

Interview to architect Pere Buil

Filipa Ramalhete

framalhete@autonoma.pt

Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa (CEACT/UAL), Portugal | Centro Interdisciplinar de Ciências Sociais da Universidade Nova de Lisboa (CICS.Nova)

Rui Mendes

ruimiguelmendes@gmail.com

RM ARQUITECTURA

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It is our great pleasure to have architect Pere Buil, from Barcelona, with us today. I will start by asking about your academic background. I know that you also studied in Portugal.

I studied at Universidad Politecnica in Barcelona. I was not a very good student. I was always involved in other matters, whether politics or culture. Those were my interests. Besides, not many teachers were interesting. I went to Lisbon for Erasmus (architect Manuel Aires Mateus was the lecturer of Project at the Faculty of Architecture in the University of Lisbon) and I ended up staying in Lisbon. I complete my final project in Barcelona, just because I had to in order to finish my degree. I did not do a master's or a PhD, I started working right away and completely devoted myself to that.

So, after you completed your Bachelor, you immediately founded an office?

In fact, I started studying and working while I was in Lisbon. In Barcelona, that was very common after completing your 3rd year. The last two years of the Bachelor would usually take longer to complete, but we learned much more in the offices than at the university... When I was on Erasmus, I worked with the Austrian architect Thomas Zinterl, who had an office in Lisbon. And when I was doing my final project, I participated, with Jordi Fornells, in a competition in Barcelona and we won, even before we graduated in architecture.

The VORA office is founded after that competition?

Yes. The office started with me and Jordi, who ended up staying in Lisbon. I returned to Barcelona a few years later. We still worked together for some time while living in a different country. In 2005, Toni Riba became our third partner and that was when the name VORA came up. Toni and I remained in Barcelona and Jordi left the partnership.



Most Portuguese architects of our generation, who we have already interviewed, say that their experience at university was not very interesting. It seems that it was similar in Barcelona... Was that a period in the teaching of architecture, do you think? Was there a more interesting or more stimulating experience at university?

Yes, of course. I remember that, in Barcelona, we had very good lecturers of History and Composition. António Pizza, the philosopher Xavier Rubert de Ventós, Pedro Azara, Juanjo Lahuerta... They were very interesting people and their classes were very thought provoking. I also did a course with Elias Torres that I really liked, it was an elective course on landscaping and urban areas. He was, and still is, a very dynamic person. His classes were really interesting, and he made his students think a lot and form an opinion. That was perhaps one of the best experiences I had at university. I also had another elective course on landscaping with Rosa Barba, but I did it to further my knowledge in a field that was not very emphasized in the school's study plan. The

classes were very different from Elias Torres's, but I also enjoyed them a lot. The courses on project were mostly lectured by teachers who had been at the university for long and who were not that motivated.

Your return to the university as a lecturer takes place long after your experience as a student?

In 2010. In fact, it was clear to me that I did not want to return to the university right away because I felt I did not have anything to teach. For me, it made no sense to start an academic career right after graduating. Only a few years later did I feel the need to teach others and to learn more myself. I started at ETSALS (La Salle Barcelona), a private university, very focused on professional teaching, more technically oriented, and I stayed there for a few years. Later, I became a lecturer at a public university, ETSAV, a smaller school - about a hundred students enter this university each year and they do really interesting projects.

How did you become a lecturer at those universities - did you apply or were you invited?

I was invited to be a lecturer at ETSALS. The architect Pau Pérez invited me; he coordinated the course on Project for the second year. Pau is a wonderful architect with an ethical position regarding architecture which I admire. Three years ago, I applied to be a lecturer at the public university.

Let us go back to the first project, the competition you won and that led you to found your office and about its topics. This competition, a project for a reasonably sized sports centre for such young architects must have influenced your future office...

Very much so. Many things from that project are still present in our thought process and in the way we design our projects. It was funny because we did not have much experience, we had worked in offices while we were studying but we had never been to a construction site. We had designed a lot but... When we went to Barcelona for our meetings with the City Hall, we said "yes, we are experienced, we have worked in these offices, we have gone to sites...". But the most interesting was when we started construction, even without any experience. We realized we had more knowledge than we had thought. We were sure of what we wanted, of the objectives of the project and even sure of the construction. We were able to talk to the contractor. This evidenced that our education was sound. Perhaps when we were at university, we did not feel very motivated, but we had learned a lot. We also had very good lecturers on construction, whose teaching was very systematic, and I think we learned very much about construction.



