

## "School" or "generalism" – eclecticism or tradition, an inevitable option

Manuel Mendes (1949- )

**To cite this article:** MENDES, Manuel – "School" or "generalism" – eclecticism or tradition, an inevitable option – **Estudo Prévio** 20. Lisboa: CEACTIONAL-Center for Studies of Architecture, City and Territory of the Autonomous University of Lisbon, 2022, p. 90-98. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Available at: [www.estudoprevio.net](http://www.estudoprevio.net)]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26619/2182-4339/20.13> (original ed. "School" or "generalism" – eclecticism or tradition, an inevitable option, **Páginas Brancas** (Architecture of Professors of the Architecture Course of ESBAP), Porto, FAUP-ESBAP Architecture, 1986). Published from RODRIGUES, José Manuel (ed.) – **Teoria e crítica de arquitetura, século XX**. Lisbon: OA-SRS, Caleidoscópio, 2010, p. 816-822.

Creative Commons, CC BY-4.0 license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

---

## "School" or "generalism" – eclecticism or tradition, an inevitable option

1

In May 1985, a group of students of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the architecture course at ESBAP wanted to shake the routine of school life, proposing to open a survey-route, oriented towards the disclosure of what architects graduated from that school did and do. Although the objective here is to awaken and contribute to the study, the reflection of an idea of architecture expressed in the joint vision of a significant framework of experiences, trends and generations, the project deviates and focuses on the edition of an anthology of recent achievements in the group of professionals – teachers in the course. Now, some of them are asked to write introductory writings, a kind of personal testimony in which they relate times of formation, times of construction of a pedagogy and its reflections in their professional lives.

Now or in the distance of facts and experience, a testimony is expressed in an artisanal dialogue between acting and thinking, to gather signs of past things and records of things lived or blocked, finding their order and manner. Eventually it insists on them and emphasizes their emergence value in the daily life of collective action – instruction of memory and the present.

In principle, by intention, without self-justifying purposes or Manichean rounds, the exercise becomes scarce (the possible rigor is still extensive) – only the openness to,



seeking a measure in the reconstruction of knowledge, by fragmented condition and of different qualities. In the propositional will, the act of *writing* is associated with *projecting*: it observes reality, delimits knowledge, provokes definitions, qualifies the construction of the craft – it gathers fragments to gather the possibility of knowledge, from which come energy and persistence – entrust the will to invent *another* reality.

And this is because "sometimes it seems to me that, fed with 'locusts' and 'wild honey', each of us must become another John the Baptist, preparing with great humility and no less faith the advent of the predestined: the architect of man's house. Perhaps this is the goal of many generations; it certainly fills our entire existence. Architecture has become aware of its renewed mission of many decades, since, coming out of abstract intellectual speculation, it turned to the concrete terms of life and sought to adhere sincerely to human measure" (E. Rogers, 43).

Our problem is more precisely this: to find the law in freedom, and "a healthy reconstruction will never be possible if we do not want to recognize that its foundations are founded in school". This is where our words will be heard, not least because we are talking about a profession.

2

"We are all convinced that the *academy* is over, but the baptism of another time has been succeeded by an agnostic feeling that is no less empty: those who do not believe in the constant renewal of the architectural spirit cannot transmit it and, standing out from formal traditionalism, are unable to connect to the sources of tradition. History, when it is not stagnation, revives in the creative spirit. What can be required of schools is that they teach a method where the ancient and the modern acquire prominence in the light of the same critical attitude. After abandoning dogmas, they cannot be content to passively watch the resurgence of a new culture, but must, by exerting a patient maneuver, help awaken in all consciences" (E. Rogers, 43).

Over the past four decades, the course of architecture of ESBAP constitutes and claims itself as collective author of a sensitive platform for reflection and ideological, cultural, disciplinary, and teaching debate. A creative gesture of those who foster an idea of *school* and *project*, in the understanding and transformation of the real. Its movement is verbalized in the contingencies of history and proves to be a permanent depository of some cultural and disciplinary bonds of a certain durability and transmissibility, which allows us to associate, generalize moments of research, of learning, of craft.

