

Interview with architect Telmo Cruz

Filipa Ramalhete, CEACTIONUAL and CICS-Nova, Portugal

João Caria Lopes, CEACTIONUAL, Portugal

It is with great pleasure that we have as our guest architect and professor Telmo Cruz. Welcome! We wanted to start by asking you to tell us your academic path, about the teachers and what exercises left a mark on you.

First of all, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be here. As I am quite reserved, I have many reservations about these public exhibitions, but it was an opportunity to listen to all the interviews with my colleagues. And I was very impressed! What puts even more pressure on me, because they are all exceptional!

As long as I remember, I always wanted to be an architect. I come from a small place, Seia, and the first memory I have is to be in my room - we had a little television and I used to go there to see Channel 2 - and I remember watching a programme showing the church of Ronchamp, by Le Corbusier, and thinking "This is what I want!" And from then on, I never hesitated. Which is strange ... when I was 12 or 13 years old I knew what I wanted! But that's what happened.

As soon as I had the opportunity, I left Seia. I went from Seia School, which was small, to the José Falcão High School in Coimbra, and I was not prepared for that! I went to live alone - I was 16 years old - to a bed and breakfast, just over the Praça da República, where all the students met.

There were football players from Académica de Coimbra living at the B&B, who were studying engineering, and it turned out to be another family, of which I was the smallest of all. I went to high school there, and then I applied for architecture degrees in Lisbon. I was fortunate to have good grades, entering university was not at all stressful.

When I entered university, I was still in high school mode, with tasks and tests. I always had good grades and was a very good student, I accomplished everything, but at university it was a bit different. Just being at the Fine Arts Higher School, with that greater informality, was very different... This was in Chiado, and I, who was already happy when I had gone to Coimbra, had now come to Lisbon!

Did it not cross your mind to go to Porto?

Not at the time. I had family in Lisbon. And it did not cross my mind. I had no idea what a school of architecture was, let alone whether there were differences between Lisbon and Porto! This now seems very obvious to us, but at the time I had no idea. I came to Lisbon, my brother came too, and we stayed in a rented room, as all students did.

Regarding the course, what expectations did you have?

I was too young. I had those fantasies that we were going to save the world and make homes for everyone! But although the school was not very exciting, nothing out of this world, I was lucky. As I heard the other interviews, I got that polarized view that everybody loved the Porto school and everybody hated the Lisbon school, but I had some teachers who were very passionate about architecture, very young teachers.

In year 5, choosing João Luís Carrilho da Graça's class was already a very conscious choice, I knew it was what I wanted to follow. In year 4, I went to see the exams (from year 5) of Carrilho's and (Manuel) Graça Dias' classes - which were the two classes that excited the school - with Maximina, who is now my wife. We had chosen Carrilho, we were excited about the very hard, very direct way he found solutions that always depended on the territory's conditions. And the exercises were always fantastic, it was all extremely appealing, the white models, it was all very exciting. We chose him, and Carrilho did not disappoint us at all!

After I finished the degree in 1991, I worked with João Luís Carrilho da Graça in a theoretical project, VALIS, for a year. And everything that at school was already very intense about Lisbon, which felt like a method that was expanding - he was still building all this himself - then had a professional repercussion, absolutely identical, and it was very exciting. João Luís' studio, at the time, was very busy, they were working on the Pousada do Crato project, but I was in a room in the background, with a Lebanese lady architect and Pedro Gadanho, who was doing his academic internship. We were in this condition, sort of isolated, continuing, professionally, a project that was coming directly from a school exercise about Lisbon. And it was extraordinary! Just as it was extraordinary not long ago to go to the CCB Garage exhibition and see a model of the VALIS, which I had not seen for over 20 years! Nowadays, we hear João Luis's lectures and realise that his talks have become very sophisticated! Now, his talk begins in Manhattan ... But we realize that this process began at that time, at that moment! And it always gives a certain pleasure to recognize this!

While doing your degree, did you have the experience of collaborating with studios as a student?

