



Interview with architects Cristiane Muniz and Fernando Viégas

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We are very pleased to have with us Cristiane Muniz and Fernando Viégas, architects and teachers at Escola da Cidade in Sao Paulo and at UNA collective. To begin with, please tell us a little about your academic career, the most remarkable teachers, perhaps the most interesting exercises you did at that time.

[Fernando Viégas] – We started at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Sao Paulo (FAUUSP), which is a public school, in 1989. It was a very important year for our country, the first year we had direct elections for the President of the Republic, after the military dictatorship. It was the first time my whole generation voted, as well as our parents' generation. It was a year of political reopening, and that marked our generation, it was a moment of hope, of reconstruction. And we, as students, understood that our role was to try to get back on track, to try to reconstruct stories that had been abruptly interrupted, the dismissal of teachers, the exile of many important people, and the murder of some important Brazilian intellectuals, journalists, artists. In our second year at university, we got organized as a group, started a magazine called *Caramelo*, in which we resumed a practice that was common at the Faculty of

Architecture and Urbanism (FAU) and which had been interrupted by the dictatorship. We talked with former students who were, at that moment, important architects, people who continued to fight, about these old publications and, from this experience, we were able to resume the critical reflection that was typical of FAU students. It was an arts and architecture magazine, one issue per semester; we published six with the same group, a seventh was published as we were graduating and in the eighth we are invited to participate almost only as consultants.

[CM] - Four more issues were published after we left. Ten in total.

[FV] - We worked on it very intensely and it influenced us because we had to search for many teachers, interview many people, publish a lot of projects. It opened up a world of possibilities, of meetings and dialogues, which we knew would be important for the rest of our lives. In this sense, this moment of political reopening and of the magazine *Caramelo* were very important.

When you entered university, how long was the architecture program?

[CM] - It was five years, just like today.





[FV] - 150 students entered: It was a super difficult exam, because people came from all over Brazil and, to this day, the number of vacancies is very small, unfortunately. But our program was already held in the building of FAUUSP, by Vilanova Artigas. The school was initially housed in the Higienopolis neighbourhood, in Rua Maranhao, in a beautiful Art Nouveau mansion, about 60 or 80 students attended it. When they moved to the campus of the University of São Paulo, 150 students could attend it, but when that happened, the program had already undergone changes by Artigas, who was important as the building itself. One derives from the other. We were also lucky enough to have an important generation of teachers. However, studying in the FAU building was absolutely transforming. That building changes people a lot, it imposes another possibility of coexistence, freedom, experience, collective action. It is a very special building, it is difficult to talk about our training without mentioning this presence of architecture.

Is it a building of change?

[FV] - It is a building that gives you lots of hope in the profession.

This climate of hope, which arose with the end of the dictatorship, how was it reflected in the school itself?

[FV] - Teachers returned, but there were still open scars. In the School of Architecture, a historically very politically engaged school, there were internal discussions among left-wing groups that had different positions at that time - those who were more closely linked to the Communist Party, those who were Trotskyists... there was this pressing issue of choosing armed conflict, an armed guerrilla war against the military government. And that divided some groups. And it took some time for these things to quieten down. I think that today we still experience consequences of this... I would not call it conflict, but a certain...

The French would use the word *malaise*...

[FV] – Yes, and it is funny because this is also linked to a bigger story, which is precisely the story of how the Workers' Party was founded. The Workers' Party, Brazil's largest left-wing party, of which Lula has always been a leader, is the result of the workers' movement, the metalworkers' movement, the strikes, and was an alternative to the existing left, at a time when democracy was being resumed. For us, it was natural that a new left-wing party would arise in Brazil and, at the same time, understand the great modern production of architects who were closer to the Communist Party, as was the case of Artigas or even the case of Paulo Mendes da Rocha or Jon Maitrejan, who had been banned from the school. It was important to be able to understand that we were part of it all and we did not need to choose sides, because that no longer made sense when we entered university.

