

REBELS WITH A CAUSE: ALDO VAN EYCK AND PANCHO GUEDES

How to find a meaning for the act of built

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Abstract

This paper aims to look at an uncommonly critical attitude against the bureaucratic functionalism in force within a kind of International Style, developing an authentically modern and human architecture in the scope of the Team 10's battle. Considering Aldo van Eyck (1918-1999) and Pancho Guedes' (1925-2015) works and thoughts, their parallel paths, sometimes crossed, are analysed: they were both part of Team 10 and they both defined architecture as the "built meaning", recalling its multiple meanings, languages and responsibilities: 'I claim for architects the rights and liberties that painters and poets have held for so long'.

Aldo van Eyck, from the studies on the sub-Saharan Dogon region to the PREVI proposals in Peru, and Pancho Guedes, from the survey on the Mapogga doors to his surrealist approaches in Mozambique, give examples of the transformation process, on how the modern project got elasticity, creativity, endurance, and finally feeding the utopia. The argument addresses the fact that these two minds envisaged architecture as a language with an emotional impact and a social and cultural scope. Bearing in mind architecture as the primary visual medium with which human society expresses and reveals itself, architecture is conceived as a dialogue and the design of buildings as means for creating relations between people rather than as an end in itself.

Keywords: Team 10, Aldo van Eyck, Pancho Guedes, modern project, architecture language

CIAM took place from 1928 to 1958 lasting 3 decades of alive discussions that didn't resist to the shift of generations in the after WWII. Team 10 led the radical contestation regarding the dogmatic positions of some of the old leaders, such is the case of Gropius at the time with more than 70 years old.

This essay aims to look at the architectural approaches of Aldo van Eyck (1918-1999) and Pancho Guedes (1925-2015), considering their critical attitude against the prevailing bureaucratic functionalism of their time, and their aptitude for developing a deeper modern and human architecture. Following parallel paths, sometimes crossed, they both defined architecture as “built meaning”, evoking its multiple significances, languages and responsibilities (Tostões & Kosejl, 2018).

Aldo van Eyck, from his studies on the sub-Saharan Dogon region to the *PREVI (Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda)* housing proposals in Peru, or Pancho Guedes, from his survey on the Mapogga doors to his Dadaist proposals in Mozambique, provide examples of the process of metamorphosis, in which the modern project acquired elasticity, creativity, endurance, and finally accomplishing the utopia.

These two thinkers envisaged architecture as a language with an emotional impact emphasizing its social and cultural scope (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 1999). The value they recognized in the role of the community and the importance of the social being as the primary visual medium through which humankind expresses and reveals itself, explains the way they both conceived architecture as a dialogue; designing buildings as means of creating relationships between people, rather than as an end in itself (*idem*).

They both took an uncommon interest in anthropology, as well as in archaic cultures. Their vision pushed beyond Western culture in the direction of what they believed to be a fundamental human heritage and which they considered as important as the classical and modern heritage of Western culture (Strauven, 1998, p. 28).

Within this background, they were key in fostering the renovating shift in the architecture of the Modern Movement (MoMo) during the period after World War II (WWII).

They were both part of Team 10 and the young group of “rebels with a cause”, and both took part in the metamorphosis of the MoMo, which connects perfectly with the theme of this conference. Finally, in private terms they were both descended from Portuguese grandparents – Guilhermina Gouveia, the

grandmother of Aldo van Eyck, came from a noble Portuguese family, as her surname attests – and they were both inspired during their childhood by the marvellous world of the former overseas colonies, outside the European frame of experience.

Astonishingly, during his childhood, Aldo van Eyck was familiar with the legend and magic of Surinam and Paramaribo, the colonial capital where his mother was born and where his grandfather had been a physician and researcher (Strauven, 1998, p. 30). Pancho Guedes was the child of a doctor serving the overseas Portuguese colonies around the world. He attended primary school (1927-1931) in the São Tomé e Príncipe archipelago, before moving with his family to Mozambique in 1933, firstly living in a rural settlement in Manjacaze village and then moving to the high school in Lourenço Marques (until 1939), and later to Maritz Brother's College Observatory in Johannesburg (until 1944). When his family moved to Mozambique Island, between 1945 and 1949, he studied for his Bachelor of Architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, then returned to Mozambique until 1975, when he finally moved to South Africa, London and Portugal.

