"Mr. Valery": report on two experiences of mixed fields of research.

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Abstract:

In the last thirty years, there was a revolution in the way we work and teach, with the introduction and development of different ways of creating and manipulating digital images. Consequently, architects and students give representation more and more importance every passing year.

This growing prominence of representation can be dangerous because it can lead us to think that a good project is the one that makes a good rendering. But the perfection of the render is many times hiding the deficient understanding of the problem presented by the client, the site and/or the program. To prevent this from happening, it is important that Studio classes are focused on the ideas behind the images.

However, this evolution has a positive side too; induced by the digital paradigm, students can learn how to use another kind of architectural means of research in the process of design. They seem to easily acquire the skills to create images that explain the concepts, the ideas, rather than the actual form of the building that they are representing. So, architecture students can be taught to create and manipulate images that express ideas, as tools for interdisciplinary research that can be used outside the Studio, in other Curricular Units. In the work done for a Theory exercise, students can also develop methods of analytical research as a support for the communication of ideas.

This paper will show two examples of the work done by Master students in classes of Studio and Theory of Architecture, trying to explain the specific objectives of each one and to summarize the results.

The first one is from 2008-09 (Curricular Unit of Studio III, for second year students); it's a practical exercise that aimed to simulate the relation between architect and client: on an existing site (located near the School), the students had to propose a house for the fictional character "Mr. Valery", from the book with the same name by Gonçalo Tavares.

In this book, Mr. Valery (a strange character, inspired in the philosopher Paul Valery) explains his ideas of the ideal holiday house. Confronted with this peculiar client, the students should try to design a holiday house responding to his demands, which had to be suitable to the site and also function like an (almost) normal house. The idea was to confront the student with the idiosyncrasies of a difficult client, but also to make them understand that it is possible to relate the architectural practice with the fields of literature and philosophy. The results showed unusual relations between site, form and function and led to many different approaches to a very common program.

The second example is related to the first: in the next year, the same group of students attended Theory III (in the third year of the same course) and were asked to do a group exercise, in which two colleagues had to produce a critical analysis of a previous Studio work that they both shared, comparing their ideas on a paper and on a multimedia presentation. Many of them chose the "Mr. Valery" exercise, and their results were the most interesting: maybe because it was a small program, which was simple to compare, but also because it allowed a very clear discourse on the reasons for the project options, which sometimes were quite the opposite, in the two different proposals.

Keywords: Architecture, Studio, Theory, Client, Site.

Paper:

Remember Vitruvius?

In "De architectis instituendis", first book of *De Architetura Libri Decem*, he explained that, besides the knowledge of theory and practice of architecture, the architect should know how to write and draw, be an expert on geometry, optics and arithmetics, have good knowledge of history and philosophy, be acquainted with music and know a little bit about medicine, law and astrology.

This holistic conception has always been one of the basic principles of the education of the architect in the western society. Understanding the role of the architect in a Vitruvian philosophy, as a generic specialist (a technician/artist who knows how to relate with other technicians and other artists), implies an idea of comprehensive education (unspecialized) of the architecture student, so that he can become a professional who, by the scope of his training, can organize the synthesis of all the elements that have to converge in the process of architectural design.

Today this is much harder to achieve, because the architectural field is considerably more complex: a generic specialist must still know theory and practice of architecture (and urbanism), history, geometry, philosophy and law, and must also be capable of understanding basic concepts related to engineering (stability, thermal behaviour, acoustics), ecology, art, photography, anthropology, economies and public relations; and, of course, he must still know how to write and how to draw (by hand and with CAD systems). Thus, educating future professionals of architecture is not an easy task, because it is not easy to define the limits of our specific field, as they are related to different areas of knowledge: aesthetics, construction, engineering, sociology, philosophy, history, urban and regional planning, environmental sustainability, etc.

But still, we can establish a general consensus on what is the main role of an architect: the response to a programmatic necessity, proposing a particular form and space to a given site.

We may disagree on whether it is an artistic or technical response, because the relation between architecture and form can be more or less connected to construction and technology or semiotics and aesthetics; even if the architectural proposal is elaborated without intention of construction, it always implies an intentional relationship between form and space. Besides, even in abstract exercises, the minimum features of an imaginary site are always implied in the options of the architect. Finally, the programmatic necessity may be public, private or even be created by the architect as an abstract exercise, but there is always a figure that can be considered *the client*.

So, one of the problems of the education of the architect is the difficulty in simulating the existence of a client in Design Studio exercises.

