

Interview with architect João Luís Carrilho da Graça

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It is with great pleasure that we interview architect João Luís Carrilho da Graça. Welcome! We would like you to start by telling us a little bit about your education, the most relevant professors you had and the exercises you did at university that you consider most marking.

Firstly, I would like to thank you for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to return to this university and the department I founded. I entered university before the 25th April 1974. I had some interesting professors, such as Lagoa Henriques, Pitún - Francisco Keil do Amaral, the son of Keil do Amaral -, but my experience at university was not very interesting as the school standard was mediocre. I started working while at university, which also left me little free time. The first day I attended classes while in my fourth year was the 25th of April 1974, the day of the revolution! From that day onwards, things changed, a student committee was formed and we made a list of those professors we would like to have, architects such as Manuel Tainha and José Varanda. And we made that happen, we restructured the school and I really enjoyed having Manuel Tainha as a professor. Manuel Graça Dias and José Manuel Fernandes were two of my classmates, with whom I founded the architecture department at UAL in 1998.

Why did you decide to study architecture?

I don't know, I cannot pinpoint a reason for my choice. Ever since I was little I have wanted to be an architect. But I do not know whether I would be one if I had to choose today. Being an architect entails a series of elements I was not aware of before becoming one. There are a series of compromises and restraints; what we imagine and aim to create is different from what is actually built. This causes frustration and dissatisfaction.

A few days ago, I saw a report on TV on surfing. The surfer that was being interviewed spoke about surfing with such a joy and pleasure that I thought architects should be more like surfers. In fact, I even talked about this with some colleagues. We should watch the waves and be ready to adjust our body

so as to choose the right moment to catch the wave. We don't hear the surfer complaining because the wave is too big or too strong! Architects are always complaining... It has become a way of life. Instead, we should see the world as if it were the sea, we must learn to accept the sea, realize which are the right waves and keep ourselves afloat.

We have increasingly less political relevance and a less proactive role in society. This lessens our ability to understand the world around us. People don't ask us for an opinion. For example, much has been discussed on housing in Portugal but I have not seen any architect involved in the discussion. In the 1980s, social housing was an issue in Portugal. And who discussed and intervened in the matter? Architects - Nuno Portas, Teotónio Pereira, Vítor Figueiredo, Gonçalo Byrne, among others.

Architects have gradually lost relevance in several areas of society and that has decreased the relevance of the profession. Doctors consider themselves and are considered experts whose technical knowledge supports their decisions; architects today no longer view themselves or are viewed that way. And nobody has taken on the role architects used to have. There is this idea that the Architect Association will eventually take it on but it has not managed to do so.

In our interviews for estudoprévio we have often been told that architects have resigned from discussing the city. Was this somehow your proposal when you made your exhibition in CCB [exhibition Carrilho da Graça: Lisbon, 22 September 2015 to 14 February 2016]?

The exhibition showed by ideas on my work in the city of Lisbon. And it has not been easy. The exhibition showed a perspective on the city, presented the projects I am developing which I have won in international contests - which is important within the crisis of the past few years - and showed a series of proposals based on the idea of joint thinking, which has lacked in architectural approaches in the past few years. I have designed projects for many places in the city in the past thirty years; analysing and thinking about territory and about a city such as Lisbon, an outstanding city, is also crucial.

Do you think that you should learn about this - about what being an architect entails - at university?

I think so, but that is not what happens. I now teach first-year students. I enjoy teaching students attending their first years at university. I have also taught fifth-year students and they are much less interesting. I teach Laboratory at the

Faculty of Architecture (Lisbon University) and I do an exercise with the students in which they make themselves a mask. They question their idea of themselves and design their masks accordingly. The results are very interesting.

In any case, teaching architecture should be something very different. I have said this for a long time and it is not always an accepted point of view but rather controversial. In an architecture program, students spend most of their time devoted to the course on project. That takes most of their time and all other courses become secondary. The professors themselves foster this idea, they do not accept that a student that has good grades in other courses - in History, Drawing or Sociology, for example - will become a good architect. And this leads to students being poorly prepared for the profession when they leave university. The exercise that, each year, is given to students in the course of project is taught as an experience that they gain and collect, attempts at solutions for which professors provide guidelines. When they complete their degree, all they have is experience in attempted failures at project design.

Engineers, for example, may have an apparently more technical training but, when they complete their degree, they have the knowledge to perform at their profession, they are able to present calculations and arguments supporting their choices. Architecture students leave university without that solid technical and theoretical knowledge, they only know how to attempt to design projects but, upon leaving university, there is no professor to guide them or validate their choices.

Is that the same at international level as well?

Yes, it is. Some architecture schools have somewhat different approaches and their students are better prepared for the labour market but the international scenario is quite similar to the Portuguese one. ETH in Zurich is perhaps a little bit different. The architecture program at UAL, when it was designed, followed the model of ETH in Zurich. This has been a reference school at international level for over twenty years; their students learn to do consistent research-based projects.

In a recent interview you were asked about the fact that you are an architect that understands the city and its problems and is concerned about what is happening in Lisbon, as well as the architect responsible for the Cruise Terminal in Lisbon - the biggest gate to mass tourism in the city.

When I was asked that, I felt the urge to answer that I do not know any architect who would refuse such a project/contest for ethical or any other type of reasons. Our proposal, which won the international contest, was the one that provided actual gains to the city of Lisbon, it was more than a gate which tourists on a cruise would cross into and out of the city. The cruise terminal now provides a garden in an area of the city, Alfama, where there are hardly any green spaces; it allows going up the top of the terminal and seeing the river Tagus from a new perspective - this is also now possible in MAAT - and has given a new viewpoint to Alfama to all those living in the city. The contest was conducted at a time when mass tourism was not even an issue for Lisbon, we were in an economic crisis. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

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