

“ON PROJECT”

A way of designing as a team

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We started from an ideal of work, of investigation, of democratic and horizontal research, closer to a language that Boaventura Sousa Santos in Coimbra, in his famous lecture in 1986, characterised when he identified the signs of a dominant crisis which is borne out by the study and production of knowledge in Portuguese universities that has become too specialised and non-communicative with the many different areas and specialties that comprise any topic of study or research nowadays.

In this context, our work methodology tries to base itself on principles of abolishing barriers to knowledge, in other words, on the idea that today it no longer makes sense to distinguish between natural sciences and social sciences; that everything matters for the characterisation and understanding of the phenomena of living and the experience of architecture, as well as the phenomena, construction techniques and processes, and respective creation of projects.

“The people, the means, the modes and the technologies are themes present in our work but the Subject has the central role.” What we are trying to say is that we intend the subject to be the central part of a study of architecture and reflection on future architecture, thought, written, projected or constructed. Naturally, these do not seem to be the paths that the history and critique of architecture show us as a way out from our ability to idealise architectural “artefacts” which are also meant to be lived in.

The starsystem of today, in general, and architecture in particular, the progressive mediatisation of architects and their productions is a recurring theme, a humdrum topic in café conversations, in municipal councils, in governments, elevating architects to another social and cultural standing which they did not enjoy until now, and this often confuses our discipline further rather than clarifying it.

Fernando Távora said that Architecture is not something of the gods, it is not a white untouchable and distant virgin, on the contrary (he later added): it is our day to day! This is the sense that we need to study and know. Perhaps this is the keyword which can characterise us as a group (as CNLL) in the present that we invent. It is this day to day that we intend to study, get to know and especially to act upon.

I say act because we want to find solutions to improve ways of living, to correct procedures, to discover new ways of living, their organisation, what new spaces, what houses are today and what to do with the large number of houses that the boom of the 80s/90s left us to adapt to the ideal of inhabiting and habitation that we are now trying out.

This is why we are here and this is why we started the discussion, the experimentation and the research to conceive projects, compare solutions, test materials, in order to keep the project, the architecture, in tune with the ways of living and inhabiting that life today, multiple and divergent, presents us with.

Ten years have passed of a century that is filled with cultural, social, economic and global novelties, while our architecture, our architects and our schools seem to have nothing to say.

Apparently everything is still the same. There is just less construction and more unemployment, a greater number of architects and young architects with no work experience and no job. But, more and more, new and exciting buildings seem to want to break through in magazines a little and virtually, throughout the world.

The social interest of architecture, in which we underline Architecture, Interest and Social as opposed to the countless interesting architectures which arrive from everywhere and which the international and global crisis seems to have ended. At least in the ateliers that have little or nothing to do and the ones that do or focus on morphing the idea of architecture as verisimilitude, or ask the magic mirror: "Is there a more beautiful project than mine?"

It is our belief that CNLL has something to say on this matter: it has created projects looking outwards, to respond to people, to provide solutions for our clients and solve problems: social, cultural and economic; looking for answers that this society demands, for everyone equally.

We can therefore not afford to "whistle away" and "make believe" that we are not aware of the drama of the precarious conditions in which many families live, the problems of organisation and healthiness that the neighbourhoods reveal, the deserted and run down urban centres, the contradictory urban policies, the ongoing outdated and alteration of "existing legislation" that architects know little or nothing about or take part in, or the management processes and the new perceptions of what a project is, a field that has been encroached on by engineers.

Thus, it seems ever more pressing to investigate and act in order to become new architects, participative and acting in a society that is showing signs of how much it needs us: architects who also know about sociology, humanists who are able to interact and act in different realities, in different contexts, with different know-how.

Yet we try to be more opportune and more objective, to be active partners and "solvers" of the social, spatial, economic and technical problems at the root of our society and to have, again, the obligation to be present in many and varied aspects, not just trying to produce fantastic buildings for an ego that nobody wants or needs anymore, at least for the time being. So it is necessary to imbibe from reality again: to go outside, into the streets, into the neighbourhoods, into the empty and decadent city; to stop and go back, not to withdraw or run away from this world, but to see better, to know where we want to go and most of all what we can do.

Accordingly, I often recall a text by Plato, recently published by Philippe Boudon, which explains the pleasures of architecture, claiming they are only two: one is to see it and the other is to do it. Then, in the voice of Socrates he corrects and adds to this, claiming there is another pleasure in architecture, which is the greatest of all: and that is to experience it.

With regard to the first two pleasures, we study them in school and here in our atelier. Regarding the third, it is up to all of us to learn and try to hone this pleasure, so that we can know how to provide this great pleasure of inhabiting with quality, the large or the small, the luxurious or the modest, the buildings we have planned... the architectures we have designed for a collective ideal or for the happiness of everyone!

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