We can present a programmatic necessity and a given site to the students, but we can't put ourselves in the role of the client (because the critical approach of the professor has to consider many aspects of the practice of Design, and most of them don't concern the relation between architect and client).

Five years ago I was in charge of the Curricular Unit of "Design Studio III" in the School of Architecture of University of Minho. Design Studio classes, in the tradition of architectural teaching in Portugal, are the spine of the Curriculum, the place where the information of every one of the

different areas of study becomes operative. Throughout the last century, our architectural schools left the "Beaux-Arts" paradigm of teaching classical drawing and composition for a modern approach, a new way of seeing the education of the architect that aimed to reunite scientific and artistic education, and brought the ancient tradition of the "Atelier" a new sense: students working in laboratory conditions (inspired by the Bauhaus[1] School), with the supervision of the masters/professors, trying to find out their own personal method to conceive, draw and construct buildings in the modern spirit, responding to current technical, theoretical and artistic concerns. This idea has survived to the present day, and represents the paradigm of most of the contemporary teaching strategy in Studio classes.

In the Curriculum of the School of Architecture of Guimarães, "Design Studio III", appears in the first semester of the second year, and should present the students an exercise of projecting single-family housing. This is a very common program in the professional activity of an architect, but also one in which the necessity of dealing with the will of a specific client is particularly acute.

Figure 1. The site for "Mr. Valery's holiday house" exercise (Architectural Studio III, 2008-09).

Trying to face this question, we[2] created a practical exercise that aimed to simulate the relation between architect and client. The students had to propose a house for a strange fictional character (inspired by the philosopher Paul Valéry) presented in "Mr. Valéry", a book written by the prizewinning Portuguese author Gonçalo M. Tavares.[3] The house had to be designed considering

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[1] The bibliography on the subject is vast… for a synthesis, I suggest the writings of Walter Gropius compiled in *Scope of Total Architecture* (GROPIUS, 1956).
[2] The team of Design Studio III also included my colleagues Francisco Ferreira and Joana Ribeiro.
[3] For a brief English comment on the work of Gonçalo M. Tavares, see http://www.mertin-litag.de/authors_htm/Tavares-G.htm.

the characteristics of an existing site, a small hill crowned with a large tree, located in Guimarães, nearby the School.

In Portuguese architecture, mainly in the work of the 'Porto School', the specificity of each site is considered one of the main aspects that influences each particular architectural approach (Fernandes, 2013). Álvaro Siza's work, for example, is based on a critical evaluation of all the components of the program and of the physical and cultural context of the site; this is emphasized in his famous motto 'the idea is in the site' ('a ideia está no sítio') a notion that practically became a definition of his method and work.[4] As Frampton explains in his definition of "Critical Regionalism" (classification that includes the work of Siza), this methodology "*stresses certain site-specific factors, ranging from the topography, (…) to the varying play of local light across the structure*" and to "*an articulate response to climatic conditions*" (Frampton, 1985, p. 327).

To preserve this important notion, we considered very important that students could be confronted with an existing and appealing site; besides, it should be located in the city of Guimarães (nearby the school) to facilitate frequent visits, so the students could "*learn and remember foremost through their bodies (experiencing through all the senses), as much as they do through the actual construing and constructing of drawings*" (Coyne-Jensen, 2013).

So, in Design Studio III, students were confronted with a strong site, while considering the will of a difficult client. In fact, Mr. Valéry was not an easy character, as you can see by his ideas for a perfect holiday house: he wanted a house with only one wall and one door (so he could get in and out at the same time, in both ways) or a house made of four doors joined together, with only one room, so he couldn't get lost (Tavares, 2002, p. 27-28).

Confronted with this peculiar personality, the students had to design a holiday house responding to Mr. Valéry's demands, which should be suitable to the site and also function like an (almost) normal house. The idea was to confront the students with a difficult client; in the book (that they were supposed to read), Gonçalo Tavares describes the habits and peculiarities of this strange character, many of them used by the students to justify their proposals: Mr. Valéry was short, so he jumped a lot, to seem taller for a short time; his work was drinking coffee; he had a domestic animal that nobody had ever seen (he kept the animal in a closed box and never took it outside); he was always sure to wear a hat, but it wasn't always true… sometimes he forgot to wear it (he often confused his hat with his hair); he was afraid of the rain; he always slept standing; he said that a tower is made to see everything (and that there aren't horizontal towers); he was married to an ambiguous creature (that nobody ever saw); he liked to walk, but was always convinced that he was followed; he had decided

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[4] It was first published in the text 'Notas sobre o trabalho em Évora' ('Notes on the work in Évora'), written about this experience in Malagueira (Siza, 1979); see Fernandes (2014).

to exchange all the mirrors with framed landscapes, so he could be unaware of his current appearance; he did not like to see his shadow; he believed in ghost objects; etc... (Tavares, 2002).