Such transmissibility selects contradiction as an agitating factor of creative tension in the paths from practice to the system of ideas, solidarizing the individual and subjective to the collective field of desire and drawing. The use of some theoretical pragmatism, on the edge of the construction and resurgence of a new culture, accompanies the new problems, the new ambitions, referring them to a common rational basis, socializing them. Principles that simultaneously condense a *project*, which, through the school, seeks and establishes a dialectic with reality, politics, and ideology.

Transmissibility that makes the drawing the continuity support. Drawing that materializes at the scale of *time* and *place*. Place that provides the *school* of the drawing process. A process that evolves to the understanding of the field of architectural projection in an open system of interdependencies of space modeling techniques; of the rationalization



of the moderating/evaluating instruments of artistic action in the scope or in the use of meaning; of the democratization of the hypotheses of a new enjoyment of the essence of architecture (space) in the materiality of history.

Transmissibility that, recognizing in the school a propositional center, dissecting, active, does not dispense with other structures and other procedures, parallel and complementary to training – transgression – achievement that instructs art and life. The "architectural offices" update the personality of the method, contextualize the creativity of the drawing, and model the work. The "student studios", from the deepening of the student condition, intensify the criticism of the material basis of the study, the quality of teaching, the didactic processes, the ideological and disciplinary instrumentalization.

In the sedimentation of training, the ESBAP process underscore its historicity in a heterogeneous notion of movement, of participation, living knowledge that renews the quality and situation of design, claiming the need of architecture in the construction of physical space. The inventory of the collective order also allows the meeting of synthesis figures – Carlos Ramos, Fernando Távora, Álvaro Siza, characters of revealing rhetoric, who offer themselves to the community, in the work of ruptures, of consensus – of resistance.

"This means that although it is up to us men of our profession, eclectic-minded by training and congenitally prophetic, the right to prefer a guidance among the many that we are given, to manifest superiorly, we have chosen, in a first phase, that one integrated in the universalist concepts that throughout the world have levelled, in essence, the product of modern aesthetic currents and the most varied means of expression; those also allowed the most perfect and convenient fusion of two successive generations to take place in this higher education institution and to give their hands to the experience of the elders and the ardor of the younger ones, in the common teaching task in which rivals are worthy (C. Ramos, n. 59).

"... Architecture, always considered a major art among the greatest, underwent, from a certain historical moment, an exaggerated technicality that eventually corrupted the essential concept in which it was taken. Past, however, the experimental period and the period of speculation to which, for years, this new science was submitted... here we are again on the right track... There is the comforting return of architecture to the nest of its siblings as an expression of art..." (C. Ramos).

Because he believes in this rivalry as the mobilizing energy of his school project, Ramos pushes and/or guides a commitment of multiple directions and senses; the space that is conquered and the evolution of the *project* are a collective work by appropriation and movement and ideas, exchange of meanings and experiences. In Carlos Ramos, the notion of "modern" is more visionary or ideological than concretizing; rather reading, receptivity, which continuously extended and risky exercise in linking the concept to architectural practice. In the conceptualization of the "modern", reflecting and drawing enunciate a multifaceted sensibility, divided between tradition and history; the universality of the "new" and the values of national culture; the aesthetic-artistic dimension and the technical dimension of the "new science". Carlos Ramos takes on the limits of an academic and eclectic doing, but at the same time frees the limit to follow the evolution of the *idea* of which he is not a creative agent. Conceiving is the "leveling" of the tendencies of another doing that no longer fits you by training and will. The action of

the project is, above all, to feel open and engaging in a practice that accompanies, reinforces, and disseminates. Carlos Ramos, the patron, believes in youth and they respect him; but his writing is fundamentally the attention, in ploughing from clearings that are announced and guided by the discourse of others.