They both shared a fascination for remote, non-European cultures. The discovery of these other worlds, and the power of otherness, undoubtedly marked these two characters in the most decisive period of their development, their childhood.

The vernacular of the heart

Aldo van Eyck contributed to deepening the progress of modernity through a modern approach, that for him meant, above all, connecting architecture with the community. The importance of meeting places and of an architecture designed as a place for dialogue led to the desire to produce public space and to think that children and places destined for play activities developed within public space, not only have the potential for structuring society but also, and through this, for structuring the city. Aldo van Eyck developed a pioneering and original body of work starting in 1947, in which he considered the importance of play, of the

collective happening, of architecture as a shaper of life in society, with the power for intensifying relations between people.

1947 was a very special year for Aldo van Eyck. At the age of 28, he just had graduated from ETH (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule) Zurich and attended the first post-war CIAM meeting in Bridgewater. Their comments there not only had an impact among the meeting's participants but were even included in the report drafted by Giedion (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 1999, p. 14). His participation in this CIAM was fundamental to his future. When he returned to Amsterdam, he started putting his ideas into practice. As an employee of the Public Works Services of Amsterdam, he began to work with Cornelius van Esteran, his boss, who had also been his closest link to CIAM since its inception. After the War, Cornelius van Esteren became responsible for the reconstruction of the city according to CIAM principles. At the suggestion of Jacoba Mulder, a woman architect who was part of van Esteren's team and who had already designed the Beatrixpark in Amsterdam (1936), Aldo van Eyck dedicated himself to a humble job, a new problem with an innovative programme: to design a simple playground. For Aldo van Eyck, it was an opportunity to try out the themes that interested him, which involved overcoming the mechanical functional limitations of the preconceived and deterministic theories of the Athens Charter, reviving concerns with community and envisaging the scale of proximity.

Two years later, he was to be called to design the first exhibition of the avant-garde art movement COBRA¹ at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where the child and the ingenuity of children's expression was the key value and the theme. Aldo van Eyck was close to the movement that shared his fascination with play, spontaneity without prejudice, children's expression, experimentation and a taste for primitive art forms.

¹ COBRA was an artists' collective created in Paris, in 1948, whose name derives from the initials of the three northern European cities from which its founding members came: Copenhagen (Co), Brussels (Br), Amsterdam (A). Among the founding members were Karel Appel (1921-2006), Asger Jorn (1914-1973), Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005), Corneille Guillaume Beverloo (1922-2010), Christian Dotremont (1922-1979), Joseph Noiret (1927-2012) and Ernest Mancoba (1904-2002). The group was dissolved in 1951.

Aldo van Eyck's architecture of playgrounds as a cultural critique against the functional mechanical city that, in its '*massive, large-scale planning view, had ignored minor spaces, abandoned between existing buildings*' (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 1999, p. 17), is linked to this movement.

This fundamental shift caused Aldo van Eyck to start looking at the city in terms of the daily use of space, without distinguishing between the private and the public, and focused on children's lives. This process led to the playground projects that Aldo van Eyck proposed for children throughout the city of Amsterdam, taking advantage of many vacant lots, abandoned or destroyed by the war. In these interstices, he proposed that life should replace misery, neglect, destruction and abandonment. This capillarity system, joyfully used by the children of the post-war boom, from housing with a scarce supply of generous areas, was to be instrumental in rebuilding the city's broken fabric. And it was to be van Eyck's weapon for exposing the limitations of a narrow and mechanical functionalism.

As John Voelcker (1955) stated, '*these small-scale projects dedicated to the everyday life of children, were woven into the neglected holes of the urban fabric, formless stretches of land located on different kinds of lots, made out of unconventional, unsophisticated materials found close to the site.*'

The Amsterdam Municipal Orphanage (1958-1960) is one of his situationist projects, and the first large-scale one. In it, Aldo van Eyck put into practice a decade of experience of children's lives applied to public space, and above all, his convictions on the importance of architecture to establish relations within the community and dialogue between people, as opposed to neutrality and repeated massification, and what he called '*nobody feeling he is somebody living somewhere*'².