The following examples of student responses to the exercise can show some of the different ways they interpreted the client's personality, considering his will to justify their project options.
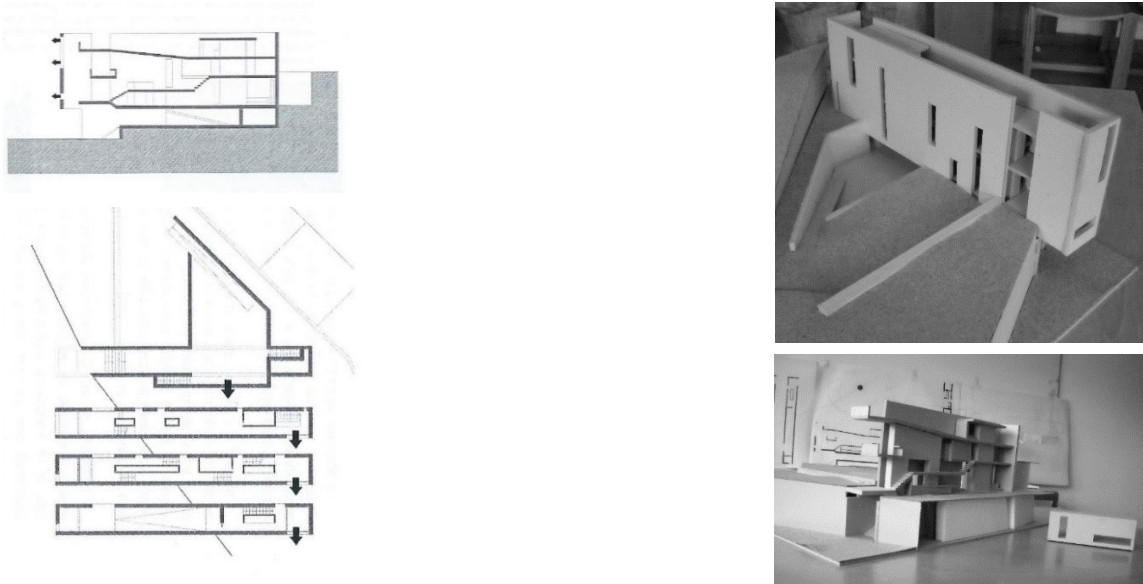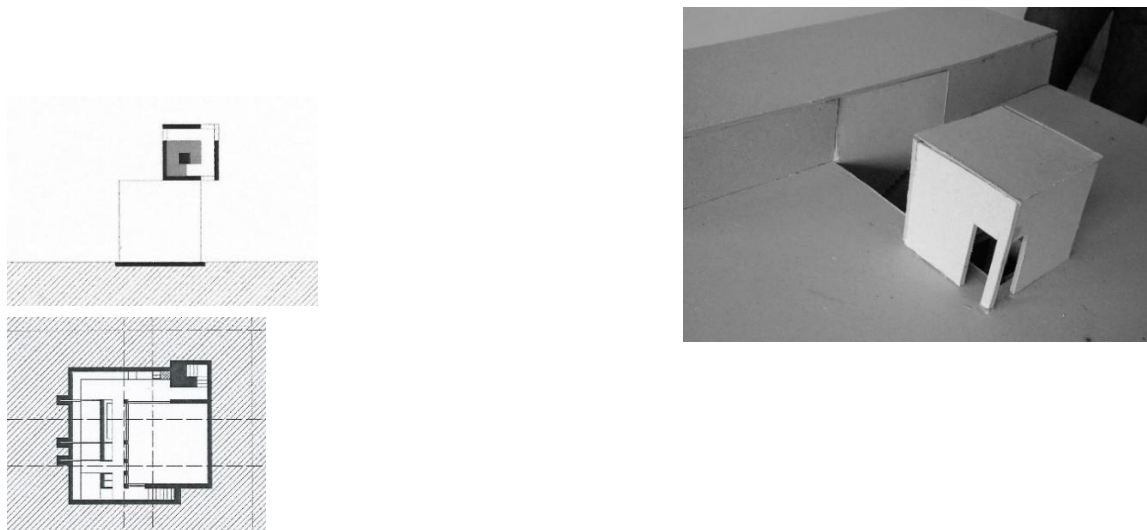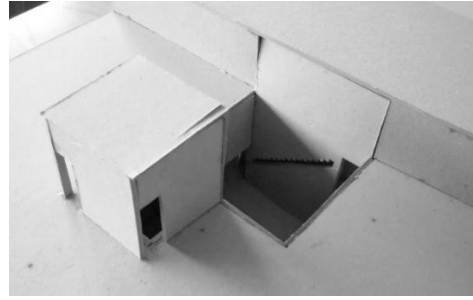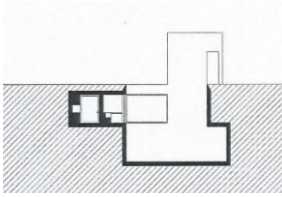

