

## Interview with architect Gonçalo Byrne

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**Gonçalo, it is an honor and a pleasure to have you here, as our interviewee. We could not help but start this conversation with an observation, which has a little to do with the moment we are living. You are one of the great Portuguese architects who began his journey exactly to face the theme of the emergence of collective housing. That is, when you left college and began your professional experience, you sought to collaborate with people who were directly dealing with this problem – I am thinking of the National Civil Engineering Laboratory (LNEC), but also in the atelier of Rua da Alegria – and, already in your own name, you made two of the works of reference of housing that sought to give an answer of dignity, on a certain urban scale. How do you see the dramatic moment we are going through?**

The moment is so drastic that it clearly goes beyond the world of architecture. In society, in culture, not to mention, obviously, geopolitics, we are going through a moment in which we are almost on the razor's edge, a movement of a universal, planetary scope. And, of course, that is left over for architecture, as always. Although architecture, interestingly, is a form of knowledge that is accustomed to dealing with transformation, I would say that transformation is such a profound condition of architecture that architects have some advantage at this time. I often say that if everything does not end badly, there will be a deep crisis, but like all crises, it will bring change. And I always have the perspective that crises are for growth – and I hope this one will be too.



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In any case, now at the national level, talking about housing, about the right to housing, we are going through a very complex moment. The "More Housing" measures have just come out, which have further dramatized this moment. I think it is an absolutely extraordinary initiative; we were already unaccustomed to measures of this kind, but there is one problem: I do not know to what extent its very transformative aspect – in theory, at least – is not an explosion that results from a postponement of a situation. The notion I have is that it seems that finally governments have woken up.

**When you began to work, there was on the horizon of expectation of the young architects of the 1970s and early 1980s the ability to fix housing typologies, or even urban forms, capable of reinventing (or having the ambition to try) the city. What seems to us to be happening today is that, in fact, the Portuguese government has reacted in an unexpected way, we agree, but from the point of view of our discipline, all the competitions that are launched seem to have a weak ambition for typological experimentation, or even for response to the problems of the contemporary city. In other words, the question seems to us to be poorly drafted.**

That is what I was going to say. Eventually, they woke up, but they did so late and very stunned. Because the fundamental problems continue and that is unfortunate; it is a pity, because – and now I speak also for the situation we have lived in the Order [of Architects] – I struggle to understand how it is that (and I do not speak only of this government) in this country, culturally, one goes silently, discreetly, passively, lateralizing and ignoring the fundamental, essential dimension of citizenship. There is an intersection between citizenship and architecture, between *polis* and architecture, which was strangely cultivated, I would say even in an intense way, in the PREC period. It was

a moment in architecture that I lived intensely, because, precisely, it brought this experience still of the previous regime that, a little on the margins of it, managed to create niches, I would say, of a vision of the city, of the common good, where architecture had, in fact, a role. I know it was a lateral one, it was the Federation of Social Security Funds, the Lisbon City Council, with the Technical Office of Housing, and in Oporto too, with some rehabilitation programs, but there was a role.

After the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1974, in that upheaval, it is very curious to see what happened in terms of cultural transformation, because it was of a brutal complexity. What happened back then, among many other things, was a brutal transformation of a country that lived still on an imperial dream, though already completely decrepit and in decay (the last phenomenon, in architecture, which was a dregs of this dream, was the Portuguese World Exhibition), and that suddenly realized that this dream was a mirage that had no possible support. Sometimes I make a bit of a parallel with what is going on today, the latest events are worrying. I don't know if you watched Putin's speech on two different days. The first showed him with the whole *establishment*, looking hyperconcentrated and worried, the reaction of the faces of the people watching the speech is very worrying, because it is an audience that is there and I could not see a smile during that whole moment. Then, the next day, a rehearsed party in a stadium. This reminded me of many things, when the Colonial War began in '61...