[CM] - About our experience with *Caramelo* magazine, I would like to add that, besides thinking, reflecting about architecture, it gave us the opportunity to experience collective action. That has undoubtedly shaped us to this day. I had a great privilege in my life, I studied in two schools by Artigas. At the age of five, six, I studied at a children's school in Santo André, owned by Artigas. The school is called Vila Alpina and it is an amazing public school, absolutely impressive in the way it occupies the land it is built on - it is almost like a very large square, with very steep slopes. The school occupied this huge area, but had three classrooms, the children's leisure areas, and the swimming pools - it was a very progressive school, especially for a public school at that time, the seventies. That, for me, was very transformative. And, for a long time, I thought I was going to be a kindergarten teacher....



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It was not far from the truth.

[CM] - No, and it was amazing. And then this happens at FAUUSP, this learning from space, this place that, by itself, already teaches you. We interviewed Marcos Acayaba for *Caramelo*. He had not yet returned to FAU, he was a little discouraged. Fernando spoke about what this moment meant - there were still scars, divisions, difficulties in understanding what this young democracy was going to be, in all its dimensions, including the professional. Marcos Acayaba always says that interview was a boost of courage and that it brought him back to the FAU. We had many other teachers, and it is impossible to talk about our training without talking about them. We will not attempt to



mention all of them because we will probably forget someone. In any case, we must mention Eduardo de Almeida, a very important teacher for us. He was my final project supervisor, participated in our exams, then supervised us both in our master's. Antonio Carlos Barossi, I don't know if you know him - he was known as Tata -, he is amazing, an excellent architect and a fabulous teacher. Regina Meyer, who teaches urbanism and showed us, in the early 1980s, how urban design could be combined with urbanism in ways we could not imagine. Helena Ayoub, also a project teacher, who was very young at the time, was an amazing teacher and is a fantastic architect, she has now designed projects for public schools in São Paulo which are beautiful. Ana Belluzzo... and Paulo Mendes da Rocha, who returned to FAU a little before we graduated.

[FV] - He was our project teacher in the third year, and my thesis advisor, already in the fifth year.

[CM] - He was your advisor and participated in my viva voce examination.

How was Paulo Mendes da Rocha as a third-year project teacher? What was his relationship with the students like?

[FV] – Paulo's generation - which includes Joaquim Guedes, Gian Carlo Gasperini, Abraao Sanovicz, Teru Tamaki, who was Fabio Penteadó's partner, Arnaldo Martino, Eduardo de Almeida's partner - was a generation of great architects we knew from the few books that existed. Marcello Fragelli, Antonio Carlos Sant'Anna Junior, John Walter Toscano, a whole generation that we saw mentioned in the few books we had, an architecture guide from Sao Paulo and also a book by Marlene Acaçaba about the houses of São Paulo, which had a house designed by each of them. These were the architects who trained us.

Paulo won the Pritzker Prize, the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) medal, the Imperial Prize of Japan, but, at that time, he was one of many. The first issue of the magazine *Caramelo* includes an interview with Paulo and his project for the competition on the *Centre Georges Pompidou* (he was a finalist). He was a finalist! Let's say, from the huge number of candidates, only a few projects were selected and it is said he got one vote. The winner, as everyone knows, was the project by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, but Paulo's was already an incredible project. And since then, all the magazines included something by Paulo, a text on the projects he coordinated or supervised, quotes - in number four we had a special article on Lina Bo Bardi and it included his participation. It was incredible, because, until that moment, there were still issues, Paulo did not talk about Lina, Lina did not talk about someone or other... He gave a statement about Lina that moves me, even now. But when we published it, in the first issue of our magazine, you could not imagine how many people told us "you started awful. You started something that is already in the past. That is old."



At that time, postmodernism, rather misunderstood in Brazil, opposed Paulo, as if they were in opposite poles of something that no longer existed. For us, it was kind of a joke. I am glad we did not pay any attention to those people, who were older than us, and who tried their best to stop us from thinking for ourselves, and we did interview and got closer to Paulo. For you to have an idea, when we chose Paulo to supervise our final project, he was supervising a small number of students. Other teachers had lots of students wanting to work with them, students would sleep at FAU to be supervised by them, and Paulo... people either feared him, or thought his time had already passed, or they were afraid of him and his way of doing things - and they lost that opportunity. For us, Paulo was a guy sitting in a studio, rather alone, and you would hang around him, listen to him talking about absolutely extraordinary things.