Figure 2. Helder Rocha – "Mr. Valery's holiday house" (Architectural Studio III, 2008-09). Left – section and plans; right - images of the 1:50 scale model.

Hélder Rocha (fig. 2), proposed a very narrow house that could be related to the pre-existing rural walls in the site and created a background for the tree. He justified this solution as a response to Mr. Valéry's will to have a house with only one wall and one door.

Figure 3. Tiago Ranhada – "Mr. Valery's holiday house" (Architectural Studio III, 2008-09). Left – plans and section; right - images of the 1:50 scale model.

Mr. Valéry also referred he would like a house made of four doors joined together, with only one room, so he couldn't get lost. So, Tiago Ranhada (fig. 3) proposed a patio-house, buried in the ground, in which the entrance was the only visible volume (that symbolized the idea of a four-door house); the idea of an underground house seemed to be adequate to the introspective personality of Mr. Valéry.
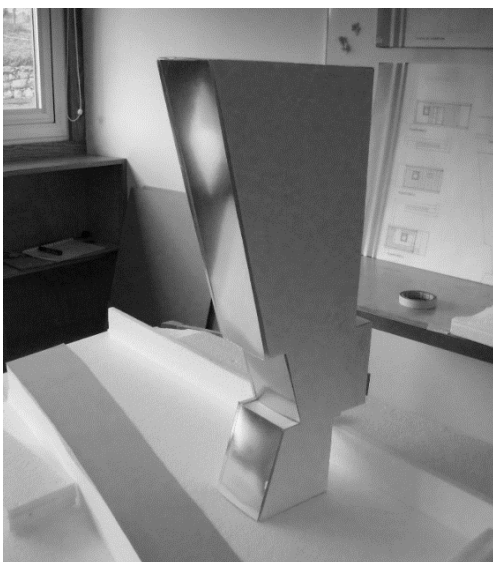
Figure 4. Cátia Pereira – "Mr. Valery's holiday house" (Architectural Studio III, 2008-09). Images of the 1:50 scale model.

Cátia Pereira (fig. 4) designed a house with a high ceiling room in the upper floor, with a trampoline, so Mr. Valéry could jump higher and feel taller. The house ended looking like a stylized coffee

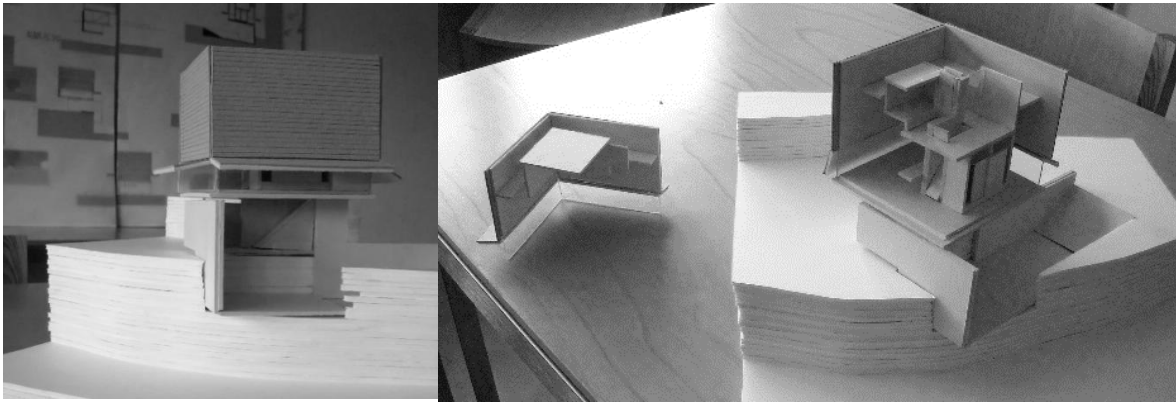maker, which was appropriate, because Mr. Valéry liked coffee so much that his work was drinking coffee...