"... from the analysis of our work, it is clear the intention to produce one that, in addition to the functional or technical interest, has plastic value..." (F. Távora, 50)

"... The family for whom the house is intended has its constitution, its tastes, its economic capacities... the terrain has its shape, its vegetation... the wind... in Esposende there are buildings... on the other side of the river there is granite and shale... the architect has his cultural, plastic and human foundation (for example, the house is not a building); he knows the meaning of terms such as organicism, functionalism, neoempirism, cubism, and, at the same time, feels for all the manifestations of the spontaneous architecture of his country, a love that comes from far away. It was by letting everything, and everyone speak in a magnificent and indispensable dialogue... that we have come to this realization" (F. Távora, 57).

"... it was a meander and flexible process and not a design of steer; it was a method of a passionate man and not a cold technocrat; it was a gesture drawing, more than a drawing on paper..." (F. Távora, 83).

The discourse is clear, limpid, direct, with the simplicity of the great axioms. At the same time, it collects itself as if inviting the reader-author to enrich it, to discover its plans of meaning. Classic, popular, and "modern" are abstracted and, as an anonymous heritage, are revivifying valences of a new *space*. In quiet writing, the restless personality that opens itself to a living and constant dialogue with nature, and all those other men signal and invent in it. Consequently, "the artist and man approach themselves, their own world, their reality, which is also the reality of the world that is discovered" (Ramos Rosa). There are those who speak of simplism, conventionalism, even bad taste. Here, "inequality" is the translation, without prejudices of modesty and redundancy, of the certainties and doubts that assault the path of creation. Fernando Távora does not hold back and, opening himself, exposes the method. "It is after all, and only, Man that is in question" (F. Távora, 69).

"... an architect was called to participate in the resolution of a problem and did so in the way he believes problems are solved, especially those related to the elaboration of a project: by supporting and promoting the increase in the number of people thinking responsibly, without diluting his own responsibility. He started from an idea pointed out in the first visit, because he considers that one does not project by adding bits of information, and that it serves, if applied to an idea, to correct and define it. And that the idea is in the "place", more than in the mind of each one, for those who know how to see, and so can and should arise at the first glance; other glances from him and others will overlap, and what is born simple and linear becomes complex and close to the truly simple real..." (A. Siza, 79).

"... Works that erase the past are doomed to obliteration. A chain is broken. One work is only little for the next one, and what comes from outside, and must come, quickly and even simultaneously, comes to vivify, not to occupy (A. Siza, 85).

The architecture of "building" to transform (not to occupy) rethinks environments as qualitative spaces, moving from a passive defense of the environment to the idea of intervention, that is, "from an idea of natural landscape to the idea of historical landscape" (Gregotti). In the practice of the project, the subject investigates and conflicts from the material conditions of production of the phenomena, himself phenomenon. Hence, in projection, the act of drawing sees the place by looking for it in a new idea of place. A new architecture cannot be created without modifications of the existing one; to modify also contains a notion of permanence. If contact with reality confirms, convinces the social function of architecture as a system of aesthetic principles, "architectural design treats space itself as raw material (Schindler). Still, in the projection, the modeling of space is simultaneously product and magma in the phenomenological globality of the place. It is to this extent that, in the "architectural project", only subjects, language and craft are questioned, themselves phenomena, representation and exchange, act, knowledge; form of presence, delirium, death. By task or mester, by destination or manifest, the drawing will be estimated as an idea of path, as offer or gesture, as taste or value, as a norm or method, to be clarified in the persistent cultivation of being – the collective workshop of the reason of time, of the historical landscape.

If *inhabiting*, as a condition of *building*, is the revelation of being in the world, architecture, as a living reality, is the revelation of the place in search of the essence of inhabiting.

