

Interview with architect Egas José Vieira

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We are very pleased to have architect Egas José Vieira as our guest. Welcome. We would like you to start by talking about your academic background, your degree in architecture and the lecturers and exercises you consider most relevant.

I became a student at the Architecture Department, Escola de Belas-Artes (ESBAL/DA) in Chiado, Lisbon, in 1981. I had attended what was called Propedêutico (it was the last year this final high school year existed, the next year it would become the 12th grade), classes were broadcast on television, at a time when there were no video recorders, and you could not yet rewind a TV program.

When I entered the school, I had just completed a school year very much on my own, without much support. I had no idea what learning architecture entailed. I did have good family support, for many years, during my parents' holidays, we travelled through Europe and visited the most important European museums. That was not common in Portugal. Otherwise, I was a very ordinary student.



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I had the huge privilege of having architect Frederico George as my first lecturer on Project (Carlos Lemonde de Macedo was his assistant), it was his last year as a lecturer and, for me, the work that was developed that year was a novelty.

Otherwise, I think that, as most 1st year students, when you get to university, you may or may not have an idea of what architecture is, but you do not exactly know how it is taught. For me, it was a shock, especially the teaching methodology, because the topics and the approaches seemed very vague and open, leaving a lot of room for our own thinking and we were not as supported as we used to be in secondary school.

That was gradually overcome, of course. That first year I had the usual courses: Project (Frederico George), Construction (Dante de Macedo), Descriptive Geometry (Carlos Pinheiro) Statics (Cansado de Carvalho) and Drawing (Fernando Conduto).

In the 2nd year, the Project lecturer was architect Duarte Cabral de Mello, architect Michael Toussaint taught Architecture Theory, and Daciano Costa taught Drawing. In the third year, architect Guedes de Amorim taught Project. He mostly taught us construction - I enjoyed that because I learned the different construction methods and how projects were set in place. Vítor Consiglieri taught Project in my 4th year. He was the opposite - the way things are built did not interest him at all, his focus was on composition and design harmony. His classes were fascinating, and he was very demanding in his analyses of our proposals.

Finally, in my 5th year, I had architect Troufa Real and our dear Manuel Graça Dias (MGD) as his assistant. That was such a joy!

It was the first year that MGD taught, it was a fantastic year, he introduced incredible, really incredible dynamics and he inspired us with his sense of humour, his criticism and his insight. We were not used to that; nothing similar had happened in the previous four years. It was a great year with a great teacher!

While you were studying did you also work in studios?

Yes, I worked in my father's studio. I worked providing support, administrative work, I would go to the post office, take photocopies, blueprints. In the 3rd year, I started doing some of the drawing work. Work was divided at that time: architects designed the concept, the assistants drew. That helped me in my training, I learned how projects were designed, their different stages and I learned also about construction. In my father's studio detail was very important, I started to draw detailing, I would receive the details already defined but I drew and placed them on the project sheets. That was a very interesting process - the drawings were not in ink, the general drawings, at 1:100 and 1:50 scale were, but everything that was detail was drawn with pencil. And they were amazing drawings; it was very interesting work, everything was drawn on tracing paper, but not on what we would call drawing paper, it was a mid-weight paper, everything was drawn with pencil, the drawings were beautiful, and the different nuances, the play with the intensity of the pencil strokes were really important to achieve that effect. It was at that time that I became interested in details.

That was my only work experience. A few days after my graduation, I started to work with MGD and I stayed with him until 2018.

Manuel Graça Dias was your teacher. Did he invite you to work with him as soon as you graduated?

Yes, at the end of student presentations, he asked me if I was available to work with him on a project he was doing - an allotment in Chaves called Quinta da Condeixa. I have done a couple more allotments whose names I do not recall, but I have never forgotten this one.

I remember going with him to see the place, that he showed me a drawing, a street linking the several blocks around it and telling me "look, this is the allotment, you must comply with these ratios, the volumetry of the buildings is this, now we have to make this happen, I must go away next week, to Chaves, and in 15 days we must have the preliminary study ready, come and meet me there with everything ready". So, that was it, I had to handle it and I think I managed... I did everything I was supposed to do and took my drawings to Chaves.