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**Gonçalo, you witnessed many episodes that we consider historical, starting with the Colonial War. There was a first wave of hope with the Marcelist Spring and the constitution of the Housing Development Fund. Subsequently, you worked in the programs of the Housing Development Fund, as well as in the SAAL Program, in housing cooperatives after the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, including in private sector housing. With this journey, what is your opinion on what the real problem of housing is? How can we try to solve it?**

What you see today, when you talk about housing, is a little shocking. When we are going to dialogue in the ministries (with some exceptions: for example, the Ministry of the Environment is involved in environmental issues, thus has another type of openness), it is above all a numerization, a quantification of the phenomenon of architecture. It is a reduction to the competitive in a perspective, I would say almost distressing, of urgency, which I think is limiting, because that urgency and the quantitative are an inadvisable cocktail for those who talk about cities, which are organisms of medium and long times. To start this "More Housing" program when we are three years away from the end of the RRP funds is distressing; it is terrible, because one sees that there is no notion whatsoever that housing has the other side, which is the qualitative one. And to ignore this side of the qualitative is to ignore the great reality. Housing is not done to win a championship, or to win a cup, it is done because there are real problems, because the city is going through a very strong crisis, which has been slowly creeping in and that, with these latest transformations (the climate crisis, the pandemic and, now, with the issue of the war that has triggered inflation), it gets worse and worse. And what we see today is this inaction of the public housing initiative. I think private sector has an important role to play, but the coordination between private and public sectors has been "asleep" for many years, I would say since the late 1980s. It is curious to see how after the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, in PREC period, which, obviously, was one of great upheaval, there were a number of seeds that were very important to rethink the city, the public space – to think about what makes the city the space of citizenship. From then on, the absence of the mediation of the State began, it began to delegate, with great comfort, in banking and technocracy.

**I think there was another difference between the two periods that you experienced. There was, in political decisions, in the 1970s, at least in southern Europe, the influence of thinking architects, where we include yourself. And it comes to our mind the great thinkers like Aldo Rossi, Giorgio Grassi, or the Catalan School, all of them were able to produce knowledge that was porous, in relation to politics. You brought to this work, of course, this level of architectural culture and erudition. What we feel today, as architects ourselves, is that politics is completely alienated from disciplinary thinking. We do not know if architects do not also have a huge responsibility in this, because our discipline has resigned from throwing thinking to the forefront.**

The perspective today, in terms of housing, is a long way from entering the world of quality. I have noticed this within the Order itself; we have insisted on the issue of architectural quality – now it will again be in the spotlight at the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the

Order of Architects. But I sense reactions from colleagues who say that what is needed right now is quantity. Of course, this dilemma has always existed, but one must be careful, because the problem is the "or". Indeed, the State says this is so emerging that what is needed is to have numbers, it takes urgency. And what I say is this: yes, but without neglecting quality. And they are not incompatible. The problem is that, nowadays, the very machine of the State is completely unequipped with *staff*, this world that existed. I had a conversation two and a half years ago, at the very beginning of my term as president of the Order, with the president of the Institute of Housing and Rehabilitation (IHRU), in which I asked "How is IHRU, which is rightly in charge of managing the housing bazooka issue, going to react to this, with the deadlines, urgencies, that it has?". And there has been an incredible effort, because it has not given up the design contest, which is already a minimal stronghold of the discussion on quality... But I insisted: "How is it, with all that needs to be done about new typologies, the new ways of inhabiting? We had a pandemic, which revealed so much, and now, with the whole issue of ecology, of sustainability, we need to rethink all of this, where is the *staff* to elaborate on that?". And the lawyer said "architect, there are none of those left here". I gave the example of the *staff* that there was in the Technical Office of Housing; there were sociologists, architects, engineers, there was a continuous reassessment – of what was done in North Olivais, before moving to South Olivais and Chelas – there was a continuous elaboration. And one of the issues is to think that housing, if it is thought of as an isolated context, makes no sense at all. Housing only makes sense because it is one of the essential matters of the city. Perhaps the most important of all. And a lot was learned at that time, from the point of view of proposition, but also of critical review.