3

... It is indispensable that, without underestimating the whole lesson from the outside, all our inner reality is fully understood. It is equally wrong to follow a wrong path, for those who advocate the return to styles that were once or those who, by the costume of fashion, intend to create in Portugal architecture and a modern urbanism; any of these attitudes reveal a so dangerous as useless plastic dilettantism that in no way contributes to the realization of the end in view because it diverts these manifestations from their surrounding reality. "Style" does not count; rather, what counts is the relationship between work and life; style is the result of this relationship..." (F. Távora, 53).

"... It also means that it is necessary to state clear theoretical propositions if one wants to travel the road in experience without too many mistakes..." (E. Rogers, 43).

In the dialectic of contemporary architectural culture, the plurality of the idea of projection raises, generically, two great attitudes. The first one explains the current situation from the modernity-post modernity dichotomy, entangling the poetics of drawing in the field of stylistic-figurative-scenographic-populist vein fictions; shallow flight in the reading of history that refers invention to disciplinary forgery in the handling of form and space; appeasement of conflicts between history-tradition-modern, manifest misunderstanding of the values of difference that manipulates collective meaning, and hence the public consensus, production and artistic activity. The second, insisting on a positive reading of the meaning of "tradition" and the "new", feeds the artistic sense in the propositional will of disciplinary practice, and, simultaneously, understands the order in the individuality of the gesture in the material consideration of projecting, where use, construction and form are intended to be integrated; values that the individual and subjective paths for the definition of form "case by case", without undervaluing knowledge as practical



intelligence of the workshop sense of the method – a project *idea* that, in the distance to reality, guides and provokes the space of invention, accepts the fragmentation of theoretical systems and universal culture, as a condition of a new way of being of theoretical reflection, of a new relationship between theory and method, and a new sense of *resistance* and design in the search and defense of the culture of place.

In the march of time (despite the diversity of intention and quality in the work produced) of the "Oporto work", there is still this workshop tradition of *drawing* that, linking some generations of architects, allows us to consider it as a related phenomenon, also discontinuous. And in discontinuity, it generates the possibility of transmitting the feeling and doing of a time that, although sensitive to what pre-exists, is added to it, without obligation to deny or reproduce it. The spirit of the *school* or tendency is born there, with this empirical knowledge that investigated or theorized, communicated to and by the work, that is, it is those residues that, in the approximation of the old and the new, refer to the evolution of the idea and, simultaneously, mark the access to truth and rigor of the projected behavior. In such a conceived evolution, without explicit theoretical elaboration, without the passage of architectural things to articulated ideas, the principles move to drawing; and in the half-truth of drawing – a unique instrument of expression – principles become formal schematism, in which quality is fidelity to the "model" practice.

In the uncertainties of the current situation, such a way of proceeding allows rare moments of identification of the idea, its process, its revision; and without the other side of designing, the role of reason in architectural discourse is reduced, in the correctness and order of the terrain in which they move their own steps.

But the deformations of the expression of tendency are also a positive effort – a recognition of the disciplinary value of drawing, of the discourse of drawing as a poetic capacity for approximation and transformation of real; the materializing will of the drawing in which language and construction, dialoguing, developing, restraining, complementing themselves in the structuring and signification of space; valorization of drawing in criticism of abstractionism and orthodoxy, seeking in the context of intervention form-generating parameters; acceptance of figurative elements and iconographic enrichment of the "tradition of the new", in the extended knowledge of history, understood as order and as *another* drawing memory.

Even so, by circumstance or necessary stabilization, the product of the "Oporto school" is characterized by a premature aging of the *taste for detail* and the *particular* of "our inner reality", that is, to the degradation of instruments and processes, the "road of experience" slides into "as dangerous as useless plastic dilettantism" that manufactures the "style" of the work turning to life.

