

Interview with architect Manuel Vicente

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It is with great pleasure that we have with us today the architect and teacher Manuel Vicente. Welcome...

Thank you, the pleasure is mine.

We would like to start by asking you about your academic background as a student, if you had any remarkable teachers and how the architecture course used to be...

More than 50 years have gone by. I must have started in Fine Arts in 53 or 54, I don't remember very well.

I always studied in private schools because we lived in Parede. I had problems getting around and my parents didn't want me to travel by train. There were better schools in Estoril, but as this one was close to home, I went there. It is a school without history and the first time I felt the pleasure of being a student was, in fact, in Fine Arts.

I liked to be in Fine Arts and liked what I did there. Not only did I like the environment, but also the work that was assigned to us. It was a school where we had no respect for



the teachers. In that post-war generation, the conflict with the teachers was a type of school culture. There were teachers we didn't like at all...

There was Luís Alexandre Cunha, I think I learned things with him that I still remember today, they weren't specific things, or academic, but ways of looking at the world and interesting concerns. The first thing we did was cover the drawing board with paper, he (Cunha) wanted us to have a measurement, for the measurement to be a sensation, and not necessarily a tape measure and he would say: "Fold the paper, turn it over, and now I have the measure of the fingers! Fold it again and you don't need to see how much the fold is...if it has 2 centimetres or not." After that we needed to make the glue, then we would put the glue and stretch the paper, then we would wet it with a sponge and it would get soaked, and we would stretch and stretch, and when it dried out it would be an impeccable sketch board, covered with scenery paper! And that was his class, what we learned and what we did in his class: covering the drawing board. I haven't used a drawing board covered this way in years, but I think I could still make one. Then throughout the course, our work was shown on boards, so we had to repeat this method of gluing paper on grids, it was the same technique we had learned in our first year.

There was also Cristino da Silva who we felt very little esteem and consideration for. He made the Capitólio, but we weren't aware of it at the time, he also made the Cinearte, in Santos. He first started out by having, let's say, a more modern approach to drawing and architecture project. His exercise program was always in an open space in the outskirts of the city. He wanted people to start from scratch, with freedom and without constraints. When I made my thesis, I was making a house for my brother and sister-in-law, and I spoke about their needs, how much money they had, that they were a young couple with two small children and he told me "Gentlemen, you come here, this is your last chance to dream, so why do you still have all these constraints? Listen! Make something you like and don't worry about it!" He didn't like constraints and he would say: "So how do you imagine it? You are going to leave here with your diploma, but you will never have the freedom to dream, so seize the opportunity now!"

He was this type of teacher, but we had a formal relationship. I think he wouldn't like it to be so formal, but Lisbon at that time didn't allow an inter-generational dialogue. The teacher was a teacher and didn't talk to students. He would say something funny, however the student didn't have to answer, and it was always a distant relationship.

He had an assistant we really liked, Alberto José Pessoa. Alberto Pessoa made those apartment buildings in Avenida Infante Santo. He had a partnership with João Abel Manta and Gandra, and made that project together. I think he was the main mentor of that project we really liked Alberto Pessoa, he came from the Keil do Amaral group, everyone with their own sense of humor. He used to say things with a very serious look on his face, I remember a project that had a spiral staircase, and he came over with a pencil and said: "Then there is a fire and the fire fighters come and go down the stairs with the water hose, they trip and... die!"

He was like that, he was funny. Afterwards, he challenged me to work at his studio, and there he wasn't the same person he was at school, so after a while I came up with an excuse, he understood, and I left.

What did you do after university? You were in India, Macau, and then went to study in the United States...

Between the Fine Arts school which I finished in 1960/61, and my trip to the United States in 1968, some years went by. I was in Goa first, then one year in Macau, and then I came back to Lisbon for one year when I worked with Conceição Silva, after that I went to Funchal where I worked with Góis Ferreira. Then I had the urge to go to America and I went with a Fulbright scholarship... I put Berkley in first place, which was where everything was happening at that time in 1968. I had also put Columbia, because it was New York and I thought that interesting things were going on there, and in third I put Philadelphia because of Kahn. Let's just say that I went because of social, and sociological reasons, I was interested in knowing what was going on, even though the academic choices were important, they were the least. I was accepted in Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. When I went there I was 33 years old and had already done a lot



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In Macau, you made many projects in very little time ...

