

Grafton Architects

Interview Matilde Girão

Living in a network culture, where communication travels at a speed of a link, we position ourselves to stay one station away from a destination. Plugging in/out; switching on/off; signing in/out is our response to a working agenda. There is no address to where the interview took place. There is a common virtual space of communication.

„(...) supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of “places of memory”, and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position” (Marc Augé, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, 1995, p. 77-78)

It was both 4pm local time, in Dublin and in Lisbon. Our distance was as far as logging in; entering our username and accepting the invitation to establish a virtual connection space via Skype – a telecommunication video chat. And that’s that. Proving right our condition in today’s society, from that moment on, we were both conditionally framed in each other’s screen. There was no place of reference, but an ephemeral transitional entity.

Sharing common grounds since 1970, Shelley Mc Namara and Yvonne Farrell, both graduates of UCD – University College Dublin – established Grafton Architects in 1978. They are Fellows of the RIAI (Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland); International Honorary Fellows of the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) and are elected members of Aosdána, the eminent Irish Art organization. They have recently won the fourth annual Jane Drew Prize.

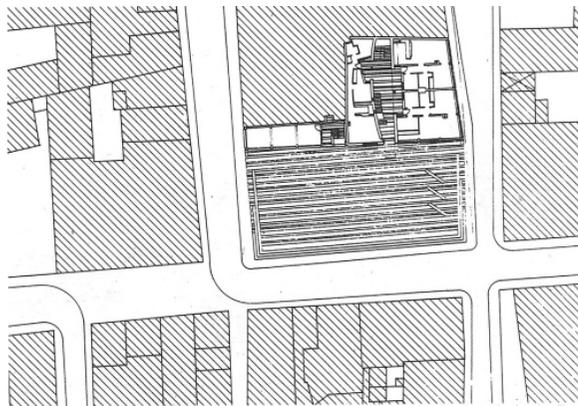
What is the meaning of confrère to you?
By confrère you mean collaboration?

Exactly. As a form of engagement between architects.



West elevation, Temple Bar Square

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Axonometric drawing of courtyard

Right. I think Architecture is a collaborative endeavor. Whether it's within the studio or beyond the studio. In one of your questions, from the review you sent previously, you ask about Group 91 and how the collaboration worked. Maybe I'll speak about that first and then come back to the meaning of the word. Why and how did people alert you?

So, in Ireland, I think without us realizing, three generations of architects were teaching together ever since being students together. And, what happens when you are teaching together is that you develop very long conversations and, again, maybe without us realizing, we were developing a common ground. Our common ground for Group 91. We felt, especially in Ireland, that there was an architectural culture to be built. We were conscious that in other countries there was a much stronger culture of contemporary 20th century architecture and this is to do with the fact that we were a young country in terms of our independence. And there were a lot of issues, I suppose, of identity and many of these things. So, Group 91 happened because this was in the air. And when in 1991 Dublin was City of Culture, we knew it was time to react and do something. We came together to make a project, which was about developing new typologies based on the eighteenth century houses in Dublin – eighteenth century Dublin is a city of houses – and because at that time it was quite derelict in the city center, we felt that it needed its streets rebuilt with new house types. So that was our first reason for setting up Group 91, to make this exhibition. Then because this group was already formed, when a competition was announced for the regeneration of a very large quarter in Dublin, called The Temple Bar, we were shortlisted to be one of the practices to enter this competition. We were against all the big commercial offices including some international commercial offices – SOM. So a group of seven small practices came together to make this competition and we won.

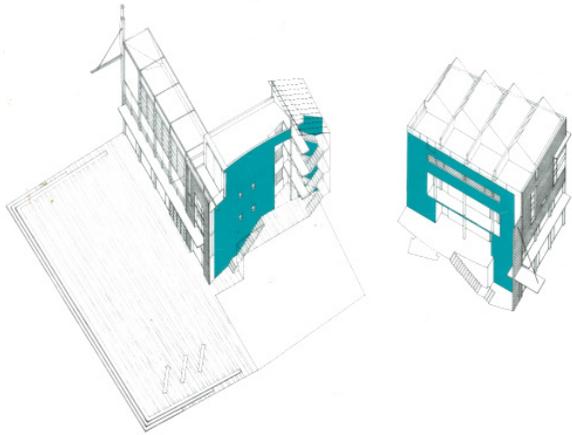
And did you have a sort of group manifesto?
We had an unspoken manifesto that we had developed over time. We believed in the repair of the city. We believed in the idea of city as a series of layers not needing the tabula rasa approach and so we took, not knowing the word at the time – which Manuel de Sola Morales coined – which is the Urban acupuncture philosophy. That was what we were doing – repairing and stitching back this piece of city together. So it was a very exciting and important time for us. For seven offices to come together was not an easy task and what was good was that each practice came to make one project.

Ok, so this was the starting point?

Yes, this was the starting point. And going back to your question about confrères, in general, I think there is a strong connection between teaching and practice in architecture. We find this a very fruitful relationship. We try to make our office¹ feel like a studio. We absolutely believe in collaboration as the very core and basic idea in the practice of architecture.

I imagine this also links to the number of collaborators you have in your studio.

Yes, we keep our studio quite small. The largest we have ever been is 21, maybe 22. This is probably, at the limit of being able to have a very direct and personal relationship with each project and with each group, allowing to cross-fertilize between groups, so that sometimes a group of people working on one project jump to reinforce another, which we believe to be one of the most important resources as a practice. For instance, recently we are doing two competitions and, the instinct is to break down the practice into two teams but we decided not to do that. Instead, we decided to group ourselves together in a melting pot, so to speak, for a short stage and only divide for the final production. We believe in the chemistry and the accident that happens when you ask a diverse group, with diverse talents, to think about one thing. And sometimes it's the outsider that makes a comment or a proposal that acts as the catalyst.