Figure 5. Hugo Lourenço – "Mr. Valery's holiday house" (Architectural Studio III, 2008-09). Images of the 1:50 scale model.

Mr. Valéry was always sure to wear a hat, but it wasn't always true… sometimes he forgot to wear it. Hugo Lourenço (fig. 5) designed a house that looked like a hat, working with the notion of shelter.

It is not possible to show all the responses from the sixty students here, but the global results of this exercise were very interesting, because they showed different approaches to a very common program. The students were pleased with the challenge that the fictional character presented: it led them to unusual relations between form and function and to consider the symbolism of the architectural forms they created.[5]

It is important that the students can understand the metaphoric possibilities of the architectural form they design; this reflection on language, signs and meaning can also lead to a better understanding of the possible relations between architecture and other fields, like philosophy, literature and poetry.

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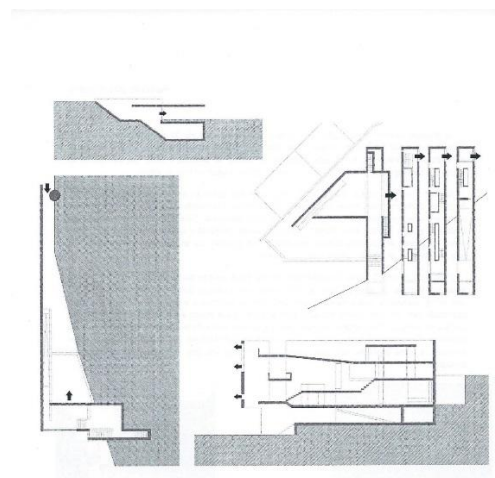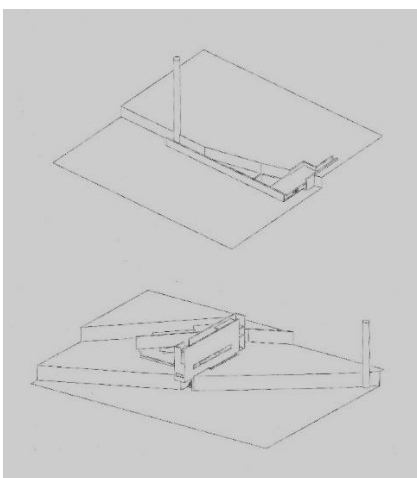
[5] Ventury's thesis on the *Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (VENTURI, et al., 1972) remains valid, today.
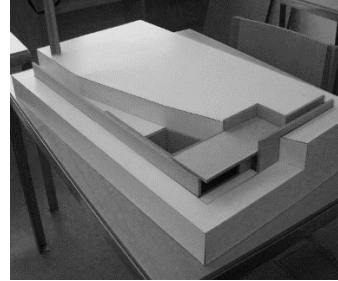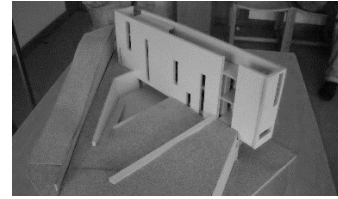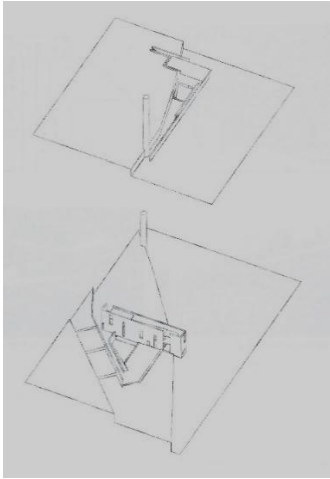
Figure 6. Comparison of the proposals to Mr. Valéry's holiday house from Helder Rocha ("Wall House") and Carlos Maçaira ("House of introspection") in Theory of Architecture III (2009-10).

After this experience in Studio III, I was responsible for a theoretical class in the next year (2009-10): Theory of Architecture III (an annual Curricular Unit located in the third year of the same course), in which I met the same group of students.

I asked the students to do a group exercise, in which two colleagues had to make a critical analysis of a previous Studio work that they both shared, comparing their ideas on a paper and on a multimedia presentation. Many of the groups chose the "Mr. Valéry" exercise, and their results were the most interesting ones: maybe because it was a small program, which was simple to compare, but also because it allowed a very clear discourse on the reasons for the project options, which sometimes were quite opposite in the two proposals.