I made many, in five years I made and built eight or nine buildings, they were all public contracts, and I only had two private clients. For one of them I made a few houses on a difficult street, it was my first work – I mean, I had already done some changes in my parents' house – but truly my first new work was those four townhouse dwellings. I also designed a church for a missionary brotherhood, but it ended up not being built. I made a re-housing project of ninety apartments in a large area in Macau, which was full of displaced persons – after the big turmoil in china many people were displaced and immigrated to Macau. As Macau had many vacant lots, they built shantytowns. There were many peasants, in the middle of a city, who created urban habits. The children were



very funny, in the morning they would all go to school, the girls with a black skirt and black socks, and the boys wore gray trousers and a blazer, and they would all leave from the shantytowns.

At some point, a project was made here in Lisbon when Adriano Moreira was Minister for Colonial Affairs. He requested from some colleagues of mine a neighbourhood project for that area near the border with China, and that was totally unreal and above all suspicious, because it was paid by the Americans, who couldn't enter in China at that time. The people that wanted to apply for those houses in that neighbourhood had to fill out some forms that were then registered. The governor at that time didn't like that idea, and neither did Adriano Moreira, so the project was discontinued and we, at the urban development office which was a part of the governor's staff, were in charge of making a project there. We outlined a plan for housing units according to the members of the household. However, the distribution of those units was done differently; it started out with the larger families, but units that were for 2/3 people now had families with 16 people. Macau was always a city with a long history of population density, a density unbelievable and impossible to sustain in Europe.

Macau wasn't a city of big conflicts, which is quite incredible and amazing, given the conditions of the dwellings in the city extremely difficult. The Cantonese lived in the streets and didn't entertain in their homes, they would go to restaurants and hold their parties there, in public places, and they didn't have the same concept of home as we did. It wasn't their culture, they lived outside. Macau had an enormous and extraordinary vitality, all the public places were very busy, noisy, crowded, they had little stands where they sold food, cloths, anything and everything...it's funny because afterwards, little by little, consumption was introduced and it changed the society, they began decorating their houses, and they would hire decorators to do their living rooms. The wealthier did that a lot, but that didn't mean they lived more at home or ate there either.

I made a very big house for a wealthy man and one day he called me over because he wanted to extend the balcony and close it, because it was in that hidden corner that he and his wife spent their days, they had a big television screen, and the rest of the house was all furnished but uninhabited. There they were the both of them, they were quite old, and that's where they played Mah-jongg, and ate...So I drew them the closed balcony, and they seemed to be very happy!

I remember once I was in Brussels, in 1989, and one time I was in a street and I felt something strange, something I couldn't describe, then I realized what it was, the street was completely empty! I was alone in that street; it was a wide main street. I looked, turned around, looked again and saw that I was the only person in that street. And I thought: "that's funny, in Macau you were never alone!". And this happened around the clock! Macau was always busy, in movement, socially intense. It was nice living in a place like that where everything was always working.



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And when you arrived in the Unites States you already had a different experience, of living in several continents and with a professional background that gave you some maturity...

I was the oldest in the group. Two hundred people had applied, but they only selected twenty...and it was funny, because from those twenty candidates, fourteen were foreigners! There was a very amusing guy, a Jew, but from South Africa, there was a Lebanese, a Chinese, Japanese, Germans, a Swiss, and me, Portuguese. The Americans were not the majority. It was nice, we used to go to each other's houses all the time; however there was a big difference in experiences and cultures.

They didn't acquire knowledge; they were used to gathering information. We didn't have computers at that time, so the library was a place we would go to, where we could take photocopies, it was a big deal. The Europeans, mainly the French, Italians and Spanish had a different relationship with the learning process. We read the books that we were interested in, we didn't read the books because we had a meeting or needed to read them all...We would go to the library to read a book and discover another one by chance, and would read it instead of the first one because it was much more interesting than the one we should have read. We were freer, weren't as surprised and weren't focused on a specialization.