In the orphanage, inspired by archaic form language, he used the polycentric paradigm. He made a kind of anthropomorphism tangible by reverting to the communicative features of the human body, the symmetry of its frontal appearance, organising a plan of void and built modules adapting and adopting the microcosmic realm of its former playgrounds. The aim was to stimulate the

² Aldo van Eyck, presentation of *the Nagele grid* project at CIAM Conference, Dubrovnik, 1956.

creation of meeting places, areas where human exchange would occur and dialogue take place (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 1999, p. 17).

Aldo van Eyck wrote '*the vernacular of the heart*'³ according to what he held to be the '*archaic principles of human nature*', the primal values that survived in archaic cultures (Strauven, 1998, p. 380). His interest in archaic or distant cultures went beyond an understanding of their way of building. Aldo van Eyck was moved, above all, by the power of their entire production in terms of understanding their associated view of life and the world. Much like Pancho Guedes, who collected incredible artefacts in Mozambique (Pomar ed, 2010), Aldo van Eyck assembled a wide collection of ethnographic artefacts, including masks, figurines and cult objects, pottery and fabrics (Strauven, 1998, p. 381). When pursuing his research, he focused his interest on two special cultures: the Dogon people from the former French colony of Sudan and the Zuni from New Mexico.

Undoubtedly, the studies, investigations, and readings he made of archaic civilizations had consequences for the way he approached the modern project and sought to overcome mechanistic functionalism. The non-western design elements borrowed (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 1999, p. 10) from the Dogon settlements in their relation between private and public and the understanding of the community in their design, are a result of this extraordinary research that moved him to visit Sudan in 1960.

From the Dogon, he collected fascinating images from sculptures and building that instilled a desire to become familiar with their culture. In 1960, after the completion of the orphanage, he travelled with his wife to Western Africa.

Understanding its mythology, rites and symbolic vocabulary '*helped (him) to get to know not only the houses and villages (he) had admired for so long, but their builders also*' (van Eyck, 1967, p. 30 quoted in Strauven, 1998, p. 381). This real and honest experience, the concrete experience of their everyday and ritual life, houses, ritual and meeting places, made a profound impact on him.

³ First presented in the IX CIAM (Otterlo, 1959), the concept "vernacular of the heart" was later developed by Aldo van Eyck in articles published in the journal *Forum* (1962).

It emerged clearly from his research that the Dogon '*saw not only their environment but the whole world as a chain of related, mutually nested structures*' (idem).

The stimulus of the playgrounds, combined with the culture of these archaic settlements, led Aldo van Eyck to deepen the involvement of people in decisions and increase citizen participation.

With respect to participatory processes, the *PREVI* project was an important experience for Aldo van Eyck. *PREVI*, an acronym for *Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda* (Experimental Housing Project) (see Tostões ed., 2014), was the result of a consultation process initiated in 1965, by the President of Peru, Fernando Belaunde Terry (1912-2002), with the goal of developing a social-housing program able to regulate the spread of self-construction in informal settlements that was taking place in Lima, as a consequence of unstoppable migration flows into the city. Asked by the Government of Peru and by the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), the architect Peter Land conceived and carried out its Master Plan as UN Project Director. In 1969, an international competition was organized for the design and construction of a sustainable neighbourhood of 1,500 dwellings. The urban principles required were human scale; a pedestrian orientated environment; high-density and low-rise development; small private courtyards; the potential to grow and be adjusted over time; new and appropriate building technologies, and earthquake resistance. Among the 6 teams, selected from 26, was Aldo van Eyck's, who had designed houses able to grow according to the needs of the family. Eschewing the usual rectangular shape, he designed elongated hexagonal plots, occupied in the centre by the elementary core, the house cell, with the intention of offering the necessary space for building and expanding the house to the owner's taste, and include front and rear gardens. These were oriented in a way to benefit from continuous ventilation and sun shade. With *PREVI*, Aldo van Eyck was also able to address the issue of interstitial voids to define meeting places within his ambition of creating spaces for children as part of the urban settlements, fulfilling his wish to follow a housing programme based overall on the strength of community relationships.