Now it is also easier to understand, together with more recent work, that Can Ricart is a rather important public workspace; it is a big sports building but mostly a great public service architecture work.

Yes, the connections between the building and its context were highly considered. We made important decisions, such as, for example, in relation to access, which have to do with our perspective on urban activation. In fact, for the competition our project included a kind of roof as an extension of the activity carried out inside the building.

There was also another thing that we enjoyed working on, which was the identity of the location, in a facade that was huge and blind (pools are usually big windowless buildings with no composition). We enjoy exploring the identity of the contexts, sometimes using textures that call on memory. And that started with this project.

You teach Project. Are the exercises you give students related with the practice conducted at your office? Can you give us examples of your exercises?

In previous years I worked in architecture studios that I did not coordinate. Only this year have I started managing a studio, whose name is "*Construir sobre o construído*" (Building on what is built), a name that describes our concerns. But the studio focuses more on a topic rather than on work dynamics.



I think I prefer to make students think, place them at a crossroads, rather than tell them the documents they need to produce or organize the process for them. Sometimes I am not happy with the result but students who think and question are always able to progress and have a position in regard to more complex issues, such as identity, memory and usage.

And on what kind of places are the proposals?

The first four months were on the Model Prison of Barcelona, a building in the city centre which closed recently and is now an obsolete infrastructure for the city. The exercise aimed that students reflected on what needed to be done in terms of use (reprogramming), in terms of the building (heritage and shared memory value) and understand the compatibility between these two. A prison is a very restricted type of building. In the medium and long term, the objective of this architecture studio is to do all types of work related with pre-existing structures or memories in different situations and contexts. To understand the conflict between historical value and usage versus the need for change and to have an opinion on this conflict. Now, in the second studio, we are working on an archaeological park and the idea is to work on how the new constructions are conceptually grouped with the archaeological past, which no longer exists and is only data...

Is there always a project proposal?

Yes. We aim that students reflect on the project, which is still open to change. I believe that architects should have this ability to reflect on what is necessary for a specific place, its relationship with the environment, its contribution to society. In most cases, in fact, you don't think about it because when an architect gets an order, the project is already defined. But this reflection is important, even if only to manipulate the suggested project, question it, connect it to the needs. In fact, it is so necessary that some architects only do this rather than architecture.

The coordination of this studio is connected to others in the school - is that a horizontal connection or is the connection with other courses restricted?

At ETSAV all project classes are linked to other courses. This connection is different for each class - it can be a connection with technology, history or urban planning.

**And what is the connection in the case of your project class?**

The connection is with History.

Are there always two project classes per year?

Students can choose between two project classes from the third years onwards. The other architecture studio, whose connection is also with History, is that with Xavier Vancells, who works on the refurbishment of industrial heritage in run down areas, usually in the outskirts, more in the style of Cédric Price. Mine originally was more connected with heritage issues. But I am changing it slightly. The two are somewhat complementary in the school's study plan.

Do you have many international students?

In the 1st to the 3rd year, we have about 10% and in the 4th and 5th years around 20%, 30%.

How many students are there working in the class?

Last year I had forty, this year I have twenty. The students enrol in the class they choose after there is a presentation on the studio. This means that the number of students per studio depends on offer, attraction ability and student interest.

In the past few years, the number of international students has increased at Da/UAL and you are, in a sense, a pioneer in terms of international experience. In the 1990s, this was less common, even though the Erasmus program existed, it had less impact than today... Where do you think your desire to change school and country comes from?

For me, the reason behind that was the city. I think I began to be an architect when I came to Lisbon. Many students have a similar experience: they finish secondary school, start university right away and continue the academic routine. There has to be a turning point that makes you think about why you are doing what you are doing. That's what happened to me and the fact that I was in Lisbon contributed to me stopping to think because of the change of pace and context. I stopped living with my parents and that made me think about what I wanted to do with my life and why I wanted to be an architect.

You even worked with a few architects in Lisbon, didn't you?

I worked with Thomas Zinterl, an Austrian architect that had two offices (one in Lisbon and another in Austria) and who worked with Gonçalo Byrne. Then I worked with Gonçalo Byrne. After we won the competition, we opened the office, which we shared for some time with Patrícia Barbas and, later, with Rui Mendes. At that time, I also collaborated with Atelier Bugio from time to time. I learned a lot from all of them and I have great memories, both at personal and at intellectual level, from my work with Bugio.