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Bernard Huet, who was the director of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* for a long time, came to Portugal to do the famous number on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April. And Bernard Huet, whom I met later (he was a professor in Lausanne, and we collaborated with one another) wrote at the time a series of articles very critical of the systematic view of housing, saying that there was a kind of strand, I would say postmodern, of the machine city, of the *machine to the habiter*. Repetition yes, but we have to see that this is also a consequence of a need for an absolutely disproportionate response, because two world wars, but above all the second one, forced a response, the Marshall Plan, which was so absorbed by the quantitative, that it implied heavy measures of doing, a repetitive attitude.

I went through a little bit of this critical movement, which seemed to me also important, because I think that, in the attack that is made on modern architecture, architects and architecture are unjustly victimized, to the extent that it is said that modern architecture killed the historic city, that the post-war reconstruction in Italy was disastrous for the heritage, the "Mussolinian gutting", and so on. That is not true. We know that even in the Mussolinian period, there were things very well done. But the truth is that the great victim of the modern city, and its reconstruction, is not the architects, it is war. I have been talking about it now, because we see it live on television day and night – war is clearly the suspension of architecture, and the antithesis of architecture, and it has brutal consequences. And we are going back to that time again.

But what is happening in Portugal at the moment, and architects have to be on the proactive side, good or bad, is that we have to build, we have to create a way of not throwing away the money that exists, because there are twenty-six thousand houses. Now, with the reinforcement, with the possibility of rehabilitation, they talk of thirty-five thousand houses. We are talking about a sector that is growing desperately and the solution for that is not house selling, but renting. The policy of the late 1980s had several harmful consequences. It eliminated renting because everybody became owners. That is not bad in itself; it was a problem of the financial conjuncture, but it generated two very bad city types – one was the peripheralization of the uncontrolled city, at low costs, but still with some attractive power, where one could buy cheaply, without thinking about what would be paying afterwards on trips and in the peripheralization of the city. The other was that of a desertification of the historic center. And we are living that now.

Interestingly, there was a turning point of this perspective of the city, that has gone unnoticed, but which was very important, which was Expo '98 Exhibition. It was a turning point because, from an ephemeral event, which is an Exhibit (in Seville it went wrong, but in Barcelona, with the Olympics, it went very well, in the sense of relaunching the whole movement of urban rehabilitation – and of some expansion as well, as there was already a lot of talk about rehabilitation). It was a cluster where the city if thought of again, with housing as a byproduct, that is, the side product, with a very curious financial engineering; and it had everything, starting from a brownfield, which was highly polluted, which was rehabilitated to make a piece of city, which today is probably the most alive piece of the city of Lisbon, in terms of living. It was also continued with the Polis programs, for example, which put the reflection of the city back into the public space, which was very important. There are programs, from time to time, that governments implement, such as Rehabita, but they have minimal consequences, from the point of view of housing. And today we have only 2% of the public housing stock, one of the lowest in all of Europe, including ultra-liberal Europe such as the Netherlands, which stands at 12%.

**In the past, you made a series of trips to the various English new towns and to the German *siedlungs*. Why is it that in Portugal this type of programme did not happen at the same time as the rest of Europe?**

I would say that for economic reasons, because, in fact, in Portugal there is always a chronic problem; it is a fragile economy that, until the 1950s, was very much based on a colonialism that was declining. When the Second World War ended, Portugal had a serious problem that Salazar tried to manage with the creation of the overseas provinces (a somewhat pilgrim idea of covering up colonization), but had a hard time realizing that it was the democratic regimes that won the war. Although there were some reforms (the Duarte Pacheco period was important), there was a lot of poverty, there was a real economic problem and there was a cultural problem as well. Portugal remained economically rural, but above all culturally rural. There was a clear gap in relation to Europe, although there were such niches – even before the Housing Development Fund and the Technical Housing Scheme, there was a small nucleus in the LNEC, with Nuno Portas, who was a bridge with Nuno Teotónio Pereira, in the studio, which was also linked to the Federation of Social Security funds, which made a desperate effort – it organized two very important symposiums (Chombard of Lauwe came, all the European elite of the time) – but which had relatively few consequences from a cultural point of view, even among architects.