[CM] – You can imagine, he would sit down and talk....

[FV] - If it were today he would have not only Brazilian students, but students from all over the world around him, crowded around him, you would not even be able to hear what he was saying because there would be so many people around. But at that time that was it, he was one among many speaking their minds. And all you wanted was for him to look at your drawing and comment - and he never did that. He would never do it. Students' drawings were simply a motto for him to talk about life, the planet....

And soon after that you became the founders of *Escola da Cidade*. What was that like, becoming teachers rather than being students? How did the school come about? You leave one school and found a new one?

[CM] - Exactly. Ciro Pirondi was the director of an architecture school in the city of Mogi das Cruzes, near São Paulo. When he became the school's director, he invited several people and transformed the program into something completely different from all other programs and whose structure was highly influenced by that at FAUUSP.



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In what year is this, Cris?

[CM] – in 1995, 1996. When *Ciro* is fired from this school, the teachers all resign and leave and then and there arises the idea of founding *Escola da Cidade*. 2022 marks the twentieth anniversary of the school's first class and the association's twenty-fifth anniversary.

[FV] - I think this transition from FAU to *Escola da Cidade* rather evidences the models of these schools. Sao Paulo school, which people call "escola paulista", is not a style of architecture but generational transitions, gradual transitions- which I think is beautiful - not generational breaks. An example is when Artigas, who was already the great teacher at FAU, enters the competition for the gym at *Clube Atlético Paulistano*, loses the competition to Paulo and the second place is awarded to Pedro Paulo de Mello Saraiva. Instead of placing these young men aside, Artigas invites them to be his assistants. I think that there is always this idea of schools being a little different in São Paulo and in Rio de Janeiro. Oscar Niemeyer was never a teacher. In São Paulo, Artigas founded the school, as well as designed it and its teaching plan. When we entered FAU, this idea that these generational transitions could be gentle and generous was seen as almost part of the profession itself. In other words, we always imagined that part of our work as architects was in line, in continuity with the training that we had received.



[FV] – And that building, so transformative, is a building in which architecture itself is a class, it is very powerful and provides us with the means to measure the world. If a cloud passes in the sky, the building becomes dark. If it rains, it gets noisy. If the wind blows, it blows inside, swallows fly over the studio. It is a school that has no doors, it is open and it is life itself. You enter it and you leave it fully transformed six, seven years later. When you enter, you are just a boy, and you leave having gained other perspectives.

But why does it change you? What does the school give you?

[FV] – There is a feeling of independence, which has to do with the fact that it is a public university. In a country like ours, that is revealing. I studied at a private school. You enter that universe, you talk with very different people, being in that public world does, in fact, change you - even more if you are a young man in Brazil. The building itself, in which everything you do is somehow transforming the space, the sound of space, and interferes in others' lives, these are forms of coexistence that educate you. The FAU building is an instrument. Even if blindfold, anyone who has lived in FAU building knows that they are inside it, just because of the sound.

What about *Escola da Cidade*?