Yes, I started early in the second year. Learning the profession was done in the studios, it was quite common practice. I worked with my year 1 lecturer, and then with my year 2 lecturer, and we only stopped working in year 5, when we decided that we had to focus intensely on the degree and on João Luís' studio practice (classes), which was really demanding, very intense. Classes started at 8:30 a.m. and we did not leave before 1:00 p.m., with daily revisions of all projects and internal debate of all the works in class. This not only mobilized the class as a whole, but also each had to develop his own critical capacity. These classes were always very exciting, João Luís was always present to make his criticism, more incisive and accurate about all the exercises. We had a formula to accomplish, white models, drawing only with lines. There was a certain standardization of the discourse, but then the discourses were all different. I found that year very intense and exciting.

Of course there were other lecturers at school ... I remember Michel Toussaint's classes! I, who had come from the confines of Serra da Estrela, had never heard the innumerable things that Michel Toussaint was revealing to us in those vaulted rooms with a projection in the background, where he showed examples of everything! I have always liked almost everything! It was never easy for me to say that I only like one thing, and that was very interesting!

Also João Belo Rodeia, who was at the time hyper-focused on Le Corbusier, having probably finished his thesis not long before, was exciting! Seeing a person who for many years has studied a topic in-depth and making it "explode" and drop it on to the students was very interesting!

With all the flaws and lack of enthusiasm that the school had, and it had many, the degree was going well. I cannot complain much, although it did not give us all the tools to be able to evolve later. We had to do this in the studios.

After finishing your degree, you spent a year at Carrilho da Graça's studio and then you went to Gonçalo Byrne's studio...

I joined Byrne's studio on 3 August 1992. The date is easy to memorise, since I am assuming that I joined because it was the holiday period. At the time, Manuel Aires Mateus was the key figure in the management of all projects, a kind of major coordinator, which freed Goncalo to pursue his reflections and critique. Even

today he likes to work that way. And Manuel will have phoned Carrilho to ask if I was worth it and João Luís will have confirmed it (I suppose so ...).

From that point on, I began to realize what it is like to be an architect, in this more global and disciplinary context, where Gonçalo is an exemplary figure. He is one of the most generous and intelligent persons I know. Putting these two conditions together, we have an architect who really strives to make cities and make life support areas - he uses the term "life containers", which is not my favourite. And he does this in an absurdly intense and cultural way! It is not current in any other office, at least with this generosity.

This intrinsic generosity is also there in the project. We get really excited about Siza's projects, and it's true they're extraordinary, he's sort of the ultimate Leonardo Da Vinci! Gonçalo's projects do not have that seduction of a kind of artistic consistency that flows from project to project, but they have great consistency in understanding the city in full, and this condition is only reached when one can get a dialogue and integrate paradoxes into a solution. And in the studio, we had these two conditions: one, more like the Siza way, and another that was more generous regarding the urban and the city, which coexisted well. Manuel (Aires Mateus) represented the most compositional approach of architecture as a discipline and Gonçalo integrated everything into a solution, because he has this enormous ability.

I remember that, when I started, there was a tender for the Rector's Office of the University of Aveiro, which was being carried out by Paulo David - there are many people who learned a lot there – supervised more closely by Manuel (Aires Mateus), delivering a very abstract and beautiful solution. And there is a moment when Gonçalo intervened and turned the entire Campus around that building, placing it in a hinged position, and, inside it, opened a small city, where all those facilities that needed to be distributed were allocated, with hierarchy, with squares, with streets ... all inside that little building! At that point, I was there doing mock-ups, and I did not really understand anything about it. But a day after the delivery Gonçalo gave a conference and described the project and then I understood everything! And this was awesome! And these things seem to me, even today, more exciting in architecture - and I will probably be proven wrong - than the very intense focuses on the more compositional and photographic aspects of architecture.

