in each context.

**FM:** But in this operation in these "north" contexts, is it possible to say "we are architects of the South working on them?"

**NM:** I would like to think that we are not, that we can be relatively flexible, or permeable, to an interpretation of the values around us and to which a person holds on specifically and seeks their adequacy, or who interprets them as being suitable, as the rooting agents of something. This is the kind of positioning we are usually interested in. Our work tends not to be self-absorbing. We do not have a recurrent repertoire, we do not insist on a certain idea...we seek this availability for what we find and seems specific and natural to us. Not that it is always clearly achieved...because in spite of everything there is accumulated learning, a double-edged sword...

**FM:** It is hard to see this when we are in, but we can say that the architects of the South, like Souto de Moura, when operating in northern Europe are architects of the South, they remain architects of the South...
NM: But when they get to Basel, a glass building is made, like the one [Álvaro] Siza (b. 1933) made, his "Grand Verre"\(^{26}\), which is perhaps the place where he made his single glass building, and where it makes full sense. I think this availability towards a versatile answer is not unexpected because Siza has always accustomed us not to expect a certain thing from him. In fact, this is what is expected of him, this suitability to the context, which is what he has insisted on teaching us... And this dimension of architecture interests me a lot, rather than a certain fixed idea of branding Portuguese architecture, possibly of the South. Of course, our conversation has been very focused on the geographical context, the South as a geographical context, because there are other references, other nourishments for architecture beyond geography...

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\(^{26}\) Álvaro SIZA. Virchow Building 6, Campus Novartis. Basle, 2005-2010.