[FV] - I think, just as we had the commitment to older generations, we also knew that we had to pass the torch to the younger ones: school as continuity. Based on our deep love for FAU, we founded *Escola da Cidade*. FAU, within the entire university system, began to stabilize and stiffen, which is natural in a very large institution, where those who can teach are those who have an academic career or a PhD. The school left out great architects who could no longer teach at FAU, who could not be teachers. In *Escola da Cidade* we tried to create a place of freedom, based on the division that took place in the Sao Paulo school. And if you consider the teachers who are with us, and who could not teach at FAU, because they do not hold a PhD, you can realize how important *Escola da Cidade* has become. Marta Moreira, from MMBB, Francisco Fanucci, from Brazil Arquitetura, André Vainer, who is the co-author of SESC Pompeia, Guilherme Paoliello, Vinicius Andrade, who did the project for Instituto Moreira Salles, all these people are in *Escola da Cidade* but could not teach at FAU because they have professional experience rather than a PhD. So, I think that what *Escola da Cidade* brings to the table is not based on competition, but on collaboration and continuity in regards to FAU. This is very beautiful. The school that has more students attending FAU's master's degree is **Escola da Cidade**. What we have tried to do is: since we do not have the Vilanova Artigas building, we have the centre of the city of São Paulo. The FAU building is beautiful, but it is absolutely isolated, in a campus beyond the river, in a situation that, of course, was based on the logistics of the military dictatorship – to place students across the river. In the case of *Escola da Cidade*, as the name indicates, we aim that learning architecture

is carried out in the city centre, with our school spread throughout the city. There is no bar or canteen inside the school - there is the restaurant on the corner.



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And in terms of the model of the program, what did you add to the program at FAUUSP?

[CM] - It is important to talk about the school's pedagogical project because, in fact, it is a different project from that of FAUUSP. Firstly, it is a full-time period, from two to eight and midnight, students have the mornings free. This already creates a very different time set, which allows you to work, that you have other activities, which is impossible at FAU. It is a project that sought to understand that one learns a lot from the place, from where the work is located. The program includes two activities, *Escola Itinerante* and *Vivência Externa*, two mandatory activities, two moments when students are outside the school - learning from the teachers, the buildings, and the city - but in a different place. It is a program that is different each year, depending on the conditions we have. The school being a travelling school offers students much more than you just being closed somewhere.

[CM] - *Escola Itinerante* takes place from the first to the fourth year, students and teachers leave for a week to visit, take classes and visits, and they meet with teachers and professionals, with the authors, on site. These meetings may take place in Brazil,



they have already taken place in Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, the interior of São Paulo, in Bahia, Pernambuco, the Amazon, but also outside Brazil - in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. They have taken place in many different locations. So, this is *Escola Itinerante*, the travelling classroom.

The other program is called *Vivência Externa*. The program offered in *Escola da Cidade* was initially a five-year program, which is the duration of architecture programs in the rest of Brazil, but currently it is six years long. In the program we include a study exchange at some other university, for six months, or an internship, because we always feel that you can have in-depth work experiences in an internship. So we included the mandatory internship by the Ministry of Education, our students just have a six-month full-time professional experience, a very important experience. Transforming our degree in a six-year program implies more money and more time; however, we have always had a lot of students wanting to study with us, so I think there is also an understanding that this adds great value.

And we also have *Estúdio Vertical*, a pioneering practice, which involves placing students attending different years all together to work on a very experimental project, we are talking about the whole school working together for a semester. We have fifteen, twenty teachers - depending on the semester - supervising the students, doing this program. Students must do this for three years, it is the highest workload of the school - three hours, three days a week.

This is very nice, because they learn from the teachers and from the other students, right?

[FV] - It creates a very cohesive school. You are with all the students all the time. That is a somewhat similar to what we experienced, that very intense week here in *Estúdio Vertical Studio* in DA/UAL, in 2021.

Your student profile is possibly very different from those attending other schools in Brazil. Who are your students? Do they come from all over Brazil, do they come from the city, from Sao Paulo?

[FV] - In the beginning, our students were the children of acquaintances who chose a school that was just opening in an abandoned building in *Boca do Lixo*. This led to a rather romanticised student profile, a student who was willing, who was free, open to a different place. That somewhat influenced the profile of the School. But, as the years went by, rather than being restricted to that profile, we have received many exchange students from Latin America, Colombians, Argentinians - and also Portuguese. And, right from the start, we tried to build a school that could include students who could not afford a private school in Brazil. That was a huge effort, an institutional effort. Still today we have a social council that is there only for this and that has been expanding its action.

