

Interview with architect Manuel Graça Dias

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JCL: We are delighted to start this series of interviews with the Architect, Professor and a great promoter of Architecture, Manuel Graça Dias. I would like to begin by saying that you were one of the teachers, if not the teacher, who most influenced me in University. I also know that you had a teacher, I think even before University, who greatly influenced you...

I had some teachers who influenced me a lot. In the Architecture course, in the former School of Fine Arts [ESBAL], there might have been two: the Sculptor Lagoa Henriques, who later taught here at DA/UAL, and Professor Manuel Vicente, who also lectures here to the second year.

In high school I had a very interesting, very strong, very striking teacher, the Painter António Quadros, who went to Mozambique, where I was then, and was our drawing teacher, in the 1st term of the former second year of high school (now the sixth grade). The presence of António Quadros in class was, for me, very revealing, very important,

The first time he gave us classes, he told us to draw an animal that did not exist, “with seven arms and seven legs, a crocodile tail, an elephant head, and three giraffe necks”, whatever we wanted. As he was describing this, I was already drawing frenetically.



I had with me a few sheets with frames painstakingly made at home, as it was more or less mandatory – something that was very hard to do, it smudged everything, and I had to repeat this a dozen times before getting a decent frame – and he said – “What is this sheet, why did you spend time doing this?” – He turned the paper over, sat down and began to fiddle with the brushes in three bits of paint: “So, what do you want, green?”. He began mixing blue with yellow and asked me if I liked that “green”. Then he began to paint a little. “Don’t you like it? Do you want it darker? Go over there and make it darker. Do you want brown? Mix red”. I was fascinated with that chemical, with the possibility of making a colour immediately, of being in charge of a tone. It was very exciting; I made my drawing, filled the entire sheet as he recommended, with a fantastic animal, extremely complex, full of colours.

I handed in the work convinced I would have another Sufficient. When he handed back my work I was very proud because I had a Very Good! The encouragement he gave us was enormous and from that moment on I was a huge fan of those classes; I took in every word he said.

Lagoa Henriques was our teacher in the first year in ESBAL, of Statue Design. It was immediately a fantastic discovery. Everyone was there with charcoal sticks, a fixative to apply at the end, a lot of bread crumbs as erasers, “smudgers”, made of felt in the shape of a pencil to rub and would take all the fun out of charcoal, the trace of our lines.

There we were, with all those tricks and Lagoa Henriques entered and immediately started screaming! He saw some people with bread crumbs: “What is that? Is it for the pigeons? Give me that!” He threw all the bread out the window, “I don’t want any bread crumbs!”

The first exercise was to observe and register a *chair*. He put the chair on a plinth and asked us to draw it from our visual point of view. I was very happy because I had achieved a very credible image of the chair...the paper was huge, it was a size A2, or larger, drawing paper, as it should be, stuck with thumb tags on the clipboard. I had drawn the chair with about ten centimetres in height, in the middle of the sheet, perfectly. I was very happy drawing, when Lagoa Henriques looked at it and told me: “Look here” – I thought he was going to praise me, but he took the charcoal, drew a small rectangle around the chair, a rectangle containing the chair in the middle of the whole paper -, “Listen, is your paper this size? Why did you draw as if the paper were just *this*? Draw in proportion to the paper!” he *yelled*; on the second day I loved those classes, Lagoa Henriques and his methods. I understood that what we should do was to experiment, more than repeat what we already knew, and that he was totally receptive to new situations.

He proposed we drew – very amazing at the time – tree branches that he picked on his way or something else that he would find in the trash – a strange machine, for example. Other times, those plaster busts that were in the former School for the Fine Arts, which were a reproduction of classical statues. He intended a more modern look. If you created a big black square in the background to highlight the piece, he would immediately appreciate it: “Ok, that’s it! Lets continue!”. At a certain point, I left the charcoal behind and started drawing with a pen; I took watercolours, crayons, I tried other materials, I would use the China ink directly as if it was a pen, and he was always encouraging and cheering! Those classes were very intensive!



Finally, Manuel Vicente arrived, the only one, from the teachers of Architecture, who was interesting. He was also very little canonical, very unorthodox. We only had classes with him for a short time and were really amazing! I think he lectured two subjects, Theory of Architectural Design – something invented at the time [1976], which later ended -, and Project.

We were there talking for four hours, around a table. Every day we had a theme. He never projected an image, we never saw an image! The themes were books, texts, movies, ideas. Things we did not know, nor had an idea they existed, especially in Architecture. He would talk about the Architecture he had seen, the places he had visited, what he had thought in those visits, and would talk about Louis Khan, when he had studied with Khan, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, Luis Barragan, Aldo Rossi – going to Gallarate and being baffled when under a simple expansion joint -, he made us talk, asked us where we lived, what architectural experiences we had had, which cities we had been to, where we had gone, where we hadn't gone. It was fascinating.