In 1985, travelling to Chaves was a one-day adventure; we would leave Lisbon early in the morning and arrive to Chaves already at night. The bus departed from Campo Grande, we would exchange buses in Coimbra; that bus would travel to Vila Real, where we would again exchange buses to Chaves. The whole trip would be made in common roads (not highways) which were not in very good conditions. At that time, my idea of Portugal was not that of a very small country, I believed it was much bigger. Everything was very far away, and it would take ages to go from one place to another. That was my first job with MGD.

Whose studio were you working in?

MGD did not have his own studio at that time, he rented a few drawing boards at Manuel Vicente's studio, at Travessa do Noronha. The first meeting, the one on the allotment in Chaves, took place there. When I returned from Chaves, I started to work at Travessa de Noronha, at one of the drawing boards, and continued to develop the project. There were several people working there besides Manuel Vicente's staff (Manuel Vicente was in Macao at that time): José Caldeira and MGD, who had Raúl Andrade, a draftsman, also working in that space. And then there was me, who also designed a series of things there.

After that, I had the opportunity to work nights in a theatre company (Companhia de Teatro de Almada - Grupo de Campolide), which later left its original location (Grupo de Campolide) and became the resident company at Azul Theatre, in Almada. So, I was working at MGD's studio during the day and at night I was responsible for the theatre company's graphic design and was also its scenographer and costume designer. I was the person responsible for all the company's graphic design, from posters to the layout of the pamphlets, to some scenography and costume design. I would stay at the theatre until the last boat to Lisbon. The company was playing in *Incrível Almadense* and, at the end of the night I would walk down the avenue with Joaquim Benite (the company director) and Teresa Gafeira (the actress and Joaquim's wife) until we would reach Cacilhas to catch the last boat to Lisbon, which departed, if I am not mistaken, at twenty past midnight. The next day I would start all over again... Until I was called for compulsory military duty, in Tavira.



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Did you design any projects while doing military duty?

Yes, I did, I designed a look-out building in Tancos - it was probably not very good because that was where the weapons were stolen from! I designed a room for the soldiers in Elvas, a canteen and a laundry room in Estremoz and I adapted a building for the Direção dos Serviços de Saúde, in Benfica, Lisbon, in military barracks near the café Califa. That was all I did in the two years I spent in the army, in Serviço de Fortificações e Obras.

While in the military, I continued to work with MGD, though at a distance in the beginning, when I was stationed in Évora, because there were no vacancies in Lisbon. In Évora, at SFOE (Serviço de Fortificações e Obras do Exército) I was part of a very nice group that worked like a small studio and included an architect (me), a civil engineer, an electrical engineer, a mechanical engineer, and a hydraulics engineer. In Lisbon, the group included many architects, some of them military, in the army, and five or six that were doing compulsory military service like me. Each one of us developed the assigned projects, always supervised by the senior, military architects. It was funny because my work in Serviços de Saúde was ongoing when my military duty ended, and I was offered to complete it through a service provision contract. That was my first job as an independent professional.

Meanwhile, MGD left Travessa de Noronha and started working at Calçada Marquês de Abrantes with João Luís Carrilho da Graça. João Luís had rented a big space - which

was his studio until recently - and divided it in three parts. The entrance was MGD's space, the middle part was João Luís's and the back space was Carlos Manuel Dias's. I divided MGD's space because I had this project for the army and a series of other small projects. My space was the kitchen and MGD's was in the front rooms. We divided the space, but I continued to work with MGD, I coordinated some of our projects and developed some projects of my own. In the meantime, MGD started to include my name as project author, and we applied to some competitions together. When we won the Seville project, we decided to become partners and that was how the studio *Contemporânea* was founded.

Nowadays, collective authorship is rather common, but it was not at the time. There were few architect firms, especially ones that lasted more than a project or two. It was quite natural for us, that was how things worked throughout our careers as architects, though MGD had ten more years of experience than me and had collaborated with Manuel Vicente, António Marques Miguel, João Vieira Caldas, José Manuel Fernandes. However, this was his most stable relationship for many years, and we stayed together until 2018, when he passed away.



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Was that the basis of your studio - that collaboration and task division? Up to what point did that interaction lead to a different culture?