Still, within the plurality of contemporary architecture, the "Oporto school", in its recent work traces a genuine path of drawing, a search (more individual than collective) for ways to define form, considering "architecture as an organizing phenomenon of space, between the scales of the building and the city of which they are not inseparable, for reduction, the scale of the object, or by enlargement, the scale of the territory. However, this "generalist idea of drawing", detached from reality, confronted in its own limits, is oriented more to the "production of memory" than to the "production of history, that is, in the doubts of the times, academized or deformed idea, hope (the will and the project) of drawing is divided between "disciplinary forgery", ethical clause of the sign, and the

"defense of the culture of the place". If "the generalist training of drawing" leaves the necessary reserve for the practical vigilance of the invention, it takes refuge in the sublimation of its formalization, in the exaltation of its alleged authority, on the sidelines by critical condition.

The result is ambiguous, sometimes hybrid. In the short term, one is left with a necessary choice: eclecticism or tradition.

4

In the late 1970s, in times of ideological revision (dialogue of reason and dialectics of history) the course in architecture resists by the accumulated experience, by the built heritage; safeguarding the metamorphosis and the otherness of the idea of drawing and school that animates it; they want it to be a sleepwalking image of provincial technocracy, imposed from the outside. The SAAL experience is a close reference. From the values and shortcomings found in the exercise (more pedagogical than didactic) that accompanied it, the goal turns to stabilize the concept of overall design in an organic course, and a practice based on the connection to the outside; also, the recovery of the school space as a place of learning and knowledge production, or an animating center of community life. By limitation, by vice, by critical reservation regarding the meaning of change, the course and tendency close in on exercise and elaboration; holding the question are some risks of marginal individualism and excuse of consciousness and practice. To hold the challenge, the General Bases Proposal is the possible way of recognizing the principles, the ethics of the message, and the disciplinary hope.

Today, the Faculty of Architecture is a continuation of a disciplinary and open teaching project at ESBAP. Its course structure is based on the centralizing trend of the design practice, reflecting the supremacy of design in the globalizing synthesis of the diversity of materials involved in the design process; it promotes the valorization of history and theory of architecture, in the process of sedimentation of the disciplinary territory, such as construction and urbanism. The creation of the Faculty of Architecture generates subjective conditions for the renewal of the quality of teaching, and for the qualification of the architectural matter, to the extent that the diversity of collectives intervening **in it assume** the movement of ideas, the use of the ideas of the didactics of the project, the project to re-suffer reality, as "concrete utopia", "principle of hope" (Gregotti).

But in the transition, the new stage will drag, at least in its next evolution, the empiricism so dominant in the current pedagogical process, so dominating the personality of invention, so responsible for the uncritical design and catalog, characterizing what has been done.

Without Manichean shyness, an open, non-voluntaristic or anesthetic observation, will find that the routes, whether "generalists" in principle or of program, are generalizers of the skeleton of conception and responses. And they are so, we argue, not only because of difficulties in the formative action, but also because of the adulteration of the principle in the globality of drawing, and, by addition, the emptying of the theoretical reason in the work and expression of the concept. The *reality* and *construction* that are the justification and materialization of the discursive sensibility that makes *drawing*, take refuge in that matte and raw area of what things are or want to be. Between reality and construction of



drawing, there is an available void; it is one that accelerates the space of uncertainty, unclarified uncertainty, since it does not isolate instruments and/or working hypotheses as alternatives to the showcases of occasion; it is an availability that, in the absence of research or in the undervaluation of essential tools – territory, method, criticism, technique, interdisciplinarity – is filled with that "diffuse irrationalism that ignores transmissibility and has always been a necessary condition for all cultural production and that art is produced and enjoyed in the encounter between feeling and reason" (J. L. Mateo).

There will also be the suggestion (no less true) that in school one works for the formation of an urban and aristocratic elite, built in a fringe area. Not that it is enough for them in the space they are allowed to do, but in what they are left by isolation, resignation, mannerism, they are also satisfied by complicity and privilege. Let's say that a few "recruits" (perhaps the same ones) no longer arrive to qualify a practice; to justify a possible expression of tendency that goes beyond the narrowness of boundaries of a new academy, it is urgent to see and mature in the whole of the scene, time, and authors.