I attended a course – in the beginning of this ecological and environmental awareness – with a Scottish, Ian Mac Carg. His classes were very interesting because he would invite the world renowned specialists to talk. For those of us who weren't Americans, we took great advantage of that because we would hear fabulous stories, experiences in academic areas that we didn't know much about. I would listen to it all and was

fascinated, and would go to the library to search for the books. It was probably the first time in my life that I had been to a library. In the Fine Arts School there was something hidden that must have been the library, but we never went there...The books we read were mentioned to one another. I read what everyone read, what an architecture student was supposed to read, I read Le Corbusier, but for additional training. And I wonder if Cristino da Silva ever read a book about architecture in his life; Alberto Pessoa probably never read a book about architecture or theory, either.

We learned a lot, it was like a handmade training, we learned a craft. We learned how to draw, how to create connections between the idea and the object; we created some skills to understand the proportion and dimension of things. We managed, somehow, to tailor space, we had that training, which was craft training, and the teachers were masters as in traditional crafts. And we also had art history and archaeology, but what we truly did there was project, in a camaraderie environment, we helped each other out – sometimes the older students would help the younger ones because they needed help to deliver a work and would recruit labour. It was an interesting group, and because the rooms were big there was a lot of space. We practically lived there, many times I would leave very late, and sometimes we finished our work using street lighting because the janitor, to send us away, would turn the lights off and we would take our sketch board close to the window. It was a distinction that Kahn made between the way of life and the way of living; that was our living, and from there we would radiate to life in a city...



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You were saying that in the United States you understood that investigation went beyond craft. That idea of architecture as a craft could expand knowledge over architecture...

I always thought as an architect, and this may seem a bit pretentious: I only clarified in books what I already knew, or what I already sensed. I never learned a thing with a book! I remember being happy and thinking: "That's right, that's it! This is exactly what I wanted to say!". Not only related to architecture, with life in general. Books have always been enlightening; explaining the intuitions of my own way of working, from my relationship with the observer, from my observation of what was real, from my own interpretation that would be more clarified, explained, and better said than what I was able to say without that enlighten that books gave me.

I think that in architecture investigation is the project, investigation is the design. When I design a hotel, I don't have to buy all the books there are about hotels. I have been to several hotels in my life, I know what they are, and I know more things I don't like about them than things I do like. If I don't investigate for an application, if I only investigate for the sake of it, I think that I lose my imagination; I become overwhelmed by the flood of information. When someone gets all that information, they lose imagination, and become terrified, and can never distinguish the essential from the accessory, to create situations for things to happen.

When you ask if I understood the advantages of a certain support, let's say, academic or technical, I think it was more a question of method – it's also a question of culture, we don't have an organizational culture, the Americans have that culture. But this doesn't mean I came back from the States with American habits, I also didn't come back from Macau with Chinese habits, I think that a person has their own structure. I didn't come from America eating hot dogs and buying a barbecue for the back yard, however I ate barbecue, why not? I think we have a strong cultural structure, made of habits, traditions, of pleasures and displeasures, of sensitiveness, of observation. This is also true in rural areas, if a sixty-year-old woman moves into the city she will bring her certainties, her convictions and her hopes and ideas about the world. It is interesting to see a cultural landmark in people who don't lose track of the things they may like or not knowing what they like. You see this in our current situation and with our governors; people lost that deep relationship with memory...



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About that deep cultural capital, do you think it is still a true capital nowadays? Is it an asset for our new graduate architects? Many of them will work in other countries...

I think that cosmopolitanism is a very important thing, and I think I am very cosmopolitan. I think the Brazilian people are extremely cultured, they arrive here and no one takes away their samba or their Brazilian “feijoada”. Brazilians are very sure of themselves in many ways: they may not have money, but they are not poor souls. They have strong cultural roots, the food, music, rhythm, presence, fascination, being able to look around, of being fascinated by the noises, sounds, flavors... But I think who goes with a void not only has very little to offer, but is also placed in a fragile position regarding others, leaving without any richness, destined to be servants. Who doesn't say what they want, do what they don't want, and do what others want. In this sense, I think people shouldn't be sent into the world unprepared, with very little capital. But on the other hand, I think of some of your colleagues who went abroad, and things that apparently seemed forgotten here are then remembered, and they have in themselves more information than they thought they had.