In the example presented on figure 6, one of the students (Carlos Maçaira) focused on the introspective personality of Mr. Valéry, proposing a house that was buried in the ground, while the other (Helder Rocha) focused on the discourse of the client, on the idea of a house that looks like a wall and has four doors…

But, although the formal results were quite different, the students discovered that they both considered the concept of motion as a major impulse to design the internal spaces of the house.

In the second example (fig. 7), both the students focused on the discourse of the client, but Hélder Castro decided to satisfy his wishes while Marta Machado tried to counteract his will.
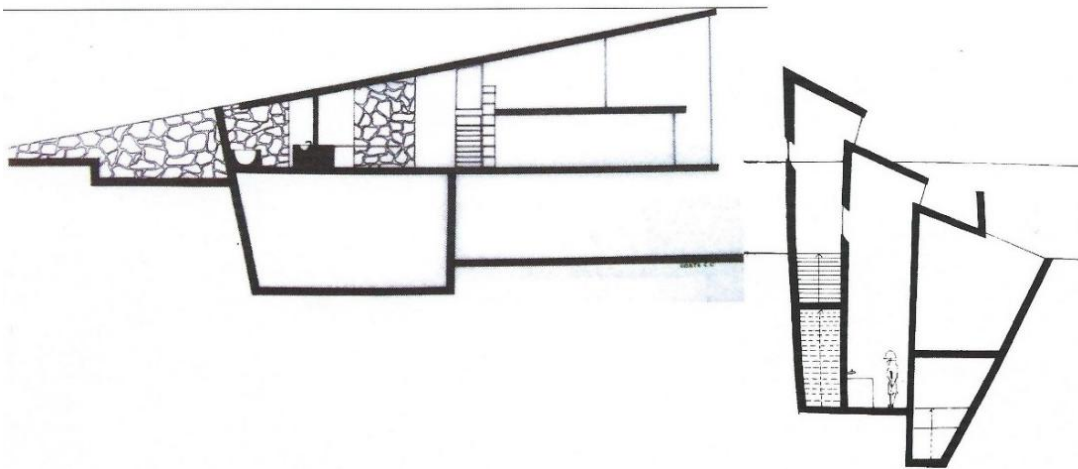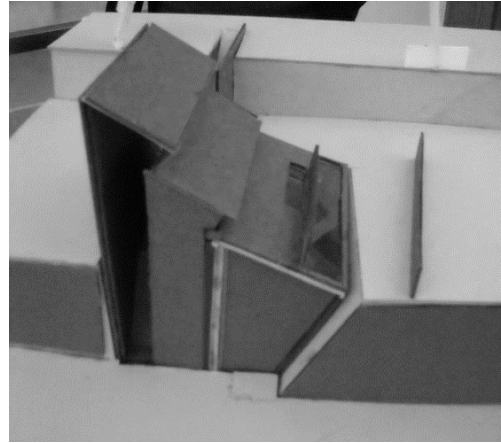
Figure 7. Comparison of the proposals to Mr. Valéry's holiday house from Hélder Castro (House PSI) and Marta Machado: ("Resistance House") in Theory of Architecture III (2009-10).

The results were quite opposite, but they presented a very interesting formal relation expressed in the sections; besides, their presentation triggered a stimulating discussion on the interaction between the will of the client and the work of the architect.

In this last example (fig. 8), both the students focused on the confrontation between the client's will and the interpretation of the site. The results were also quite opposite, because they resulted in different readings of the same site.