He brought us the magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* dedicated to Portugal, the issue that came out in 1976 [(# 185). Paris: Maio], and we were fascinated. There were his works, of Siza, of Távora, of Byrne, de Hestnes Ferreira, of a number of people. Of course, Álvaro Siza was the only one we knew (or thought we knew); we were so ignorant, we didn't know anything.

Manuel Vicente's classes, for me, were always reconciling with what I was expecting, in Architecture, but had not been provided! He would tell us to see things – “Cova do Vapôr” (Steamer's Cove), for example -, observe, take photographs. Then *slides* would be projected in class and we would comment on them. It was very, very exciting! But the classes were more than this; they were about many things, about Art, about Architecture, and also about life, about the passionate relationship between life and Architecture. For all of this, I owe him a lot.



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These experiences that influenced you happened in a very different context in which the country lives in today, and so they were teachers a little bit outsiders of that grey country with very conservative and castration teaching and very academic. Are you able to pass on this type of approach to your students nowadays? The irreverence that those teachers expected the students to have?

I think that assumption is still valid, at least. The teaching in high schools is quite conventional. I'm not saying it is better or worse than the one I had. Probably, in some aspects it is even better (I hope...), but in general, it still is very conventional. It is still a non-thinking teaching method that does not allow people to reflect and enjoy reflection, largely based on *memorizing* – in learning techniques and formulas. It's a bit like those *Highway Code* tests. To have a driving licence, everyone has to take a *Highway Code* exam, right? And the engineers, or instructors, who provide training in that so-called technique – that convey this knowledge that is condensed in a book of twenty or thirty pages –, teach “tricks” to solve the tests! And in high school it is the same way. Kids come to University with that spirit. They are not keen on thinking, or reflecting, and not keen on understanding on their own. They want their work done for them, they want formulas. “I had *that* in High school, but it was last year, and I don't remember!” is a recurring phrase, which sums up this *frustration* of most people relating to knowledge.

I think there is always a possible subversion: to realize that it is much more interesting if we discover things, if the tools are given to us to do so. Basically, that's what happened with these teachers I mentioned. They gave me tools for me to find things, and then on my own. At that time, I wouldn't have understood, but today I am sure that was what



happened. That field is still wide open. I think that our job as teachers is to see which is the best way to give each one, as much as possible (and in this School, which is not a School *for the masses*, that is somehow easier), the necessary tools to reach knowledge, itself, and then from there, develop, make, propose, invent, discover one's self, and their own capabilities and limitations.

For some years now, you have experience in the big School (public), and in the small School (private). Are there any main differences, at this moment? In this challenge of teaching Architecture, the type of exercises, and the answers the students give?

The difference lays not so much on the fact that there are a greater or lesser number of students, but in situations far more perverse. It lays on the fact that in public Schools there are, in general, students who come from wealthier families, who have a more qualified cultural level. And even though today that isn't so clear – as it was some time ago -, it's perverse, because, contrary to what one might be led to think, in private Schools there are, most often, the students from more modest backgrounds, who never had good grades, nor enough encouragement to study, that would motivate and allow them to enter in the public system. Those who have that social stigma are, in most cases, the worst students and end high school with the worse grades.

I'm very critical about the education in high schools nowadays, and I would say that, following our recent conversation, those students who enter in public schools are probably much more *stuck*, with "mannerisms" of a "good student" and a "doer". Being a "good student" and a "doer" does not mean a thing, because that status is achieved when you are not very creative and when you do not question the "knowhow" that the *mainstream* values. On the other hand, students from private schools, since they are not recruited among the "best", could be a little *wilder*, less "regimented", and less predictable; but it is not quite like this; none of this is completely true, even if there was a chance.

I do not see major differences; the only thing I sometimes realize is that there are students a bit more structured in the Public-School System, with ideas well in place, capable of reading a book and understanding it quicker. They are capable of getting a question and developing it, even if they have a "well-behaved manner", and not a creative personality, willing to move forward. It is always necessary to fight, to finish with the "repetition boxes", with the "well-behaved manner", so adored by families and put them in confrontation with the world!



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And what about job opportunities for those students, do you think there is a difference between studying in a Public or a Private University?