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I was very lucky to be very close to Nuno Portas and Nuno Teotónio Pereira. Nuno Portas' father had been my father's class mate; they were both mining engineers. But, above all, I know the architects Nuno Portas and Nuno Teotónio, and this sensitivity that there was in them, especially in the theme of housing. There was a rethinking about modern architecture, which had to do with the last CIAM – and this comes a little bit through Fernando Távora and all the architects of the North who were linked to that generation – Viana Lima, Octávio Felgueiras, Carlos Loureiro. Then, in the South, Nuno Teotónio, Nuno Portas, João Braula Reis, and a number of other architects, introduced European authors and experiences. Távora went a lot for the revision of the CIAM and, therefore, was a little closer to the Netherlands, also Finland, and also Aldo Rossi.

Portas and LNEC introduced, fundamentally, the Italians and the English authors – amongst the Italians, not yet Rossi, but Ludovico Quaroni and INA-casa, the great Italian housing institute post-Mussolini, which did all the development of housing and which had a very important architectural and theoretical production. Also, on the English side, they introduced the whole culture of the successive new towns.

I remember visiting, as an architecture student, the London housing technical office, the Great London Council (GLC), which was studying Greater London. I went to the office, introduced myself, said that I was very curious about the work that the GLC was doing, that I had a plan of visits and that I would like to know more information about the first generation of new towns. I was greeted at the reception and, at one point, someone came down (I later came to know that the person was one of the directors of the office), who spent an entire morning with me, explaining what was being done, patient like a saint. He filled me with literature, gave me a series of clues to go visit, at the time





Stevenage, Harlow, the first, we were still entering the second wave of the new towns – then came the third, which was a little closer to the garden city again. And I visited a number of others, lesser-known ones. Later on, I came back, this time as an architect.

**Some of those sets are classified as World Heritage Sites. And we talk about things that, in hindsight, people recognized as collective memory. If this happened, it means that the effort of all those architects, politicians and thinkers was worth it. Making the bridge to the moment that we are going through now, the ambition should not have been less, that is, those architects knew that they were in dialogue with the times, even making the most common of programs – small topologies (some houses were thirty-nine square meters) – painful construction processes, because they were often ahead of technology. Today, in view of the urgency of which we have already spoken, it seems inevitable that ambition will be a dialogue with time to do something that is able to cope with it – and there is a paralysis.**

This dimension is fundamental. Today, the big problem is that the time of politics is the time of the immediate – and I think that this is going to be very expensive, it will have a very, very high price in social terms, in terms of the city, of citizenship, of housing, of living. Because citizenship, which is the central concept on the table, is fundamental. And it is very important in the question of rights and duties, and of participation in a model that is very much in question right now. Citizenship means living in a shared space. And that is where architecture comes in. And it does not come in alone, there are more people involved, landscapers, engineers. Today, it is very important to know that architecture not only has to rethink itself a little bit, but also has to rethink that it is not alone in making cities. There are also politicians, neighbours and residents' committees, there is a social and political movement that is essential – but which has completely broken apart.

**We would say that it is also necessary to have those stages where the city is discussed, in which the architects are quite absent. Is academia the first place where any change should be made?**

The answer to that question, for me, is very simple. Similar to what is happening with this government initiative – 'More Housing' – which is well-intentioned but late, academia is also lagging behind, in my opinion. Still in the late 1990s, early 2000s, I was in the department of Coimbra and, interestingly, students began to appear, who wanted to do their end of course work on sustainability. And the Scientific Council thought that if they wanted to do their thesis about sustainability, it should be with me. And I was left with the anathema of being the "service bore", although I said that I thought the topic was very important, but that I was not an expert on it. But what was curious was that the pressure came from the students. Of course, it is in universities that everything rises.