Unlike João Luís, Gonçalo Byrne never demanded exclusivity. He understood the studio as a kind of school, where people come and go (and I do not know why I have not left yet ...). And this was boosted by the chance of being able to continue working outside. And, with Maximina, I started working with Paulo David. We each left our jobs and I would go out with Paulo to his house. We had a small

studio there, we left at five in the afternoon and stayed there until 2 am, working, doing what we had to do. And the next day we would be at 10 am in Gonçalo's studio. The possibility of having this double life - that at the time we liked, because of the architecture enthusiasm, but which, being a little more mature, I still maintain it today, because I am still working half-time with Gonçalo - gives us the possibility of working and reflecting at two speeds and two distances, and gave me increased ability to analyse what we were producing. I even started having a triple life when I was invited to teach at Universidade Autónoma!

All this results in a sort of triple personality, which focuses on the same object and I think it is more exciting than having only one thing. They are different things, looking at the same thing, and each one adds to the other. Nowadays, if I were asked if I wanted to work with Siza, I would say no! I would not stand it - and it's a personal problem, it's not Siza's problem - living with just one thing. Only this toing and froing between lives fulfils me. And I try to make them relatively watertight, for ethical reasons. I try never to be in a position when one can benefit from the other. This is an issue that worries me enough so I keep things separate.

Is this your survival strategy in the face of what architecture is becoming?

I had never really connected these two things very well, but yes. Also due to this triple analysis possibility and because, as I said, I really like architecture and it's hard for me to say that I like this better than that - I put Niemeyer and Stirling in the same bag - they are different, but each has very interesting things to tell us. At the moment, I intuit a kind of hedonistic condition of Portuguese architecture, which is focusing on a kind of regional consistency - which states that Portuguese architecture is "this". And this "this" lives in a society that has little to invest in architecture, and it seems to me that, sooner or later, global investment in architecture will end. The counterpoint will be Switzerland, which, in this condition of a certain regional consistency, has a society that invests in architecture, and it is extraordinary when this happens. And I do not think that this is happening with Portuguese architecture, in this society, which is much less structured and demanding, where topics that are not hierarchical are easily hierarchized. At times, I am surprised by sentences I hear in conferences that confirm this tendency towards a certain aristocratic condition of the architect, who is becoming enclosed in a particular way of doing, of writing, of acting. To me, this is a path that is increasingly limiting what is Portuguese architecture, instead of clearly exploring the possibility that is embedded in architecture that comes from plain architecture: to optimize all the resources, to optimize all the opportunities, to take solutions as far as possible with very little material, which then endure because, quite simply, they have not missed a chance!

I quite like looking at the vernacular architectures of the whole world. In all of them, one recognizes these decision-making threads, which, from generation to generation, optimize solutions. Of course, they are optimized towards a narrow view of the territory, for that little bit of territory. But if we can learn the strategy and mirror it to the world, I think it's more exciting. So, I find it a bit sad to see this kind of single-image condition of Portuguese architecture. I preferred it to be much more plural than it seems to me to be happening.

Is this because an image, in some way more elitist, is being built, which is somehow more unique and more internationally recognizable, but not by the Portuguese? Or is it because we do not have architectural culture, as a society, and therefore we do not recognize the intrinsic quality of things?

It is clear that Portuguese society does not have the capacity to recognize the values with which Portuguese architecture can contribute to society - it is not part of the priorities of any government, as long as I remember.

But what I was saying is a little bit different. Indeed, this restriction of the expressions of Portuguese architecture, possibly more in the media than in reality (but I do not presume to know much more reality than the one shown in the media) seems to be building a kind of Portuguese architecture, which is not rich enough to resist the real complexity of the world. And when Portuguese architects start receiving orders through this branding condition, they are in a very weak position. Because they are expected to produce something. But the conditions are always absurdly different, in each project, depending on the territories.

Last weekend there was a Portuguese-Spanish meeting. In this event, Spanish architecture was almost always referred to as a more real architecture – in the words of (Rafael) Moneo – compared with a more abstract Portuguese architecture. And I think this is reductive! It does not correspond to reality. And we are all very excited about this more abstract condition, which to me seems a dead end.