We have no money from external sources, none. All the money we have is from tuition fees, from the students, the partnerships we have built, from postgraduate courses, free courses, but that's how we manage the school; we pay for the rent by refurbishing the building, but we use money from the owner himself. And with our efforts, nowadays we manage to offer twenty percent scholarships, it is a large percentage.



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I imagine that this more inclusive perspective is as important for the students who benefit from it as for the others?

[FV] - Both grow up a lot. We even started to accept students who have a different training, who come from other social classes, who worked as teenagers or who studied in public schools, who are more mature when they enter university, whose drive to do the program is huge, despite some shortcomings in their education. But sometimes this inclusion can lead to prejudice, as the program has progressed, these issues have appeared. That is why we opened a high school two years ago, with children aged fifteen to seventeen who study with us before entering university. It is a program equivalent to our high school, our secondary school. Students can then choose what they want to study, but they can also continue to study with us, at *Escola da Cidade*. The first class graduates high school at the end of 2022. Resorting to external scholarships and sponsorships, we are able to pay these students for their high school; when they enter university, they will be the best trained and will have lived in the centre of the city, they



will have received enviable training when compared to those who studied in private schools. The school is already changing and, from next year onwards, the changes will be even greater, the roles will be reversed. They will be great architecture students.

I think it can be said that at the origin and in the DNA of *Escola da Cidade* there is dialogue. It begins with dialogue on the city, it continues in the centre of the city, and now there is this exchange among the students.

[FV] - The School has been created for the students, but it has also been created for us. The school is this group of friends, architects and researchers - because nowadays the school is also a research school. But this idea of school as a place to think, to learn with the students, for the teachers to be together and reflect about our place in the world, I think this an important thing to say. Firstly, the two buildings, which were housing buildings designed by architect Oswaldo Bratke in the forties, are gradually being refurbished with the participation of the students, through conducting refurbishing workshops. In the post-graduate program that I and Alvaro Puntoni have been coordinating for thirteen years, we also try to think about our place in the world - and I think that is a beautiful thing to do.

[CM] - I think I should mention a course - the Seminar on Culture and Contemporary Reality. It is a mandatory course, it takes place on Wednesdays, in the middle of the week, and that is when we discuss current affairs, we analyse society, its real issues and what has been happening in the world. Most participants are not architects, but doctors, biologists, musicians, artists, historians, anthropologists, archaeologists...

Cris, I think it is time to talk about your role as the current school director. What do you want to add to the school?

[CM] - I am in the direction of the bachelor's program since 2019 along with Maira Rios. In 2014, Ciro invited me to create a postgraduate course on architecture teaching, on training architects. I invited Maira, one of our teachers, to coordinate the program with me and the idea was to discuss how to teach and learn architecture. It was a program whose structure was based on lectures by different guests. Seeing all these people share their experiences of other pedagogical projects, of other schools, inside and outside Brazil, was very interesting. It was all in-person, and it was very important for the change that took place at the School from then onwards. Since the first class included thirty of our teachers, it was not open to the public. The School designed this course for those teachers, who often had no other degree besides their bachelor's, in order to foster discussion on teaching and learning, and this was a moment of enlightenment.

It became a forum for discussion about the School, because everyone was a teacher, everyone had a lot of experience, but had never studied theories or education or pedagogy. After this course, which I coordinated for five years, I left to join the board.



The course is today a place for those seeking to start their training as teachers. It has been very interesting, and the assistant teachers, who are temporarily at the School, generally take this course.

The great transformation took place in 2019, when the School started being managed by a board. This is a big change; there are ten directors, five men, five women, who coordinate it - each manages an area, because the School has expanded a lot in that time - but they participate in all discussions and decisions in our very frequent meetings. We meet at least once a week, and have very long meetings. We have a huge task, which is to institutionalize several areas and procedures that have been very experimental, that were designed to make things happen, and that have often been very individualized. We have a challenge - to imagine that soon we will not be there, and that this important structure has to strengthen and stand on its own.