I do not know how my fellow architects view this matter. At this moment, everyone is in trouble. For a few years now, the market is more saturated, but I never considered this when looking at those students who would ask me for an internship or to collaborate with us. I never considered the origin of the course. I teach in two of the best Schools in the country, in Porto, at FAUP, and in Lisbon, here at DA/UAL, and I know that there are great students, very interested, but there are also weaker students and with less vocation. The Schools, however good they may be, do not fail candidates, except in extreme cases. The good schools will try to keep up with the students, will try for them to be better than when they arrived, with more freedom, for them to know more, for them to be more curious, to be more informed, better educated, but if there are “stone hard” cases the School won’t be able to change them radically. So, I never pay attention to the school origin, even though I think there are some Schools (Private or Public) better than others, and probably their students might have, throughout the course, contact with more interesting situations, more creative. But, frankly, I think it is like when someone asks which elementary school we attended. There are always things to learn, and a young architect, we are all aware of that, is *nothing* until he starts working, until he spends two or three years in a studio. Only with a few years of work can make him into a good collaborator, or a good architect, or whatever. The role of Architecture Schools is to familiarize future architects with the area of knowledge that they chose, to open their horizons, offer new experiences, show them that the world is much more complex than the *flat* idea that the dominant culture intends; it is not so much preparing “professionals”



that may become efficient in the “workplace”. That would be an economist view of teaching; I share a more “humanist” point of view.

In essence, the Universities of today have the responsibility to provide students with critical skills, which is something they do not learn in high school...

Of course. Neither the high schools nor the media are very helpful. And the whole environment is very programmed to a given standard of living. Probably, now, things will change, with all these economic problems that we are facing. But, for many years, we lived in, above all, a kind of *ease*. A “whatever”. There was money – there seemed to be money -, the world was good, was cute, it was all great fun; you did not have to think much. When you watch a movie, you do not have to think much, you eat popcorn and drink Coca-Cola, and everything is a party (a party in the worst sense of the word, I like parties...). It’s not even a party; it’s to *pass the time*. It’s an expression that I hate: “hobby”. Passing the time is for those people who are waiting to die: they have to spend time. “What are you doing? I’m doing a hobby”.

A person who likes Architecture, or any other profession, that likes the chosen profession or the field of studies, does not need to “pass the time”. Everything should be interesting enough to be interested the whole time. That idea of “pass the time”, of having *hobbies*, of always having on *headphones*, listening to music, a kind of empty *life*, is greatly encouraged, because deep down it guarantees gentle citizens. These are people who do not create problems for the “machine”, to the “super-structure”. Everything runs smoothly with citizens like this. It is very respectful, everyone wants to have a house, a family, a car, everyone wants to learn how to drive, and they make the Highway Code exams just as the teachers told them! Everything is very polite and very gentle.

It is part of any educational institution, whether Public or Private University, whether Elementary, or Secondary, to disrupt a little. No one gets hurts! It is really messing people from the inside. Of giving them only one certainty: things do not have a single point of view. Getting them to create this vision; because there is a great tendency to think that everything we have is more or less stable, is acquired. And I’m not even talking about the social and economic issues; I’m talking about the culture itself. In the knowledge itself. All stable, all easy. And people are not prepared to doubt, to have doubts, to ask, to question themselves, to question their lives, to question the social and the culture. I think that any education institution should go through this; it has to place the idea of *doubt*.

I really like to make allusions to the students’ clothing, the parallel may be forced at times, but it works. Most of them do not care to walk around “foolishly” dressed, with knee-boots and, at the same time, showing their kidneys, for example. And when those conversations are “well-behaved”, reproducing what they hear at home or on TV, I say, “Look, if you want to go to the *functional* world, do you think your clothing *functions*? Are your feet cold but not your kidneys? Something just doesn’t seem right! Aren’t you dressed this way because you *like it*? Because you *want*? There must be a form of expression you chose and that exceeds, by far, the strictly utilitarian look. Think about it, and see the implication that may contribute to other fields of knowledge!”. Or, “do you like to wear old, used, worn out, torn pants, but then say that the city is very ugly, very dirty and that policy makers should be arrested because they do not send people to paint

the buildings?... I mean, they make small talk about the city, but like to walk around with “worn” clothes! Try to understand why you like old jeans; is it because new jeans don’t seem to have so much history, so much *time*? Probably, there will be a certain charm in obsolescence, a certain *patina*!” there are always many ways to stimulate them, to help them think in another way. I don’t want them to think like me; I do not care how they should think! I just don’t want them to think as *everyone else*!



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After University, the student finishes the course but is not an architect yet, the internship is year zero and only three or four years later he acquires skills to be in a studio. The question I think many architects continue to ask is: which is the next step?