**Beatriz Colomina released a few months ago a very interesting book, called *Radical Pedagogies*, a history of the teaching of architecture around the world, from the 1960s to the 1980s. Schools of architecture around the world – Europe, North America, Latin America and, occasionally, some in Africa and Asia – were reacting to all the problems of hegemony of power,**

**hierarchy, gender difference. The book ends with Oporto and the fact that SAAL program had its seed within the school of architecture. It is another observation that we can make today, that schools themselves have lost a little of this side of radicality, understood as something necessary for transformation. And maybe that has to be gained again.**

I totally agree, in the sense that I think this transformation must clearly go through a radicalism of attitudes. The question begins in schools, but not only there. The question of radicality is inherent in the very transformation that is taking place. I think people do not realize that this last hatchet of war, which we see right now on television, is the obscene crackle of carbon civilization. All we see on television are charred buildings, all the war energy is carbonic. This war started with an invasion whose great asset is entirely carbon energy. All modern warfare relies on carbon energy, except nuclear – but nuclear warfare is bullying, because if it is not bullying even the war ends, everything ends.



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There are already statistics on the evolution of the carbon footprint on the planet since the war began, and it is increasing again; it was reducing, but that has already reversed. And this results from war, I don't know why that is not said. It may be said in Davos, but it does not reach the outside world and, therefore, we are living in a period in which the alternative – probably "screwed up", but it is the great challenge, what I call an eventual new Renaissance – the paradigm shift, only goes there with a radical attitude.



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**You also studied during another war, the Colonial War, and participated in a series of student struggles, which were very important in trying to reverse the authoritarian regime we lived in. Is there not a parallel between these two scenarios?**

Definitely. I think so. Nowadays, the phenomenon of young Greta Thunberg, with all the manipulation that may have, is a very clear signal that who is in the eye of the hurricane are my grandchildren, it is not me – it is you, it is your children. It is the students, the pupils (more so than teachers, who are usually older than students). There are so many intergenerational readings here in our country, which is getting older and older.... But I totally agree, and I increasingly find parallels between what is happening in world's geostrategy and what was experienced in Portugal, with the outbreak of imperialism, which is very evident today.

**Is it possible to have a future reaction, as there was back then, be it a political reaction or action responses?**

You know what I think is happening here? I do not know if you have read an American philosopher from Harvard, Michael J. Sandel; he has several books, but he has one above all, *The Tyranny of Merit*, which is worth reading. What is happening is that there is a constant; the economy has been concentrating on 10% of the population, tending to 1% of the population. And this evolution, which is behind all this problematic that we are discussing, has two solutions: a capitalist perspective or a Marxist perspective. The Marxist perspective has been reacting, in a certain way, but certainly struggling, because it is very orthodox; the proletariat today is much wider than the proletariat we used to know. The problem is that capitalism is a big chameleon and can adapt to all this. And the question that arises, in order to answer to reactions and of more or less popular movements, is that if nothing is done to intervene, correct or reverse this movement, this revolution is appearing in localized epiphenomena, at all levels, such as with teachers. And teachers' reaction is no longer the orthodox union reaction, it is another type of union reaction, because the processes of struggle are also undergoing evolutions. Otherwise, there are resurgences of religious wars, which are extremely complex, but which are on the table; it is not Putin, it is Kirill, and it is only now that we begin to give importance to that, it is the dream of Eurasia...

### **A new Cold War?**

The Cold War, in principle, needs bipartisanship. There was a tripartition, but now bipartisanship is being restored again. Russia was not imposing itself, it was the duality of China and United States of America – a post-Marxist movement, but translated into a muscular regime, and a democratic regime of liberal roots. Now, there is a third element that comes along and that is trying to reach China, which will reinforce bipartisanship again. But I think Russia's ideological project is not exactly China's. It is based on various ambiguities, it is a tremendous oligarchy – so is China, but there are differences. I do not know what it is going to be like. And then there is a great Russian dream, which is clearly pre-imperial; such are the ghosts of history.