The relationship with the city and with society is another challenge, to think about who these students are, these young professionals we are training. The expanded field of our profession is very wide, we almost can't list everything we do today. These are things that we did not imagine twenty years ago, types of actions that keep on reinventing themselves. And I think that the School also has this role, of proposing and making these fields expand and open. There are two examples that I think are important in this new form of action. One of them is the development, within the school, of a SESC project, SESC Campo Limpo, which started 5 or 6 years ago, within a pedagogical structure. How do we get this back to the students, to the teachers? How can everyone take advantage of this and not be a reproduction of an studio? I think this is a challenge, to think of all the research that can be conducted and that can foster work, project, which, at the same time, must build itself autonomously. The neighbourhood of Campo Limpo is very well known, there are many specific cultural actions taking place there, which a structure like a school can add to. We did a cartography of these actions and sought this interconnection through a great program - SESC -, doing workshops and discussions at the whole School; it is not a project that is designed by one person, it is designed by the school. The project with the municipality of Diadema is also an example of this different way of doing architecture, the government asked the School to do projects that the school can do. *Estúdio Vertical*, for example, devoted the first semester to developing studies for several areas of Diadema. Another course, from the fifth year, *Exercício Único*, which brings together technology, project and design, also worked on these areas of Diadema. They are discussion forums, reflection spaces within the school, the biggest contribution is to understand the project as research.



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Do you approach the public authorities or do they approach you?

[FV] - The teachers approached us; in the case of Diadema, Mario Reali, who is a great teacher and lectures urbanism and who, in the past, was the mayor of Diadema, he was the one who approached us, because he did not have a technical body to discuss things with.

Basically, the school is the starting point for other things that may happen? Do you also propose new projects?

[FV] - Yes, there is a huge number of ways we can relate to society and public authorities. I will give you another example: a large Brazilian construction company was accused and convicted of having employed work considered similar to slave work in building the third terminal of São Paulo airport. They had to pay a fine, pay for compensation by doing a public construction work. Some of this work was done in schools. Because we are a private school but of public interest we are accredited to conduct this work. So, the compensation financed research that involved publication, workshops, discussions about what slave labour means, today, in the construction industry in São Paulo. It was a huge one-year-long research involving many teachers and students.



Let me ask you a rather subversive question. Are you also approached by private companies?

[FV] - Before answering, I want to talk about how this has had an impact in the way that this generation of school architects is doing architecture. After many, many years, our generation has again started designing projects for the real estate market in São Paulo. Some generations refused to do it as a result of their ideological perspective. And the city was still being built. Our generation thought that, despite all the problems, it is better to design for the market than to not do it. All our teachers design projects. Some private groups linked to the real estate market, are looking for us precisely to try to create a discussion forum that can bring these two worlds closer. Now we are developing a program to discuss the urban issues involved in a private real estate market venture. Yes, we are also trying to build bridges everywhere.

Cris, was your post-graduate experience decisive for becoming a director? Have you taken your reflection on learning and teaching with you and to the people who work with you, the board members?

[CM] – Yes, this course taught me about construction and its collective nature. I learned that education is not conveying knowledge, but a cultural construction of something that is new to everyone, to the teacher, to the student. The idea is that you teach what you don't know, what you don't know yet. That construction will be carried out collectively. I think this understanding is a little different from what existed before, and this is something that has been consolidated in recent years. It is an understanding of the students' autonomy; the students will make their own journeys. So, we are making some adjustments, pedagogical enhancement, to allow for more options within the program, more electives.



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More optional courses?

[CM] - Exactly. Optional courses were introduced when the program had been running for six years. We introduced these courses in the fifth year, then in the fourth and now, in the pandemic, down to the first year, and it has been an amazing experience.

This is what we mean when we talk about new practices that excite teachers and then students. There are several exercises conducted by students in *Estúdio Vertical*, or conducted in *Exercício Único* by fifth-year students. These exercises are carried out by the students as a group, they get together and go to a community where they analyse the issues they want or can address.

Do they all influence one another?