Nowadays is your office still managed from a international collective logic or is it a more classical type of office?

I think it is rather classical. There are two associate members, me and another architect, and there are two or three other architects, plus one or two students, who we try to keep for some stability. We also have some international students who stay for a few months. At least six. We work a lot on our territory. It's what we know best and where we want to contribute the most with our knowledge. Or perhaps we are just lazy... There was a period, during the crisis, when we participated in some competitions in Switzerland and we won some honourable mentions, but we never built anything.

Considering the knowledge that the office has built, do you deliberately choose to work on places whose heritage you somehow recognize?

I believe it is not always deliberate. Sometimes we participate in competitions on places we do not know. But, when it is a place we do know, we make an extra effort to work on it. We have worked a lot on the historical centre of Barcelona, because of a chain of relations: we do a project, the clients like it, they trust our work and other jobs

appear. And we build knowledge from that. It is not something we think about ahead of time, though.



What are the most relevant topics of the work you have done so far?

An important part of our work is our perspective on collective spaces of all sizes. For example, while refurbishing a small flat we focus our energy on the transition spaces so as to make them more than that, make them be used for more than that. We carry that perspective to public space; we aim that the spaces where citizens meet have their own identity and citizens feel that the spaces belong to them. This line of thought is in all our projects.

We also work on memory and identity, from making use of materials - something common among architects of my generation - to working on lost memories or present but unacknowledged ones. Those make people and place's innermost identity and we try to recover that through design.

Can you give us some examples of that?

The project on the El Born Neighbourhood Market. We worked on something that was underground and is a part of history, a tragic incident for the city and the country and that was not visible in the present city.

A part of the medieval city was destroyed in order to build a military citadel that controlled the city after the war on succession (in which Catalonia lost its independence). In 1888, with the Universal Fair, the citadel was demolished to build the new city and the market, whose melting structure left the past buried underneath. When a plan to build a library inside the market was put in place, the underlying structure was discovered. We aimed that the archaeological findings, now visible on the inside of the building, are seen as an integral part of the city's history rather than a jewel locked in a trunk. We try to convey that in the design of the pavements around the building.

You show that in the pavement...

Yes, we also show the memory of the market and the 19th century architecture around it through the use of granite (a material commonly used in the pavement of urban spaces in the city, which was rejected in the 1980s for functional issues but is part of popular imagery). We tried to represent and make visible these two recovered memories there.

That is a common resource in your office: limit the number of element to better evidence them.

Yes, we might say we are somewhat baroque. We conduct a synthesis of meaning in order to enrich ideas and, as a consequence, affirm its complexity in a rather subtle way.

This has to do with the issue of research and project, doesn't it? Do you work with people from other scientific fields?

Yes, we do. We work with historians, archaeologists, as well as experts from areas linked to architecture, more technical areas. Because, in fact, we are not experts in History. We need people who are knowledgeable so as to understand History, synthesize that knowledge and interpret and transform it in our own way. Historians get often stuck in their knowledge.

If we consider our students' profile and that of the generation that is now graduating, in which people are so mobile, do you think that it will be easy to keep this "one city architect" posture? Right now, the intense circulation of people does not favour that you stay twenty years working in an historical centre... This understanding and thinking about the city is, in a way, vanishing and eventually leading to the creation of interesting things as well...

I think we are also different from architects from different generations, who had a lot of projects within the areas around them. We have few projects and need to devote much



energy to each of them and learn a lot from each of them. I cannot imagine how things will be like for the younger architects in the near future, but I think that architects are always very connected with space. We always need to understand space. On the other hand, knowledge is much more accessible today.

In this sense, you become very knowledgeable of the territory, but it is exactly because you are so knowledgeable that you may be invited to reflect on other spaces.

I do not feel that knowledgeable. For example, when we design a project in Barcelona, I don't feel I know the place very well, it is rather that I am curious about it, I want to know it and I try to find people who know the place. And you can do that regarding a new place.

João Gomes da Silva, for example, who knows a lot about and participates in conferences about Lisbon, is suddenly invited to be at Harvard or Mendrisio, exactly because he knows much about a space. To know a lot about a space evidences the chance to learn about other spaces...

That is true, you create a methodology to understand and build knowledge. I think that what is valuable is Gomes da Silva's perspective, not his encyclopaedic knowledge. He has developed that perspective in his deep study of Lisbon. I think we are all very far from his ability.