It’s a classical answer, people will require practice, work in a studio with a certain routine, they are interns, they make inter-teaching with others and, at a certain point, there is a job they feel comfortable of doing on their own. A friend may ask to remodel a house...that will always be an opportunity.

Then it depends on each one. There are people who don’t feel comfortable until they have enough practice; there are others more daring, who think they are capable as soon as they finish their internship. And they manage, until a point where they acquire independence, even if briefly. A job will appear that will last two or three years and will allow a small structure for them, a friend and another employee.

And then one of two things: either all happens at a time when there is work and one thing happens after another – the contractor who will built the house likes the young architect



and asks him to design a small building, in the meantime, a cousin sees the project and likes it a lot, and asks him to remodel the attic, at the same time some tenders are made and one or another goes well -, it is a possible way, or *it was a possible way*, because if there is less to do, as now, this possible “network” is less likely.

But I would say that, more importantly, is really the architect as a *person*. I think there is a myth that we should try to help dismantle, originating from *star architects*. The myth that everyone is suited to be a boss; not of himself – it would be interesting if people had this thought -, but someone else’s boss.

This current myth that you will do a course and become a boss when you finish it has to stop. People have to realize that having a university degree (higher education) is actually having a specific preparation. The word *higher* is a bit annoying because it seems you are higher than others. If we called them specific courses it would probably be more interesting. “I will do a specific course of Architecture and then have more training to start working on things related to Architecture”.

**Are there any young or very young architects that you have as a reference?
Are you following the work they are doing?**

Yes, I see work of people I know, who were students of mine (some were also collaborators) and today are architects, with interesting works. For example, Ricardo Bak Gordon. In the first or second year I went to Milan, he was there in Erasmus. I met him in Milan and I immediately liked him. The following year, he and Carlos Vilela were my students in the last year at FAUTL. And there are people I have met more recently here at school, that I have seen, with pride and pleasure, doing interesting things. You [João Pedro Caria Lopes] and Ricardo [Silva Carvalho], for instance, were my students in your first year and are now my assistants.

I’m not saying that I “launched” these people; I lectured the fifth grade at FAUTL, and I was a little demanding on them. I think I helped stir ideas that some of them already had, but overall, the most interesting ones already arrived with a certain security. And the dialogue was almost from one architect to another. I enjoyed the fifth year for this, because I could take them to a higher platform. It’s different when you talk to kids in the first year, as it has been my experience in the last fourteen years, either in Porto or here at UAL. We have to go down to the base to get a starting point where they can understand, be helped and be encouraged.



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My best student ever, and in the very first year I lectured at FAUTL, was Egas Vieira, who is my business partner. In addition to an enormous talent, he had some training and an ability that surprised me, that's why we began working together.

Egas' brother, Nuno Vidigal, as well as Pedro Ravara, with whom he built a partnership, were my students two or three years later. It was a very good year, with Cristina Veríssimo, Mário Martins, Gonçalo Afonso Dias. Then, I remember João Matos, who now teaches in Évora, Ricardo Vieira de Melo, who returned to Aveiro where he develops an interesting work, Vasco Delerue, deceased, Luís Torgal, our collaborator in the studio for a long time. Later, when I taught Project in the Interior Architecture course, I was Steven Eavens and Miguel Abecasis' teacher, who are also doing interesting first works. Pedro Machado Costa was not my student but worked with us a couple of years, Paulo André Rodrigues also... well, so many! I have met so many interesting people, who I have seen with joy becoming architects, who have work they do with honesty, in good



taste, with engagement, and with passion! That's what I like best about these people! If I have also helped, the better! If not, no problem, it won't be relevant. I like to feel that passion, that involvement! When they don't look at Architecture as just a thing, made with boredom, commercially and bureaucratically.

You are a person who reads, who writes, who thinks about what you write and what you read. As an architect, in the project component, which is the weight of theory in your professional?

Of the programs I made for television, I recorded one with the architect [Manuel] Tainha. We were talking, after it was filmed, and I was very happy because we both agreed that writing would also be a way of projecting *Architecture*. When you write the project brief, for instance, in tenders, there is a lot of stress, you are focused on that, there are deadlines to meet; you are under a lot of pressure. It is necessary to write a text, and this text needs to be perceptible by the jury, it cannot be too long, or too boring, and needs to be well understood. It is always a lot of drama to put everything in it, so that the jury does not fail to notice the essential things. And I told him that, many times, when I was writing the project brief, I would discover things that were not in the drawings and I would run to say that we needed to include something or other. Because through writing, when justifying a certain project, I understood we hadn't gone as far [in the project] as we would have liked. "That also happens a lot to me", he replied. It is incredible! Because we really *draw* through writing as well; we are thinking in a given situation and we solve things through writing that haven't been solved in drawing!