[CM] - I think there is something beautiful in the way this school has redefined representations. When we founded our high school, in 2019, student representation also increased. There are always many students in the councils, in the nucleus - and this is also a means of learning, both for us and for these students: how come you don't speak about you and you alone, but speak about the collective? This has also been very interesting, it is a school that aims to be more democratic, more open, and that is always difficult, it is not simple.



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Can we now talk about the studio? Tell us a little bit about how the studio started, when and how the first projects were designed.

[FV] - We have always tried to do construction collectively. Since *Caramelo*, we have always worked as part of a group, never just the two of us. So, whether the *Caramelo* group or the way we organized the studio, or the desire to work as a group in schools - our motivation was exactly that, the collective, rather than the isolated genius artist. In this sense, the studio was founded by a group of students in the *Caramelo* group; this was a very large group that was divided into smaller ones. It was a large group, when it started we were eleven people, who have been divided and worked in different studios. When we completed our program, in our last year, we took a trip across Europe with a group of friends. When we returned to Brazil, each of us worked in a teacher's studio, architects who were a little older than we were, who were already established. And at the same time, the desire to continue as a group, to design as a group, began to emerge. So, we rented a small room inside a small house in Vila Madalena. There, we started to design some small projects. In the first year, we sent the only project we had designed for a young architect's competition and we won. The following year, we participated in a competition for an agricultural research centre, a rural school, and we won second place. That excited us a lot and then we entered a competition for changing the São Paulo Post and Telegraph Building, to change it into a cultural centre and, to everyone's total



surprise, we won this two-stage competition. This allowed everyone to leave the other studios.

At that time, you already were UNA architects, right?

[FV] - We were already UNA architects. We were seven when we founded the first group. Then Fernando Nigro Rodrigues left and we set up the company with the six of us: Cris, myself, Fabio Valentim, Fernanda Barbara, Ana Paula Pontes and Catherine Otondo. We won the Post Office competition and founded our studio.

When was that?

[FV] - in 1996. We had to hire twenty complementary teams, and coordinate a huge project, with all the required approvals, and it was amazing, because it allowed us to design other projects which appeared because of this one, and I cannot even start to describe the madness of setting a studio- when you think there is nothing else you need to do, something new shows up and you keep on postponing finishing the studio. In fact, we have not finished it yet.

This first competition was the one that opened the doors for you?

[CM] - It structured the studio, gave us the opportunity to experience a huge project, something we never would have imagined, all these professionals working together. It gave the group the recognition that allowed us to do other things.

Was it at this time that you moved to Rua General Jardim, in Higienopolis?

[CM] - That was in 2003. A little after the Post Office project, when our children were born.

[FV] - This question is important, the space where we worked, because these first projects were designed in that little house we rented in Vila Madalena. But soon after that we received an invitation from Antonio Carlos Barossi, who was our teacher. When he was a student at FAU, in the seventies, he and his friends occupied a warehouse in Vila Madalena, an old workshop, they were a kind of a community, they lived and worked together, and a whole generation, who are now about 65, lived and worked in that space. Vila Madalena was still a different neighbourhood, it was a village, where there was a very strong movement connected to samba, connected to bohemian lifestyle, it was an experimental place, it was located on the way between the city and FAU. Antonio Carlos Barossi invited us to share this space with him, it was a big space, we could even hire trainees, young architects, to work with us - and we kept using this space, to the point that Antonio Carlos Barossi left and we kept the space. We worked there until 2003, when Paulo Mendes da Rocha invited us to do the project for the Olympics in São Paulo,

a project we made in collaboration with other studios. Paulo and we organized a group of five studios and we did the project in record time - three months. We started working in Vila Madalena and finished in Higienópolis; our first child was born in 2002, and we moved there. We live in this area, where our studio is and our house is, near the children's schools, and near *Escola da Cidade*.

So, this is almost a circle? You found Paulo Mendes da Rocha at FAU, then Paulo Mendes da Rocha found you and you ended up basing your work there. Paulo is a kind of an authority figure in your path.