Buildings should smile and speak

Pancho Guedes⁴⁴ (1925), the Luso-African architect (Witwatersrand University, 1953) active in Mozambique – the Portuguese colony until its independence in 1975 –, made in his writings and architectural production a major contribution to the reassessment of architectural modernity, connecting different disciplines and cultures and developing an affinity with various creators, notably the painter Malangatana Ngwenya (1936-2009). His fantastic and magical architecture comes from the stimulus of a large worldwide network of artists and thinkers that he himself assembled from different sources such as: MoMo architects, namely the South African contributors such as Martiessen or the inspiring Brazilian influences of Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer; Frank Lloyd Wright's spatial research or the contesting critical movement at CIAM in the context of Team 10 which he joined at CIAM's Royaumont meeting together with the Smithsons, Aldo van Eyck, Candilis and Giancarlo di Carlo; or lastly, the new African artists who he promoted.

Therefore, he sought for an architecture full of significance, carrying a personal dimension based on research focused on all formal dimensions and on the possibility for architectural elements to contain and express emotion: *'I claim for architects the same rights and freedom painters and poets have had for so long'* (Guedes, 2007, p. 12). Pancho Guedes wanted to appropriate the primitive's universal motifs, mixing them with his own sophisticated architectural culture, in order to achieve the atmosphere of a de Chirico painting in his buildings. Pancho Guedes knew that architecture is not perceived as an intellectual experience but as a sensation, an emotion (Huet, 1962, p. 42). Therefore, he was interested in the quest for such a quality *'long ago lost among architects but able to reach a spontaneous architecture capable of magic intensity'* (Guedes, 2007).

In the 1950s, this search resulted from the desire to create an alternative modernity, different from the mechanical international style also growing in

⁴⁴ Pancho Guedes full name: Amâncio d'Alpoim Miranda Guedes; the various guises of his name: Amâncio Guedes or Pancho Guedes: A. Miranda Guedes, A. de Alpoim Guedes, Amâncio D'Alpoim Guedes, and Amâncio de Miranda Guedes.

Africa.⁵ Unlike the majority of architects working in Africa forced to design in dialogue with climate constraints, Pancho Guedes also claimed the creator's right to innocence stimulated by the sensuality and drama of the surrounding African culture.

The will to discover an alternative modernity was a response to an inner appeal, but also to an Africa awakening to contemporaneity, to a new world which was in a state of ferment (Tzara, 1962). Pancho Guedes witnessed and acted at a time when architecture was open to popular culture, when architecture without architects and architecture of fantasy were accepted.⁶ But it was also a time of complexity and multiple solutions opening up to the MoMo in continuity or crisis (Rogers, 1957), the ones Giedion identified as a result of an equation between reason and emotion (Giedion, 1941).

Pancho Guedes assembled the conditions to follow an alternative, original and idiosyncratic path of his own. Besides his huge talent, broad culture, experimentalism and genuine curiosity, he had the experience of living in Africa at a time when, despite the imperialistic presence '*anything seemed possible*' (Guedes, 1998, p. 9).

On the international circuit, Pancho Guedes established himself both as an architect, patron and champion of African art at the same time. In Paris, the publication of his article about the painted houses of the Ndebele people of South Africa, entitled "*Les Mapogga*", which featured on the cover of the magazine directed by André Bloc, *Aujourd'hui: Art et Architecture* (Guedes, 1962a), was considered ground-breaking: '*the first to highlight the architectural and sculptural formalism of the dwellings*' (Antonelli, 2013).

⁵ As Pancho states: "For some, the Modern Movement has accomplished its program and architecture has entered the time of refinement and classicism. Indeed, the cancer of styles is again upon us – more mortal and terrifying than ever before. For others – who from day to day stare loneliness in the face – we know we will remain outlaws for the rest of our lives or else turn traitors to ourselves." (Guedes, 1962b, p. 42-48)

⁶ MoMA exhibition in 1960 "Arquitectura Visionária", Bernard Rudofsky (1905-1988), "Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture" (1964), "Architectural History, as written and taught in the Western World, has never been concerned with more than a few select cultures."

In the area of architecture, there were important “Stiloguedes” buildings in Lourenço Marques at the turn of the decade, such as the Prometheus Apartment Block (1951-1953) and The Smiling Lion (1954-1955); the Saipal Bakery and the Otto Barbosa Garage (1952); the Abreu Rocha and Tonelli Building (1955), and the Pyramidal Nursery School (1959-1961).