Of course, reading the theories helps me put my ideas in order; helps me understand some situations I suspected but could not explain very well, or hadn't understood why I felt that way, or alerted me to situations I had never thought about before, which is always the weakest point. When we are aware of situations we have never thought about, we never fully understand them. It is easier when we are given an explanation for things we have already reflected, experiences we have already been through. Then we can fully understand, we are more aware of the problem, we can immediately criticize, and say "it is not quite that", "it is more than that", or "that is it, because it also happened to me". I think this is kind of a theoretical reflection that can help us exercise the ability to draw.



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It is always tempting to ask a question about the future of architecture, but even more than that – now that the current situation is more or less catastrophic globally and with a national crisis – I dare ask what ways you think we should follow...

I feel like giving a relatively easy answer, as the architect [Eduardo] Souto de Moura, when he was interviewed in connection with the Pritzker Prize. He repeated several times that the new generation has to emigrate, that there is no work here for anyone. Apparently, it seems so, for a few years there will be no work for anyone. Not because there is a lack of things to build, but because there is no money to make them. Fortunately, the housing problem has been solved for some years now; the most urgent is done, there is no money for other investments.

If the State has no money for large orders – and imagining there will be a huge retraction in economy in general – there will be no money in the private sector either; and so most of the young architects will have to emigrate. Some are already doing so: many of our students here from University Autónoma went to work in Brazil, in Switzerland, others went to Spain, and some went to do a two- or three-year internship and ended up staying. There are those who came back to see if they could work here, and then returned again. This is already itself an interesting experience for those who like Architecture. There is no problem in emigrating; I think it is fun for people this age, without any responsibilities, going to a foreign city and getting started in Architecture; later they will decide if they want to stay and make it permanent, or if they want to return to Portugal. However, and despite knowing some “success stories”, I do not think it can be a generalized solution.



Aside from this answer that is more or less “easy”, I cannot answer anything else; I do not have great solutions for this problem. Maybe there is a chance of doing another type of work not so orthodox, in a more or less conventional perspective in the profession: I would not mind areas like “Measurements and Budgets”, or “Construction Site Technicians”, being occupied by young architects, as it has been in the last few years for the former “Designers-Planner”. Also, Photography, or the Architecture Editions in paper or digital, or Scenography in theatre or television, or Art Direction in cinema – but these fields, though, have already been occupied by architects.

Of course, for those studios that are established, emigrating doesn’t make sense; I can’t emigrate with my structure! I may try to bring work from the outside. It is a bit different: the younger generation will sell their workforce to foreign studios and the studios in Portugal will try to capture work from outside. But it is not easy, I have done some *demarches* in this regard, I am in talks with Macau, Mozambique, Bahrain, to see what we can do. Besides liking Architecture, a lot and not wanting to stop doing it, even in these adverse conditions, we have responsibilities to the people who are with us, who enjoy being with us, and for whom we have to guarantee work. But this is a personal answer, I do not see many ways out, I do not know how we can get out of this; let’s see what happens.



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And urban rehabilitation is not a possibility?

It is, but money is also necessary. What I want to say is: urban rehabilitation, even if promoted by the State, or the City Halls, is much more expensive than new construction. It is made, most of the time, in adverse circumstances, in the middle of the historical city, problems with the construction site, and problems with the work. It would only be possible with economic encouragement, with positive discrimination, and with much lower recovery rates. Without these things, and in the midst of an economic crisis, there will be fewer chances and private rehabilitation will be only for a small niche in the luxury market. This area is also very limited; with all that has been said that the rich people should pay the crisis, there aren't that many rich people, they all have houses, and they have children who are already married. Developers will spend a lot of money and the houses on the market will be very expensive. Even if they sell them, there is another perversity:



the *gentrification* of the historic centres, i.e., a significant social change that will take from those centres their popular features, the joy they still have.

When the working class stops living in “Escadinhas da Bica” – with their “Santo António” parties, where they put up paper decorations, eat sardines and drink in the streets, where they yell at each other -, and will be occupied by “mommy’s boys” whose parents buy them a house there, recovered, with many bathrooms and bedrooms, it will be a sad, boring, horrible place! There won’t be any more small groceries, or taverns (“tascas”), and it becomes a deserted street with closed shutters, where people leave in the morning and get back at the end of the day, and they see no one. I hate this idea of *gentrification*, as a result of that expensive recovery. If there were truly mechanisms to expedite that recovery, make it cheaper, and more stimulating for contractors and developers, so that they could charge less...the social mix would still continue to be made, with some vivacity.