In one of the proposals, the will to dialogue with the tree is stronger, and it is open to the landscape; on the contrary, the other one seeks to relate with the horizontality of the rural walls, and almost disappears in the ground.
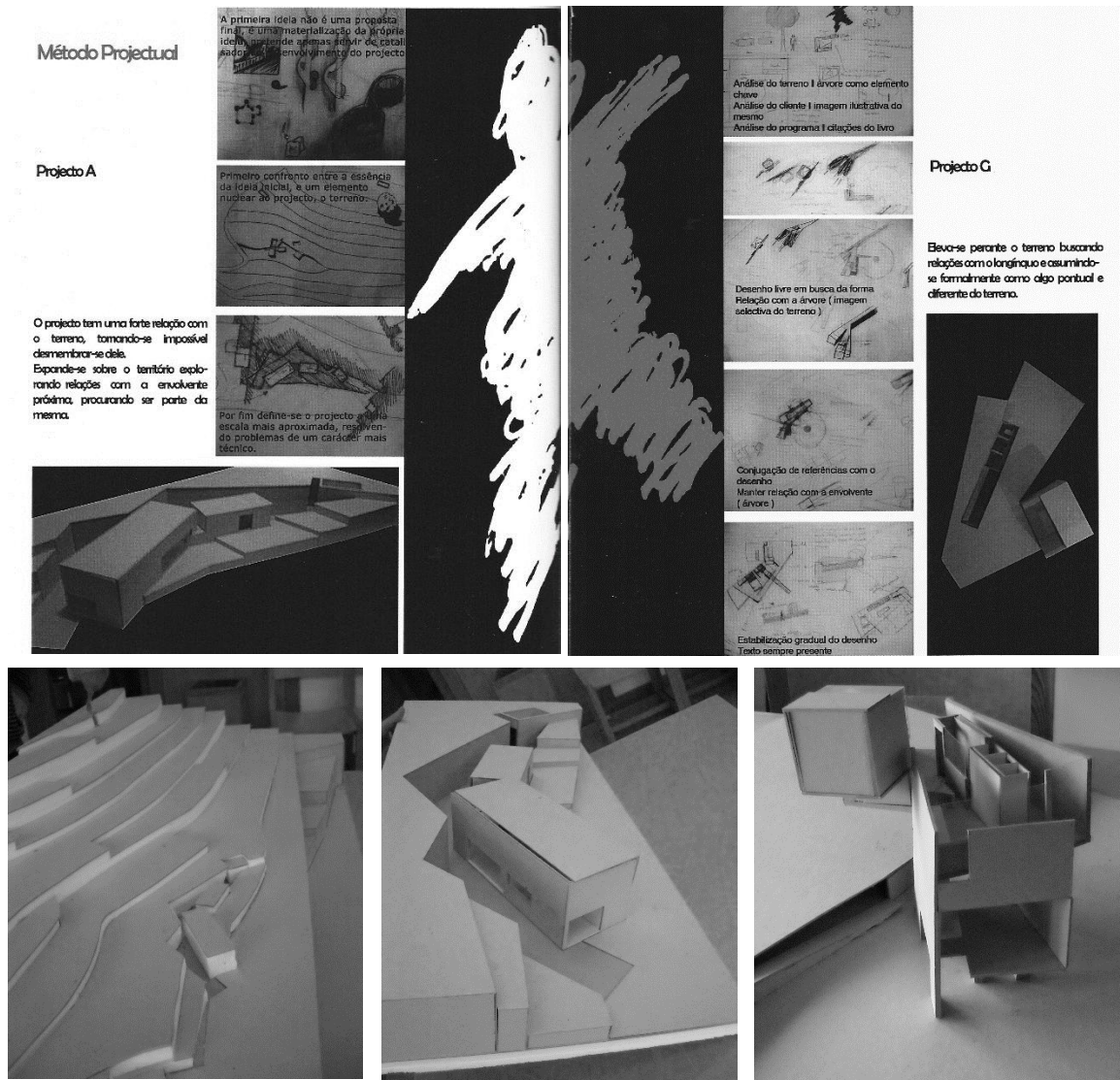
Figure 8. Comparison of the proposals to Mr. Valéry's holiday house from Adriano Silva and Gonçalo Vasconcelos in Theory of Architecture III (2009-10).