I recall texts by Paulo Mendes da Rocha, in which he talks about the house being the city and the city being the house. When you talk about big and small, I see that small may be big and vice-versa. How do you balance or join the small refurbishing and your work on public space?

In terms of conceptual work, we end up working on common spaces, the meeting spaces. These are the ones we find most interesting. We end up putting rooms, kitchens, and bathrooms aside and focus our energy on creating these other spaces, on their identity, their comfort and their infrastructural ability to make things happen. That is very important in public space as well. In more pragmatic and work management terms, this depends on the teams we have and defines the dynamics according to the moment at the office. We often work on the two scales at the same time. A small thing and a big one.



And what about the relation between the school and the office, and between the office and the curatorship, how does that work?

That all started in the office, some time later. When you start, you need a lot of energy, to learn, to produce, you need to acquire more knowledge, you need a lot of time to create, because you have many doubts. So, I was focused on that only. But after some time, I felt the need to understand why we were doing things and that led me to organize debates, meetings with other architects, which later led me to the school. Those were needs I tried to satisfy, without really understanding the link between them and work. They were a space for thought, and I needed thought to produce meaningful architecture.

There is an experiment we consider important and relevant - “sensitive matter”. Could you tell us about that?

That was a curatorship I did with two other architects, Carlos Câmara and Joan Vitòria. It was at a moment of change - in 2009, when the crisis was starting - and we realized there was a new generation who had a different perspective on architecture. In Catalonia we saw that very clearly. We tried to collect that information through an exhibition and some meetings: we went to Lisbon, Berlin, Coruña, we did some exchanges with these places to understand if the same was happening in these places.

We made it possible for people to meet that were in the same situation, who shared a line of thought and this led to mutual enrichment.

And it resulted in the two terms “sensitive matter”. Why?

“Matter” because in this generation (or group) there was a very material approach to the project, they aimed to create form and image as a result of the building process, i.e., the project was not an abstract process but a process between form and matter. “Sensitive” because it was sensitive to the environment, to the context, to inhabitability: the issue of permeability, sensitivity to the environment in a more “natural” and non-mechanical way. All that was shared.

Initially you listed more than a hundred offices, but then you chose ten, which led to meetings with other geographies...

We chose ten for a round number, nothing more... In each place we went looking for a place, a translator or interpreter that could speak about us in that context: Rui Mendes and Ricardo Carvalho in Lisbon, Andreas Ruby and Somethingfantastic in Berlin, Carlos Quintáns and Carlos Pita in Coruña... Some of those architects are now very well known: Bosch-Capdeferro, Harquitectes, TEd'A, Emiliano Lopez and Mónica Rivera... They say that part of their growth derived from these meetings - they enriched them. And us too.

And then you ended up working together...

In 2013, the Municipality of Barcelona launched a competition to rethink the Glòries Square, a “black hole” in the city. In the plan by Ildefons Cerdà it was supposed to be the centre of the city, but it ended up being in the border between the inhabited and the industrial city - Poblenou. It was the outskirts of both sides of the city. It became a road junction. The industrial neighbourhood started becoming the “city”, it became more inhabited, but the link between the neighbourhood and the rest of the city still needed to be built.

The eleven offices applied to the competition and we were all selected for the second phase. The work based on the debate made it possible for a proposal to be submitted on rethinking the city model at a moment when these matters were being reflected on.

The process was very interesting. A debate on an urban issue that we deemed key to rethink the urban model. It was also very interesting in terms of managing group thinking and creative process.

The book resulted from that, it was a compilation of this “manifest” proposal on the city model, which is, in fact more than a project for a specific place.



This does not fit the idea of a traditional office. This is an interesting perspective - that yours is a traditional office but in terms of practice it is rather different.

These are things that we do every now and then, special moments...

Lastly, we would like to ask what you chose to present here, at our school.

I will talk about the relation with memory through several projects. I will combine several small “exercises” (contributions to a fanzine that we do with friends - thoughts and speculations on urban issues) with built projects: Can Ricart sports centre, our first work which we mentioned earlier, Domus Avinyó, an action on a small archaeological site in Barcelona, the El Born project, and the Bank of Spain project, in Madrid, which is the logistics yard of the main building where we aimed to design a “writing” that allows to blend and simultaneously separate the pedestrian and the circulation areas based on the creation of bank notes.

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