For me, one of the greatest advantages of Architecture when compared to other artistic activities is that it is not solitary work. I like to tell a story about my niece Madalena Vidigal when, before going to the Faculty of Architecture in Porto, she worked in my sister's studio - my sister is Ana Vidigal, a painter and my niece worked as her assistant. One day, my niece went to my brother's studio - my brother Nuno Vidigal is an architect - and found it fascinating. She said, "This is much better than being a painter, you are not alone, you talk a lot, there are other people you can share your ideas with, there is no solitude in decision, this is way better!"

And that is true. Architecture is not solitary work. At least, I never felt that, I feel that a bit now because MGD is no longer here. But when there were the two of us, we knew that we did not have to worry about certain tasks because we knew that I would do "this" and MGD would do "that" and when he had any doubts, we could discuss them, and things would flow. It was much better than deciding everything on your own, with no one to talk to. He completely trusted my opinion and I trusted his.

When you have someone you work with and who you can discuss things with, everything is so much interesting! I really like teamwork. I am really used to working with other people, I have rarely worked alone. It is always much more interesting to work with someone than to be alone. In my case, it is rather in opposition with my personality because in my personal life I enjoy anonymity, I rarely share it with other people.

This collaborative type of work, having colleagues you can share projects with, is that something you bring to UAL? The structure of the program has always been that of a studio where students get together, where everyone is together.

Neither MGD nor myself invented collaboration, by any means! It is essential and MGD really fought for it at UAL. For 1st year students, the interaction with older students is key, they exchange experiences and foster critical thinking, opinion, growth.

That there is a studio for all the students regardless of the year they are attending is key, just like the one that existed at UAL, at the Boavista campus and which is now being implemented in the Campo de Ourique campus. This was a room where all students worked in, as if it were a studio, they would discuss design and provide support to one another, as well as dialog, crucial to consolidate ideas.

Is there a relationship between the studio and the school? Carlos (Sequeira) and I (João Caria), while in the 2nd year, were invited to go to your studio, at Rua Dom Dinis, and that was crucial to understand what a studio was like. I remember that it is common for you to invite students to your studio.

Yes, I continue to do that. We have a student from UAL at our studio now, working at a competition as if in a traineeship, understanding how a studio works, how a project is

designed and implemented. I think that is something that should always happen, but it is not always possible. We as teachers should work harder to provide that experience to UAL students.

What about the opposite? Are there experiences or research that starts in the studio and then expands to the school?

I believe that can happen in the case of senior students, but I teach 1st year, so... UAL has had many students from Brazil and Angola who do not know Lisbon. The 1st year is about students knowing the city they live in, how that city has changed, its origins, how it has become what it is today. Most of our work has to do with the city of Lisbon.

Our model for the 1st year is based on knowing the city and, at a second stage, in developing artistic skills and deconstructing complexes in regard to plastic arts. João Quintela, who teaches Drawing, really helps us a lot with the exercises he does with the students. We try that they understand that there is no “right way of doing things”. We like to show them that there is more than one way of doing things, that you can attain your objective using different paths.

I would rather they forget and do a kind of reset of what they have learned since they became aware of drawing, that they become free of the complexes that they have gained. In the Drawing classes I hear phrases like “I can’t draw!” “I cannot draw a person!” “I am not good at drawing”, over and over again. Everybody can draw and can draw a person, regardless of whether they are “good at” it. What they need to do is to free themselves of the complexes that they have gained through the years that we have been told about the right way of doing things. First year students - probably because they did not have interesting drawing teachers or interesting teachers, period - do not realize that there are several ways they can express themselves. I think it is important to make that inability or anguish that students feel about “doing things” less complicated. Moreover, I do not believe in that idea of teaching in which there is a master and a student who furthers his or her knowledge through copying the master and gradually gains autonomy.



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When I look back at my experience as your student, I remember that what I took from my first year was that freedom and uncomplicated perspective of the world, being able to express myself with the means that I have. And I have always considered Contemporânea studio a breath of fresh air, and outside *mainstream* Portuguese architecture.