And what is the teacher's role?

As a teacher, I am much more interested that students discover what they didn't know they knew. The examples we normally give are for them to reach for those memories that they didn't know they had, intuitions, reasons for which they feel good and don't know why. When they enter in a coffee shop, why do they choose that corner and not the other one? Why is it a foregone conclusion? And capitalizing that experience,



highlighting it, as done in therapy, speak about things, name what we know, establish connections between what we sense but are afraid to mention.

I think it is important that people leave university feeling safe, not so much about their technical ability, but about their humanity, their capacity, to make windows regardless of the casement. Any student, when handing in their final project, shows the story from the inside: "...I go up the stairs, and I have this window in front of me..." – understands how to create a living space, that is not to create an object, it is not an example of design, it is an example of how to create spaces with shapes, inviting to a comfortable living, but with the comfort of body and mind. A person has pleasure, sometimes can even be sitting in an uncomfortable chair, but it is very warm, the sun is coming through the window, and we start talking... Kahn said... It is more important to know what it "is", than the "how", because the "how" is discovered in the "doing".

It may not be handy for business that people don't know exactly how things are done, but it is much more important in life to know what we want to do, because the "how" is everywhere! You turn on your computer, go to the internet, go to Google, and you find how to do this and that. I believe things are for people, and not people for things, and even when something seems really complex, building any kind of architecture is not even as half as complex as building a shuttle to go to the moon, or an atomic submarine.

We know exactly how life appears, little by little, then there are some molecules that multiply, some are attracted by the negative charge, others by the positive one, then start to create more complex things, and end up reaching thought and human intelligence...And we have to understand that nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything is transformed, and can't throw in the towel and quit.

I mean, although at this moment the priorities to invest in intelligence and resources are diverted towards profitable capital gains and revenue – finances have taken over the economy, there is no longer an economic thinking, there is a financial one – and so a big part of humanity's resources is invested in things that have nothing to do with life, that are no good for progress. For example, there is medicine that isn't made for Africa because it's not worth it, the market is not worth producing medicine, and so we live in a world with perverted priorities, by the ruthless logic of capital gains...

I remember very well, when I was younger, people used to say: "How did Alfredo da Silva get rich?". Well, it was by lending money to widows with a very high interest rate, so, in those days, in my parent's days, the loan shark, the person from pawn shops, was socially inadequate and no one respected those who got rich through shady businesses, and loaned money with interests, receiving income and rents. These things were not appreciated. "So he would buy that for a penny and sold it for 25 thousand? But isn't that strange?". Therefore, this legitimacy, arrogance and superiority of capital gains are something new, recent. I know I am 76 years old, but I perfectly remember that capital wasn't seen as it is today, people suspected the rich, not only those who explored others, but also suspected those who had new money and even those who lived from their work or business. There was also a lot of corruption in the dictatorship, but now we have "democratized" the corruption when before it was more selective...



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Considering this current global issue – with capital gains ahead of everything else – what is your view about the potential of architecture, what assets of today and tomorrow’s architecture can help develop the world and look at the past?

I am an optimist by nature and I am an optimist by principle, by ideology. Almada Negreiros, the painter, was once asked if he was a pessimist or an optimist, and he said he was neither, because between him and life there were no misunderstandings. I think the answer is quite nice, I have never forgotten it. I have hope that at the end everything is solved. In the short run, maybe it will be difficult, even tragic, but this is much more relevant for you than for someone my age...

In relation to architecture, what you said about goodwill, about earth bag building, of returning to the past, I believe a production and an industrial machine exist, important and powerful enough in its dimensions, capacities and competencies, and it is not likely to return to adobe and straw. It would be true in a catastrophe if the systems all failed, with no electricity and completely in the dark without information, light, food...We would need to rediscover many things that we don't even remember. But in a less catastrophic scenario, I believe architecture is necessary for people and we need a space to feel well, comfortable, to be with others and with ourselves.