[CM] - He was present at many different times. In the Post Office competition, in the second phase, we were very doubtful that we would win and even talked to Paulo about it - and he came to our studio for a visit. He came to see what we were doing and we rehearsed our project presentation. The deadline was close, the last stage of the competition was a public presentation, and we rehearsed our presentation in front of him. And that was key, he made comments that completely changed the presentation, we changed several things. He was always very close.



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[FV] - We couldn't believe it, you know? How generous it was that he showed up and helped us, we didn't even know if he knew we were in this second phase of the



competition. And he was paying attention to what we were doing. This is a very beautiful thing, coming from a teacher.

Were you aware that your work was different?

[FV] - That is a difficult question. I think we understood that our discourse made sense, not as something unique, but rather an enhancement of a language or field of knowledge, and we understood that some fields could be linked - urbanism, planning, architecture or design. To select a preserved building, from the beginning of the century, eclectic, heavy, and allow the city to pass - connecting all the dimensions of the city - was very revealing and marked our training as architects. This idea of public squares, of alleys becoming part of architecture, we pursued it, we knew that this would allow for new discourse. But to choose the details of the materials, build the day-to-day of the profession, which are thousands of decisions every day, that I think we learned step by step. The fact that we were part of a group helped us think, but we were not a formal structure and we were not single-minded as a group. We always thought that our work would derive from this dynamic of dialogue and discussion rather than from a formal strategy, our work would result from the process of dialogue and discussion. I also want to mention the importance that the outside perspective had, because that helps you think and awards you responsibility for your own actions.

And any proposal must be very well grounded, which forced you, from the beginning, to listen to others. And all that is proposed, is proposed with a reflection and with a reasoning, thought, theoretical thought with underlying research, always working collectively.

Collective action, something you insist on, is a kind of an echo of public space, something that is always present in your projects, even in those who are for private clients - one of your most important materials is concrete. There is a set of elements that are always present in your work.

[CM] - Yes. This is very clear for us, because the bases of each project are very different. Sometimes it may seem that concrete is present, that there is this search for an expression of apparent concrete, those structures that are already form itself, which are already the building itself. In fact, we have an understanding that there is always a reaction, that there is always something that provokes you and that was already there. So, understanding what was there before is an important issue for us. What does this place, all the conditions of each project, ask you? What does this place tell you? It is not contextualizing, that is not the question, it is the idea of understanding what there was, and what there has always been. In each situation, we will seek to find an appropriate or adequate answer. Whether it is constructive systems, or the way it touches the ground, or the way it relates to all the neighbouring elements, the climate, how it opens, protects

or appears, and its use, which is also changing, which is also not static. We start each project not knowing what it will be, not knowing what the result will be, what will happen there. It will depend on many issues, and they will shape the project. I think it is a kind of a search. Because that is how it happens. The conditions of each project are not the same.

If you had to choose the project that you liked to design the most, which would this project be?

[CM] - I can't even make lists of the five films, of the five songs I like the most... let alone choose a project I've already designed...

But, if I think about it, the Post Office project has influenced us a lot, we learned to coordinate a large project, at an urban scale, all this was essential. Then we did a public school in Campinas, a public equipment in the outskirts of the city, construction and industrialization were the essence of the project. And we also designed the urban plan for the neighbourhoods of Mooca and Ipiranga in SP, which taught us about the issues of metropolitan scale and made us systematize certain strategies in terms of the role of infrastructures as city design, urban permanence and memory, industrial heritage. And another important project was to design a residential building for the real estate market, the Huma Klabin building, and learn about the rules of the city. There we tried to introduce small contributions in the scale of urban kindness, which were replicated in other projects.

The Post Office project seems to be *the project*. It is a very important project for you....

[FV] - It was very relevant, it was formative, but it was never completed, its full potential was never assessed. It was completed, for us, as reasoning, as training, but its influence on the city was not completed. In this sense, it can never be the project. The project that excites me the most is the next one, in the municipality of Diadema, that we will design in *Escola da Cidade*, a project we will design with the community, a work of resistance, in the poorest outskirts of the expanded centre of Sao Paulo. I am very hopeful that Diadema will be our most important work.

Thank you very much.