According to the book, Mr. Valéry did not feel complete with what he was, and believed that everything he was not would complete him. Likewise, in their presentation, the students concluded that their projects were complementary and proposed that they could be joined together, forming a new response to the client and to the site.
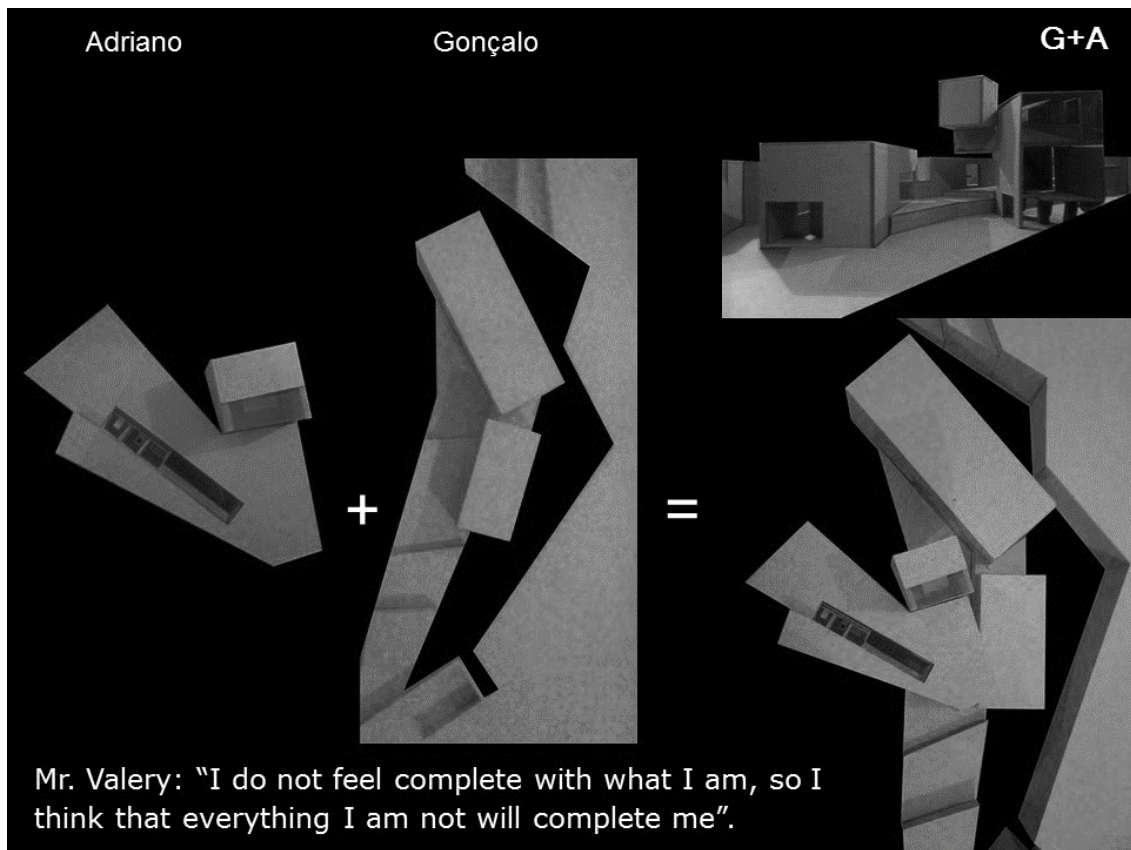
Figure 8. Comparison of the proposals to Mr. Valéry's holiday house from Adriano Silva and Gonçalo Vasconcelos in Theory of Architecture III (2009-10).

Globally, the results of these two exercises showed that the work of the architect is *complex and contradictory* (Ventury, 1966). Not only can the discourse of a specific client allow various responses, but also a site can present multiple interpretations…

So, it became obvious for the students that the will to respond to the same requests can lead to different solutions, as they had to confront their own design with different interpretations of the same idea, or with different ways of dealing with the same client and the same site…

Most of all, students learned how to use architectural form and space as means to express ideas (in Studio III) and trained their capacities to recognize the different meanings of architectural design (in Theory III).

It is very important to focus on ideas in the training of the architect.

Nine years ago, in the Internacional Symposium "The education of the Architect" (Barcelona, April 2005), Mark Wigley proclaimed that the architect should be someone that *creates ideas about buildings and buildings that are ideas*.

Today, it is important to state this notion because in the last thirty years there was a revolution in the way we work and teach, with the introduction and development of the various CAD systems, associated with all the different ways of manipulating digital images.

Consequently, most architectural schools tend to give representation more and more importance every passing year, encouraging students to create good images so they can present their work in the most appealing way.

This can be dangerous because students tend to think that a good project is the one that makes a good rendering. But the perfection of the render is many times hiding a lack of sense of construction and the deficient understanding of the site, the program, or the client: it represents too many hours of work, and we all know that, in an architecture student's life, time does not grow on trees…

To prevent this from happening, it is important that Studio classes are focused on the ideas behind the images.

Studio teachers can benefit from the digital paradigm, inducing the use of other kinds of architectural means of research in the process of design: students seem to easily acquire the skills to create images that explain the concepts, the ideas, rather than the actual form of the building that they are representing. So, they can be taught to create and manipulate images that express ideas, as tools for interdisciplinary research that can be used outside the Studio, in other Curricular Units.

We shouldn't leave the responsibility of making the synthesis of all the knowledge that students gain, from all the different classes they attend, only to Design Studio; in the work done for a Theory exercise, students can develop methods of analytical research as a support for the communication of ideas. Theoretical subjects in architectural courses should give students the opportunity of doing this kind of work, producing and presenting images that explain their ideas in a visual way.

So, the work produced in the Studio classes can be a theme in theory classes, gathering different fields of knowledge in the same practice, like architects do every day, in their professional action.

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All images by Eduardo Fernandes.

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Biographical outline

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