What is now a mistake (perhaps useful and inevitable), if it persists over time, will be pure dilettantism denial of the schooling task itself, by drag, disaggregating the integrity of architecture in the absence of real relations with "the world of needs, production, urban growth, collective meaning, the very tradition of the disciplinary craft" (Gregotti).

In the short term, one is left with the necessary choice: eclecticism or tradition.

## 5

In the evolution of writing, to the question that interests us (the teaching of architecture or the denial of the absurdity of the total light of *pure drawing*), the theme will have different faces, namely as follows: recognition of school and architecture in metamorphosis and ideological and cultural otherness of the *place* that provides it and motivates it, shifting from the "discipline of rhetoric" to the discipline of *construction* and space modeling; refusal of historical knowledge as an absolute measure, as reconciliation with the past, as a "shadow" of projection, or as an imperialist form of the fundamentalist validation of the action that derives, by the claim of the need for the presence of historical knowledge, in the perspective that the architect can and must work, fight for history, in both senses of the word, be *another* (J. Le Goff); to challenge the design to implement the disciplinary scope of design, the only possibility of meeting the rigor of the methods and the aesthetic dimension in the praxis of the project, and in the epistemological possibility of interdisciplinarity; recovery of the workshop and laboratory sense of space modeling techniques, refusing the "craftsmanship" of eclectic bonding; professionalization of schooling, recognizing in and by research the possibility of scientific practice of drawing, and hence creating minimum conditions for the practicality of a pedagogical and didactic system, in which the principles and/or fragments of theory become rules and transmissible methods, work hypotheses, instead of images and modifiable models.

Associating the idea of science practice with the design process, we think exclusively of the construction of a methodology, of a language, whose syntax has the power to know how to instruct on the internal and external relations of the architectural phenomenon.

Associating this idea with the concept of the overalled of drawing, it will be worth reflecting on whether the "generalist formation of drawing", in its voracity anti-specialization, does not forget the *specialties of drawing*, if "the generalist formation of drawing", as it has been understood and practiced, does not forget the message of the beginning, and in counter-departure, puts it in an ethical plan of "well-to-do, a plan that does not fit it for unthinkable exclusivity; if "the generalist formation of the drawings" does not make the principle a kind of "illuminated design" which, recognizing in the architectural object defining the defining force of the design of the city, the urban landscape, the environment, puts us much closer to some ideas of Gropius and sectors of the Modern Movement, and, at the same time, distances us from the heritage (which is close to us) of some sectors of European realism of the years 1950-60.

6

It is true that a *project*, although it only defines one *discipline*, an *orientation*, can, within certain limits, be detailed by means of drawings and memories, but as we all know, it cannot be detailed in advance, without running the risk of never being able to carry out works again. And those who build, also know that there are unpredictable cases and others, although predicted, that only in the course of works can be defined with the necessary rigor (Pardal Monteiro).

Nevertheless, "alluding to the future need to re-synthesize principles and elements derived from different origins and various ideological sectors, we must admit that this meeting, at the level of authentic dialogue, has not yet occurred. Therefore, we find ourselves in a kind of truce, in which we can no longer exercise the dogmatism of one truth, and in which we are still unable to stop the skepticism in which we have found ourselves" (Fr. Ricoeur).

"If the experience of observing explains the complexity of drawing", "if the experience of teaching explains the clarity of the drawing", the clear expression of the complexity of the drawing is an act of cognoscibility, discovery of the forbidden by the cult of learning intelligence, to the extent that the serenity of drawing explain the experience of *resisting*, and the solidity of the drawing explain the experience of *building*.

In the short term, one is left with the necessary choice: eclecticism or tradition.

Hesitating, Minerva is under thoughts.