Somehow, the architects who are part of this more recognized group, more internationally than nationally, have been inspired by Portuguese popular architecture and other international masters. Today, do you think that the fact that our students (from Autónoma) come from all over the world, and do not necessarily know Portuguese popular architecture, will change anything? There is a break in the link here, isn't there?

It is this breakdown of the link that has contributed to the existence of this kind of restriction of what can be the themes of architecture. There are themes that will

become no longer a theme. There are taboo themes! If anyone wants to have a disciplinary conversation about comfort, he will face numerous problems. It is not a theme!

Well, since Autónoma invited me to teach Construction classes, that's my theme! I live a lot in the *utilitas* and in the *firmitas*, and it seems that Portuguese architecture lives only in the *venustas*. And that does not make any sense! Of course there is a kind of healthy tension between the most instrumental subjects, such as Constructions, designed to produce a built architectural object, and the elective subjects. However, I admit that construction is a medium, I can admit this condition, and that architecture, which needs this discipline, can live with numerous constructions, and the same meaning may have different bodies. If there is one thing I try to do at Autónoma is not to do what I hated as a student. In those days I hated the Construction subjects, which were positioned in an autonomous way from the project subject, even aristocratically autonomous. As if there was an autonomous perfect body of knowledge in Project. This is a paradox that makes no sense, and when I began to think how I was going to deal with this - because I had never given classes, I am the most recent lecturer of Autónoma, I have been teaching for seven years and the school started fifteen years ago, all my colleagues have a much longer academic path - the first thing I thought was to attempt to make the connection with the Project subject. Over the years, I have always been seeking the best link between the two subjects.

In year 4 the experience is almost always the most balanced, it is one that allows the Construction subject (in UAL it is called Technologies) to follow Project decisions more closely and make these decisions large enough and complex enough to integrate everything at the time of decision. It always went very well. In year 3, it is more difficult, and in year 1... it's a challenge! It is a challenge because they are new students who come from high school with another type of preparation, farther away from what would be necessary instruments for Architecture. Therefore, we must find a way to bridge this gap, and we must be very direct in this acquisition of the instruments; that is why 1st year students are doing surveys and drawing, because they lack the ability to communicate ideas rigorously using architecture sentences and drawings. In year 2, which is still a recent experience, I have been making the first recognition of the qualities of some materials, including the ubiquitous concrete, which is one of the materials most used in current architecture. Then the brick, as a counterpoint, a material that is made in a different way, which comes in pieces, for which one has to imagine the expressive possibilities that bricks have versus the expressive possibilities of concrete. And it has been going well, we have managed to connect it to the Project work.

And year 5... is a very sophisticated year! Both the studios of Inês Lobo and Francisco Aires Mateus are studios which, in order to greatly increase the intensity of the students' work, require a very precise focus, in the case of Inês, on an almost always urban territory, and, in the case of Francisco, on a usually less consolidated territory. This requires a certain water tightness in the form of teaching. And this water tightness is in the sense of being able not to destabilize, not to blur, and yet make decisions that are mobilized by external things, in this case, building materials and opportunities. Year 5 is all very anchored in Matter, in Energy (they are the great umbrellas over the themes) and the challenge has been, without disturbing and without blurring, to introduce these themes, which are global themes.

Since your area is different from Project, how do you see the relationship between Research, Professional Practice and Teaching?

It's a very difficult topic. On the one hand, there are some factors that influence this relationship. One is the way research investment is done in Portugal, because research does not live without funding, without resources. And everything works very well when the profession and research get mixed up, when we have research in the chemistry lab, for example. As soon as the profession, the day-to-day of those who investigate, is divided into profession-research, there is a crisis and, in practice, even for regulatory issues, one is required to choose one or the other. If you want to have a profession, there you have a profession, if you want to do research, then you do research. This is a problem in the creative professions, and I think in the humanistic ones too, and is not a problem in pure mathematics, in chemistry, professions in which the laboratory is part of the profession. The perverse consequence is to reduce things to a consensus that says that researching is "this". And any architectural project, done under the intense conditions of a high-level architect, requires such commitment and focus on the object of study ... the number of working hours spent by a small building project team, and it does not need to be a very large one, far exceeds the number of hours required to complete a PhD!

