

Architecture and Portuguese society

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As I am far from the date of the meeting, I can dare to be aggressive – with myself and with you, fellowmen. I will defend modesty and, therefore, nonconformism as a means for a better location and effectiveness of the architect's action.

1. With modesty, I would like to raise two problems: the first starts from the well-known idea that architecture can do little as an instrument to substantially modify the social context; the second is that the little it can in this area is not negligible – and it is a right of our fellow citizens, as the competence of the doctor to which they give themselves – and it hasn't been given by us here and now. Worse still is the fact that we often use the sympathetically radical alibi that "first we must change the structures" to do nothing or little, in the field of effectiveness, to change the structures, nor to seek in the workshop or in the distribution for the best solutions and the most effective processes to impose them, if not the realization, at least to demonstrate viability.

2. Architecture has little chance of growth outside the social context that can spell it out, understand it, consume it, and ask for more, better, or something else. Social context is not active administration; the administration, but bureaucratic societies of directed consumption, responds to interest group priorities and seeks to avoid pressures from a base that awakens and proposes alternatives. The architect, by conscious hypothesis, does not have organic relationships with the social base (he is a socially privileged technician, despite everything); he misinterprets the needs of the user population (let us remember the Olivais case) and, at the level of language he poses, denies, and reposes questions of incredible arbitrariness that remove from him any semantic validity – and

responsibility! And at the same time, he works for administrations as an outcast who does not even propose in most cases higher levels of rationality (as does the economist or the agronomist, after all).

3. The decisive field where the social destiny of architecture is decided is that of socio-economic priorities and, immediately thereafter, that of decisions on the programmes. This is where we will have to start our approach plan; however, even if the definition of priorities between the various sectors far exceeds our disciplinary competence (not that of citizens, of course), the truth is that from the moment of the implementation of the problems arises (strategy of operations, agglutination of activities in space, etc.), the competent architect can make decisive contributions to better social and cultural income from investments. Examples: the alternative of evolutionary habitat operations to conventional finished neighborhoods is a typical proposal whose feasibility is for the architect to demonstrate, taking upon himself its risks; showing a concept of directional center can lead to the unification of regional transportation and privileged nodes and indicate priority points for the installation of buildings hitherto, putting them more at the hand of the population of the suburb with the same or less investment; and more deeply, knowing what idea we have of urbanized territory and what processes or tactics to come up with better solutions than we know, is an indeclinable responsibility that finds us too unprepared. I can foresee the objections to this challenge that I am setting myself: these are complex problems; we need interdisciplinary teams and to carry out extensive investigations before making decisions. Let us not delude ourselves, however: Le Corbusier did not have the opportunity to carry out extensive inquiries by extensive teams before risking the models we have yet to serve; what we have today about the idea of city was gathered by ten men in 2 or 3 congresses (Team X), who drew from their daily and alienated professional experience, but also from an uninhibited imagination, some concepts that we are far from having exhausted or proved the inoperability (and by the surveys would not get there).

4. Or rather, after these ideas, surveys are more possible, the field is less indeterminate. The limits of drawing are obviously enormous, but without some essential concepts of the structure of things, which require study, research, and design, it is not possible for us to dialogue with the teams that plan and program – if we do not continue like this, we are left with nothing more than to wait for them to decide and the chance to make a project arrives, disintegrated. The current trend in team building is to bring together those who have certain ideas and not certain degrees.

5. The acquisition of this competence goes through two main ways: the first one is to set up pathways of permanent education that allow us to discuss the architecture that is made or should be made, to create, disseminate new ideas and concepts, provide new methods of designing unrelated to our professional training – and attention, here, for the biggest revolution is in knowing how to design architecture for *standards* with the variable *time*, cost included, ideas that start from the strategy of doing, in which every cent spent does not compromise the future evolution, instead of the optimal (?) finite, finished and isolated projects that we have become accustomed to do.

6. And at this point we must courageously review the means of meeting that we have (we never meet to define architectural hypotheses, but only more or less vague actions,



which always leave us empty-handed to act with public opinion¹), the means of dissemination that we have (and first of all, the transformation of *Architecture* – today, an aseptic magazine in a combat body where there is no fear of talking about things with their names, of risking proposals, etc.) and also the means of international contact with centers with more possibilities for the production of ideas and where we do not act for a kind of unexplained complex.