Here we are living in this studio, office, factory, hospital, man's dwelling place, where we are supposed to be protected from the inclement weather, this protection is also necessary, places must be sheltered, where it is possible to relax, sleep. Having places connected to the outside, connected to oneself, and it is not just construction, as I say,

there is no architecture without construction, but there is a lot of construction without architecture. On the other hand, when construction is mistaken by real estate that turns to an interior decorator to cover up the emptiness and senselessness in which people live in, maybe we are in a vicious cycle, where we can only end up in destruction. What I mean is, I wanted to take from architecture the idea that "...If I have money I will call an architect!", I wanted architecture to have a more vital role, I wanted people to be aware that it is necessary to have quality in dwelling, as there is quality in eating.

I think human beings don't worry about producing pleasure, about producing comfort. I usually say that those who like what they do are happy, because they don't have to spend money on whiskey! As João Santa Rita's mother used to say "Don't you know that an architect's beach is his studio?". That was really true; working on what you like is truly a pleasure. When work takes over the pleasure of working, when the need (also from Kahn) erases the desire, when a person only produces to receive a salary and needs that salary for car payments, and when his wife tells him that the neighbour has got a better car than theirs, and you don't have the best scotch whiskey...Your priorities are upside down. Slavery, nowadays, although less complicated and less spectacular, is much more severe and harder than it has ever been before, we are forced to consume. Even pleasure is produced without us and is sold to us, and we all live in obsolescence. Things that were great two years ago no longer are, and I think this is very serious, much more than CO2, or oil, or unsustainable development, a disqualified life is much worse. We have lost touch with what was human, with humanity, that is why I prefer to talk about pleasure, the well-being and well living, of a person feeling fulfilled and happy.



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Someone whose office is a mess says: "Well, today I cleaned everything, placed things in drawers, books on shelves...I feel great!". But it is difficult for a factory worker to leave an assembly line feeling great, he has to go for a drink, has to do foolish things, go to the gym... We spend our time doing things to forget what we have done, instead of spending our time finding pleasure, happiness, well-being, well living, be in peace.

You don't need to go out every night, to go dancing, you just need to be good, to be in peace, to be free of problems: "...It is going to be awful tomorrow, there will be traffic, the subway will break down, and I have to leave half an hour earlier or else I will lose the bus...". We should not live under all this stress. Or even live on one side of the city and work on the opposite end. We should be able to work close to home. This perfect city without cars, which I don't agree with, could be true if people made short commutes. However, if a person lives in Oeiras and works in Setúbal, it is very difficult, it doesn't make sense. And with the crisis, they increase the price of public transportation, now it doesn't make sense, and if a person loses their job, it makes even less sense.





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A person can't live this way, it's horrible, and I hope that at some point people may say: "I can't take it any longer! Not like this! I can't!". I think people have to say this is enough, like the verses of José Régio: "...I don't know where I am going, but I know I'm not going that way...". And I think this is a citizen's right, people's rights, when people are finally able to say: -"But I don't want to go that way!", -"Then you will starve to death!", -"So I will starve, so what!". It's better to die of hunger than to die of indignity. This is way I think architecture is a vital part of people's needs, architecture has always been done, and dwelling has always been celebrated. They would even paint in caves and would keep record ... That's what gave them pleasure in cave painting, which shows your soul, of man's joy at work! As Ruskin said, a person must have joy at work, many times we are in our studios working on a project, and there is a point when a person does something they really like – at least in the studios I used to go to - "Come here, everybody come here and see this, isn't this great?!", we have to tell, to show, we need to have these explosions of joy.

Each person is an individual and should create his own opportunities. I used to say that if I hadn't had a university degree something I wouldn't have minded was to be a chauffeur or a mason. I think it must be interesting to be in a construction site, placing the bricks and watching the wall raise. And a chauffeur because I like cars, I like riding in a car, I'm a traveller, I have a lot of fun riding in a car, even when I'm not the driver, because I like to see the world go by and choose what I want to see. An architect can be a chauffeur, or a mason, he can be whatever he wants, as long as he's happy. I hope I can be an architect, but the profession can be done in an alienating and alienated way. Sometimes I think I should have been a mason.



Although I am an optimist, I think there isn't an answer at the moment, only if you could work in developing countries, I think it can be very gratifying there. There is no bigger pleasure than watching something grow, being built and becoming something. That is happiness!