And this effort, this real effort, to investigate architecture, with the architecture material, fits in no "drawer" of what is considered research in architecture. But then we see the formal, academic and more stabilized research use all that effort as study object! It's a paradox! In my projects, I do not presume to generate such intense material, but there are many cases in Portuguese architecture where this is so! Any project carried out by Gonçalo (Byrne), (Álvaro) Siza, or by (Manuel) Tainha, is in itself an intense research thesis. It does not come in the form of a doctoral or master degree, but it has this condition. It would not be a bad idea to

think how to change this. It makes no sense to say to a person, "Choose between this or that", because in practice you are doing both...

Something that Gonçalo Byrne said at a conference just came to mind: "I prefer the word "And" to the word "Or"! I'd rather include than having to choose, because it's so much more exciting!" This sums up what I said when we started talking, about the generosity with which he operates. Because we are missing this "And" a lot! The structure of the city is very much sustained in the "Ors" and little in the "Ands". But all of us individually can practice the "And"! It is easy and is very inexpensive!

You reminded me of a small conference by Frédéric Druot, who worked with the Lacaton and Vassal, who started with the phrase "To give is more!". And he talked a lot about the idea of the effort of the architect, as the person in society who has the possibility of giving as a mission. Give more than what people would expect at first...

That was the reason why all young people wanted to be architects. When there is this opportunity to make this a conscious decision, and not lose that will, I think it's incredible! The risk is rather what is happening to these "social" (or for the poor) architectures, when they make statements such as "I am not interested in this aristocratic world of architecture, I am interested in the poor world of architecture" (the Lacaton and Vassal are among the most balanced because the results are really exciting). And this does not exist! There is no such polarization. When it's good, it's architecture! It is not because it is poor or rich. It's saying, "When there's architecture, it's here". When it is used to solve problems, it is here, when it has to be, it is! There are so many things that are just that, they just are.

We look at the Ajuda Palace, which will soon have that finishing, and, essentially, it is! It's a representation of power and it does not cease to be architecture because of that. There is always this risk of selecting only a portion of the problem. And I think, whether it is something made with five cents or five million euros, as long as there is intensity in the way we look at the subject and in the way on how what we are proposing can interfere with the future of the territory, whether it is extensive or not, it is incredible! In what other profession can you say that you are contributing materially and physically to the future? Any architectural work that is done marks the future. Directly. There are not many professions that have this condition.

And how do you see the future of the profession?

Obviously, we are all concerned about the lack of resources. We will all have to continue to adapt. It's very different for a young man who leaves the university now, compared to how easily I left school. I went to João Luís, after knocking on

various doors, 3 or 4 (not a few hundred), and then I went to Gonçalo. We are the ones who build this condition ... when resources begin to be accounted for, there is a greater requirement. I have had a kind of obsession about the *quality of the decision*. Qualifying a decision is an obligation of all. What mechanisms can we find to improve the quality of decisions? Regardless of what they are, either the ones we make every day, or the ones governments make every day.

Much of the effort has been made through resources. When the word resource appears, it begins to permeate the processes, to make itself felt as qualifying material. And I think it is a good idea, but I also think that there must be conditions so that this can permeate all the processes. And it is not clear that the decision-making bodies that we have in Portuguese society do so, at least from a technical point of view. The state has lost technical qualifications, in favour of legal ones, at a galloping pace. When we see a decision, a Law, I ask myself, "Where is the stratum that qualified all this? Why was this decision made? Why is this decision better than any other?"

And if we understand this condition of letting resources as a concept permeate all processes, I would say that I do not see the future of architecture as too bad because we are qualified to deal with it.