I do not think there is only one way of doing things, but I also do not have such a negative perspective of architecture here - I do not think that there is the risk of all of us doing everything the same way. For me, approaches are always different, the worst thing you can do is to tell me to do what I want. I do not want to do anything! I want to help solve problems and lead to solutions that you may eventually not have expected, always aiming to solve a specific problem. I do not know whether we are outside mainstream, this is the way we work.

I believe that the approach you have described implies the idea of diversity.

Exactly! But diversity can be dangerous at times. One thing is to be able to not reject what you do not know. You experiment and explore the potential assets. That is the way MGD taught me to approach Architecture and that is the way I like to do Architecture. I like the idea of diversity and the availability to develop a project. I acknowledge the need for control by lecturers, students' "spontaneities" need to be in check because if they are



not assertively controlled, they may lead students to believe that anything goes. And that is not so.

What is your opinion on today's architecture and the current labour conditions?

Throughout the years that I have been an architect (I started in the 1980s) I have witnessed different ways of communicating the project. First, you would draw it on tracing paper using Indian ink and the copies were blueprints. Then the computer started being used, printing was made on plotters, some were made with Indian ink on film, but copies were printed on plotters. Later came the ink-jet plotters, then 3D modelling and renderings and now we are moving to BIM (*Building Information Modelling*). These are very different ways of seeing the production of drawing required to communicate architecture. Not to do architecture, the way you do Architecture is the same.

For example, a few years ago, when we still used typewriters, whenever we made a mistake, we had to type the whole page again. Then, there was a white strip you could place on top of the text and type over and that way we could correct our mistake. Afterwards came MSWord and things became much easier. This means there has been a huge development, the time needed to type a text is now much shorter, but not the time to write the text itself. That requires prior work, to think what you are going to write, that implies time other than the time "to type the text".

The same happens with drawing and designing - technology is more effective and that makes the process seem faster now. But the time needed is the same because to develop a project, to define its assumptions is exactly the same as before. Only its production is now faster. This has caused one of our problems today - the lack of time to think and reflect. Who can design projects in the time clients provide us with? I have deep admiration for those who are able to do it in an honest and effective manner, because I am not. Honestly, I think that processes have their own time, they need to take their time. The time for a project is not just the time needed to communicate it, that in a different stage. The time to design a project is incredibly short nowadays. Renderings are also harmful, because you rapidly make a model of something and you get a very fancy image of what something may become. That image can be drawn but you cannot do anything with that image. These images often do not derive from a space synthesis based on plans or cross plans... They are some kind of space *Pinterest*, a chart evidencing taste. These images also represent another "danger" - the fact that clients, the entities choosing the projects, tend to look at those images rather than the drawings because it is just easier.



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The other day, at a jury in a competition, I found myself looking at the renderings first. I had to try to forget the images and look at the plans, at the relations they showed, the cross plans and the elevations. Space cannot be captured in a 3D image, that is a manipulation that eventually represents what is being done. Space is captured in reading the plans and the cross plans. This analysis has been lost, nobody reads plans and cross plans. Now you look at an image and you say whether it is beautiful or ugly, if its colours are beautiful or not, if the textures work, if its shapes are elegant or not...

In fact, Architecture is space, not 2D.

That is it. If things were like that, São Francisco Convent would never have become the Public Library and the Escola de Belas Artes. That building's ability to be transformed derives from its extraordinary spatiality. A building's ability does not derive from what it holds but from its spatiality, it does not matter whether people sleep in those cells or whether they have books inside or whether it is a classroom, as it does not matter whether the cells are yellow or green. That is just paint. The important is to realize whether the space is interesting or not.



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Do you have any message for architecture students?

It is a wonderful profession! It is hard and it is even harder now to get a job, there are more and more architects today. But this is a wonderful profession, if it were not, I would not be here, after almost forty years, excited and talking about it.

You need to be persistent and committed, but you can do it. Being an architect today is not just to do architecture, it is also to have a critical perspective, to write, to reflect, those are all part of this profession.

I remember when I was studying and I was really scared when I realized that, for example, most Italians did not do architecture but worked at something else... That thought had never crossed my mind... Today, I think that makes sense, especially because architecture degrees had to reinvent themselves and create new paths for their graduates which they may want and enjoy pursuing.