7. If we have the most committed part of the profession with a "liberal" mentality – even when it comes to employees – it is a condition of survival to allocate a part of the useful time, with sacrifice – discussion and dissemination of alternative ideas, many times stillborn on the clipboard or in the customer's drawer, but that is important to discuss. Ciam, Team X, did so, the dozens of groups that today push architecture, which seemed lost, to new horizons of intervention. It is a matter of school. And consistency.

8. But there is a second way, linked to this one, which is that of work integrated in decision centers, especially the State, which currently requires a well-defined strategy and appropriate action tactics (it is a time of remodeling, no matter now whether good or bad, services in our field of intervention. And this reshuffle will proceed). It is difficult for plans to be drawn up and the programmes of buildings and their implementation to be made outside the management. Drawing up these frameworks (when it is possible to occupy them) for the sacrifice they impose and for the adverse constraints that we all know is a suicidal attitude. We will be out of our own problems, we will not be able to demonstrate the validity of the alternatives that we may have, and we will lose the unique opportunity to enter the interdisciplinary work, which is beginning to be outlined there. When I said that the two routes are interdependent, I did so aware that they are difficult, intermittent routes that require patience and, again at the beginning, nonconformism. But now it is clear that this is justified nonconformism in alternative ideas. Deciding programs, researching, fighting in alliances with other technicians in the administrative staff, imposing competitions to democratize the collection of work based on competence and, in parallel, searching for ideas in the whole profession competence and, in parallel, searching for ideas in the whole profession. Another example: the most serious squandering of wealth and energy is today in the so-called "urbanism"; it seems to be where everything is decided for better; however, do we know how to plan? Parallel to the non-use of plans according to the interests of corrupting speculation of technicians and administrators, is there not a total inadequacy of the plans we make? Do we not have to discuss all this from the years that the plans take, the surveys that have nothing to do with the proposals, the means of transmission of the criteria that do not serve, etc., etc.? Is it not possible to propose to the administration a non-perfectionist or idealistic planning strategy that uses the forces in attendance to obtain some achievements for the collective? It is at least a question we are worth asking. And then, or at the same time, the reform of urbanization services (in what is already thought) and the accelerated training of technicians executing new forms of planning.

9. In summary, the "competent nonconformism" translated into public criticism of the directions of "edification" and "urbanization", and in parallel in the concerted and supported access of layers (younger, probably) to the administrative staff of greater reproducibility, will put us to the test in our disciplinary limits. But the conviction I put in the search for tactics appropriate to these objectives does not make me forget that,

at the same time, subterraneously another action involves us, but there, mixed in the mass of citizens, without the privileges of technicians, when very serving the population as "lawyers" who can give them chances, and hopes (once again, alternatives to what they are willing to grant them). This action is part of the available sectors of what we now call the basis and is directed at the exchange of dominant structures and interests. It has its own strategy and rhythm, which must not be confused with those of the disciplinary action that falls to us. But I have no doubt that this hope does not dispense with the daily work I wanted to recall here. After having contacted colleagues from many countries, I was convinced that there is probably no country where the critical and alternative action of architects is as non-existent half a dozen years ago, as ours. A profession changes, available for what it takes, taking refuge in corporatism so as not to get its hands on what is difficult. This translates into practice in real conformism (although highly nonconformist and, above all, individualism) which seems to be especially convenient for the interests we want to fight.

10. Plan A1. Ideas on Portuguese priority themes where the competence of the architect can be decisive.

Exs. - Planning Process - Teaching - Development centers, directional centers

-- Industrialization of construction – Participation of the population in the habitat

A2. reinvigoration of broadcasting organs, especially Architecture, newspapers, TV

A3. claim of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism as a Training Institute in Urbanism

A4. claim public contests as a way of awarding work of greater public reproductivity.

Plan B1. Design of services in remodeling and access campaign according to *curriculum* and interests.

B2. support for infiltration by research and discussion of action processes.

¹ What will we have to say concretely and with evidence, on a TV show, once we have exhausted the far-off and always methodological generalities (starting with the creation of the world), that we have been repeating for years and that do not speak to public opinion! Has there ever been a polemic in the papers for the sake of architecture?