Regardless of the scarcity...

Yes, regardless of scarcity. It worries me that scarcity is not about the object of the study, but about who studies it! It upsets me that in many cases the scarcity of project study resources leads to a costlier work. This does not make much sense! And then it is up to the architects to prove it should not be so.

Since we are in the period of elections for the Architects Association, do you think these issues should be the subject of debate?

The Association exists as the regulator of a professional activity, it is a delegation of the State to a half-dozen people, who have to regulate Ethics and Deontology. But this is not appealing, it does not win elections, and therefore it is a discourse that is always half-concealed, half-forgotten. And in the Architects Association, it is widely perceived that cultural issues, such as conferences and exhibitions, garner far more favours and commitment from members than these. And this has weakened the Associations.

And I think that the Deontology Code of the Architects Association is old, it was already old by the time it was done. It is a difficulty Associations face. All architects have the same rights and the same duties. And this, which is evident, is no longer evident if I say that not all architects are equal. Without removing



anything from the first sentence, the second must also exist. And this is a very difficult topic within the Associations, saying that not all are equal but that everyone has the same rights and duties...

This week I visited various studios all over the country and there was a student who asked me a question that I now pass on to you, so that you can talk a little about your studio, the MXT Studio: was it easier to go from University to work in an architecture studio or to leave an architecture studio to set up your own studio?

I never left! But much for the reasons I have explained, because until today I have never ceased to be enthusiastic about the possibilities that Gonçalo has given us. So I do not know if I have a very precise answer to give. What I can say is that working for a studio is to be in a protected environment. It is not the same as having a studio of your own. Working in that comfortable world, where we have only the core of the discipline, without having the "dirty" part of the profession, is very good, it is exceptional. Having a studio requires dealing with the "dirty" part of the profession, but, when well-balanced, this possibility that the profession has to generate self-sufficiency is incredible!

We recently made two bridges, one on the 2nd Circular and one over the Northern Line. From the onset, the two processes were absolutely different. One was an international tender, with lots of competitors and a guest jury that was very good. Then we had a tough private one until the end. This was the 2nd Circular one. The other was one of those processes more focused on fees and methodology, with the awareness that the time resource will be limited, which made us realise, from the first moment, that we had to find a solution that, from the point of view of execution, would fit in a certain time period, would be very restricted in what it demands, and extraordinarily inventive to overcome conditions that were in the tender regulations. In practice, they asked for two bridges and we made one. Making one bridge is always cheaper than making two, and we were doing the same crossing. And we won, and it is built, and it is true that in the end, one has a very precise geometric constraint, so that it could be drawn very effectively, the other was much more exuberant because it had to pass this international tender criteria. Right there at the start there was this awareness of these two conditions.

We won the 2nd Circular Bridge by luck! That tender had a reboot and that's why we were able to compete, because the proposals we had on the table were not going well at all. With that reboot, we got another drive. An X appeared on the road, and with that X we began to see other paths, which were already there - we understood that this bridge could be some kind of prototype of a network that went over everything. And that was where it went, and of course we were very happy!



We won this tender two days after winning the Abrantes Nautical Centre one. It was an extraordinary week!

And the truth is that this was done in a small studio. Nowadays, any student leaving the university probably has more resources than I have. With these computer and rendering (3D) resources, which I do not have, any group of three or four students can provide incredible answers in these processes. And unfortunately for us who have more demanding structures, light structures, which can be assembled to respond to architectural tenders, can kick-start incredible things. Many of the studios we know, like the Spanish Barozzi and Veiga, are an example. They are very light studios at the beginning, which then win tenders, and then move on to become who they are now. Therefore, any Autónoma student can get there!

How to quote this article: RAMALHETE, Filipa; CARIA LOPES, João; – Interview with Telmo Cruz. Estudo Prévio. Lisbon: CEA/CT/UAL - Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, 2016. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Available at: www.estudoprévio.net]