Peter Rich, a former student and now also a professor at Witwatersrand, states that *‘the work of the architect Pancho Guedes is a fusion of European modernism with African artistry’* (Abitare, 2010) For him,

Pancho was a great mentor because he was a painter, a sculptor, a Dadaist, a Surrealist, and he had an incredible energy. When we were at school, we were very lucky; everyone who was a student or member of staff somehow exceeded their potential by about 300%, making you believe you could do anything and everything and the more you did the better you were. You could shoot a film, create sculpture, paint, perform in a play and make architecture as well. (Abitare, 2010)

From technical issues to poetic approaches, Pop Art and African expression, Pancho Guedes promoted the possibility of modernity issuing from a complex procedure nourished by diverse and eccentric cultural sources. Pancho Guedes divested himself of the colonial hegemony of his time and immersed himself in the myriad of cultural influences and motifs that constituted the very particular African cosmopolitanism of the city of Lourenço Marques in the 1950s and beginning of 1960s. (Gadanhó ed., 2007)

Pancho Guedes promoted the viability of the success of a new African art rooted in the character of local roots and cultural conditions. He consciously led a kind of patronage to support to the birth of a new African art.

In his architectural work, he developed an original style and intense expression, revealing influences ranging from the paintings of Picasso to his friend Malangatana with whom he shared research and inventiveness, from a dreamlike Freudian universe to African sculpture, mixed with an expression characterized by

a "Dadaist" disposition, fostered by his friendship with Tristan Tzara. (Tostões, 2013b, p. 68)

Establishing links with the local population, he found in Africa a favourable atmosphere for the realisation of his projects. By showing interest in issues ranging from African sculpture or indigenous architecture to Malangatana, from Gaudi to Art Nouveau, reflecting the fundamentals of his oeuvre: open and unorthodox, eclectic and irreverent, freely revisiting and reinventing both modern and primitive art in his constructions, with his architectural projects that borrowed from his painting and sculpture in a complete creative process. Malangatana recognized that *'no architect had ever linked architecture to indigenous culture. In his designs we see a geometry that reflects patterns resembling the tattoos of African mythology'*. Famous for his fertile imagination, for him, each project sprang naturally from its surroundings, climate, geology and the culture of those who use it.

How to find a meaning for the act of built

With their prolific outputs, Pancho Guedes and Aldo van Eyck anticipated various trends and ways of thinking that are still to be found today in the international context inspiring relations between art and architecture (Tostões 2013).

They are examples of how the interest in anthropology and archaic cultures was important for the renewal of post-war MoMo architecture, particularly in the framework of Team 10. The aim was to overcome the limitations of the 1950s, regarding which Aldo van Eyck stated that *'rarely had the possibilities been so great for the architectural profession, but never had it failed so badly'*.⁷

Somehow, they personified a profound metamorphosis that proves the hybrid nature and capacity for inclusion of modernity. With careful attention to the myriad of cultural influences and local features that define societies, from culture to

⁷ Lefavre and Tzonis considered this was probably the most famous talk of Aldo van Eyck's career, delivered in 1959 at the Otterlo Conference (Lefavre & Tzonis, 1999, p. 13).

climate, Pancho Guedes and Aldo van Eyck were able to deeply explore the human nature of architecture, responding to its challenges with creativity.

In a way, they both explored metamorphosis in their approach to MoMo, while envisaging otherness, and emerged with a creative stimulus as well as a prolific synthesis. Aldo van Eyck established a school of thought⁸, influencing generations with his usual wisdom of intuition and praxis, spontaneity and innocence. Pancho Guedes could not be considered a conventional teacher, but his influence extended around the world from Mozambique, influencing artists of the calibre of Tristan Tzara (Tostoes, 2014) or encouraging Malangatana to establish himself as the painter of Mozambique. The workshops he organized and his genuine admiration for black art were not only central to the international affirmation of his own work (Guedes, 1962b, p. 42), but confirm the MoMo's capacity for metamorphosis.

60 years after the creation of Team 10 the contemporary agenda recalls to foster the humanistic learning launched by Team 10, and realised by Pancho Guedes and Aldo van Eyck in their architecture, so that the modern project keeps contributing for a better world made with the active participation and inventive capacity of architects and planners.

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