**To end on a bright note, imagine that you were now finishing your degree. What would you like to do? What was the work front that you would embrace?**

That is a good question, to which I do not have an immediate answer, but I must say that I have been thinking and talking about it, even at the ceremonies to welcome the new members of the Order, because I usually say – and I used to say it during my Master's thesis in Coimbra – "You people are starting over. You are entering the world and suddenly things are no longer children's play. Now it's serious". Even academia sometimes generates some illusions that I think are dull, and serious, do not make it easy to youth, like this endogamy or endogeny – which is not a thing only of architecture; it is also due to the civilization of nihilism, of the iconic building of architecture, of the architecture of opulence, which has been built, even a little bit, in my opinion, to the exaggeration of the 'star architect', that is very much linked to this architecture that today is completely questioned, because it is, in fact, also a market phenomenon.



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### **It was not about necessity.**

It is not about the need. It is clearly a phenomenon of production of the linear market, moreover, it is not of the circular economy. I think there is a parallel world, where architecture is already trying to succeed, but it is a very much under construction world, which is very aware of this issue of "Reduce, reuse and recycle" and which has to do with a rebirth of architecture, which I think is fundamental. This is because we are really talking, I would say, about a rebirth. It is not the Renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, which was a European phenomenon; today, the Renaissance is global, it is planetary. And it affects everyone or no one. The issues of sustainability, of echoes, of

of ecology, are quite demanding and very radical, but I believe that this will imply a renaissance of architecture. There are some documents, such as the (clearly utopian) letter of the *New European Bauhaus*, which, like all utopias, is important. The problem is how utopias are built and how architecture will build them. That, for me, is the great challenge, not to say a big dream – which I will no longer witness – that I would like architecture schools to somehow build – and to realize that they are part of the solution and not part of the problem. Like the Orders, and in this case the Order of Architects, which I think has to give up a lot. They have to realize that they have been living in a world of illusion – not to say of great insignificance. Because we are not going anywhere with the Order that we have had... But it is also to realize that this change implies great internal changes and one of them is to realize that endogenies probably are about to cease. And that, for architecture, is a big challenge.



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**The idea of a rebirth is a fabulous ending, because it opens up many fronts, from the organic to the absolutely conceptual.**

The first time I published a short monograph in *Casabella* magazine was with a text by Manuel Mendes, who took a phrase that I used to say back then: "In architecture it is important to go to the places with the sunrise". When you have an architectural project, there is a will to transform the place. There is an illusion, there is a utopia – and the project is born. Siza Vieira once said a beautiful phrase: "When the project begins, it is like a bird that I hold in my hand. If I squeeze it too hard, it dies, if I squeeze it too little, it flies away". And I was saying that the place where the project is born is important to perceive with the sunrise, because the characteristics at sunrise are incredible, because there is a revelation of rebirth. The architecture of churches and the temples is very much



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based on this, the altar to the east is not because it faces Jerusalem, it is because it faces the sunrise. And night is all that is bad and day is all that is good.

### **Will it be a rebirth or will it be a reaction?**

I understand perfectly what you say, except that when I hear the word reaction, I have a chill. I was born into the culture that reaction was to lock your feet on the ground, it was to go backwards. But I agree, deep down. I think that more than a reaction, more than resistance, it is about resilience. Resistance used to be the great motto of architecture. Architecture resists all these temptations of the alienated world. Right now, resilience is about the phoenix rising from the ashes. Or, if you like, it is the ability to react to catastrophe. Not resistance. There is a very interesting book, *The resilient cities*, with seventeen case studies, and one of them is Lisbon. This city is one of the cases of urban resilience, with the earthquake. It is very interesting to see how Lisbon rose from the ashes – there is a logic, there is the Enlightenment, there is a thought. I think we are now clearly experiencing a challenge to all this: to react, to resist and to be reborn.