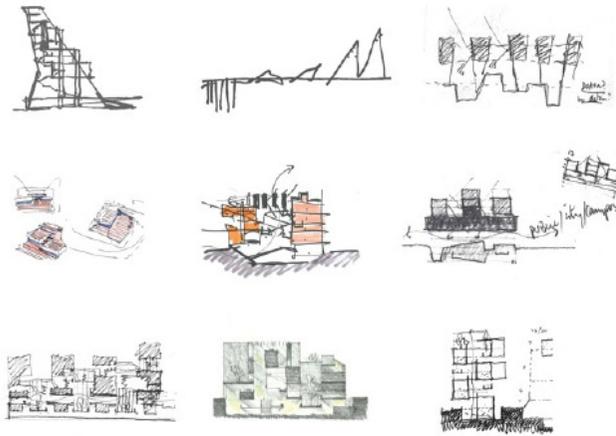
Plan of Temple Bar Square

In one of your lectures you explain your Diagrams of Intent as “a secret enigmatic symbols that form a part of DNA of each project”. Do they appear at the beginning or are they the result of something achieved during the process, after all do procedures?

It is always different. Sometimes it happens early on, where a sketch captures something and because we know there is something in there, we try to translate it into architecture. And other times, it comes from after a lot of struggle, where everything seems foggy and confusing and we question ourselves a lot until reaching to this sketch, this kind of hieroglyph, that captures the core of each project. It is amazing how essential these sketches can be, as a form of communication between us, and between the outsiders.

Are these sketches produced by both you, and Yvonne?

Yvonne and myself produce them, but other people in the office also produce them. The ones that are published and credited to us are our sketches. So, many of them come from us but very often a sketch that someone in the office draws becomes also part of the process.



Diagrams of intent, DNA of each project

Going back to Group 91, how did it close-up?

It is very interesting. I remember young architects saying to me – you really failed because Group 91 finished – but we had never thought about it as being something that would go on. We felt that it was something of magical that came together and was completed, because everybody made a project. I suppose, things happen naturally.

A built project?

Well, not everybody actually. One of the architects, McGarry Ni Eanaigh, unfortunately didn't because they were doing a bridge across the river Liffey and that project stopped. It was a tragedy. But effectively, people made their projects and when the project was done everybody went their own way. Although we have spoken about collaboration, and some people within the group have collaborated since, I think if there were certain opportunities it could work.

Again, I suppose you have to believe when things happen naturally. It's hard to force collaboration. And in fact, we tried once or twice to collaborate with people with whom we thought we had common ground, and we do, but then the chemistry of working together was quite difficult. So it doesn't always work so easily. It depends on how big the project is and how independent you can be and respect egos.

And boundaries, I suppose. Understanding where those boundaries touch and distance themselves. How was the working space of Group 91 organized? Was there a physical space or did each practice work independently?

We worked closely together, meeting once a week. We divided the area into different parts and each practice had to make proposals for those areas and then we worked on how to stitch them together. We reviewed each other's work. Which was very painful, at times, because you know your peers; you respect your peers and so, criticism from your peers is painful and some people are more fluent than others and make beautiful drawings and some people are slower and make not so beautiful drawings. There was always this balance to be held. In the end, a number of collaborators undertook the mission of bringing together our proposal, in terms of format and graphical representation. It was important that it looked like one project.

Exactly. So here we reach the issue of authorship. How was this preserved?

I don't think, at the time of the competition, authorship was an issue because everybody had made a huge contribution and, we really did feel everybody owned that project. No one individual or no ones office owned that project. There was a very strong sense of it being a team project. Everybody invested their energy at a same level and everybody made a very important contribution. So, there was no issue of authorship, really. Well, I certainly didn't feel it. It was Group 91 project and that was it. And then, of course, when the projects were completed, the authorship became very clear. Here, we were dealing with individual projects after the competition phase.

Do you feel it would make sense to go back to A Group 91 collaboration?

Absolutely, if the combination was right and if the scale is right. We are always open to collaboration; it's just that there hasn't been that many of those opportunities in Ireland, in terms of a whole urban quarter being regenerated by one company. See, The Temple Bar project was effectively administered by the state. Many of the collaborative projects are now run by developers, commercial developers, that are not so interested in us.

You describe “The role of an Architect as the translator of need into built work, into the silent language of space”. This is, in every dimension, a simple yet complex explanation of what architects do. What if the need is questioned?

We always question the need, actually, the need in terms of the brief; the ambition of the client. For instance, in educational buildings, which we are lucky to work upon very often, the need is questioned in terms of: what is ethos, what is the hidden ambition that the client wants but can't always express. Considering the Bocconi University in Milan, in some ways you could say that the brief, the ambition, or the perception of Bocconi, may have been that it's quite a conservative university of economics but, in reality, because of our belief in the role of education in the city, we thought beyond that and felt that the university is a place of exchange, as a marketplace, that it has an urban and a social role to play. We perceive the university as very important institution in any city and so, the idea of opening the university up to the city was part of our philosophy. Allowing a clear relationship between the university and the city. So, in this sense, you could say we were questioning the need in terms of architectural values.

I think an architect brings a set of values in a project as a form of reaction to a very precise analysis. We believe we go in a precise analysis, like a detective or psychiatrist, and question ourselves – what does the client want and what is our translation of that need into space or into architecture. And the discussion and the answer is very different. For instance, in Lima it was a completely different situation, because of our understanding of the culture and of the climate. Then there

are times that you question need, for instance, if a commercial developer is trying to make too much profit and is pushing the architects in a compromising direction, one has to resist that, even at the risk of walking away.

You give a great example of how architects should collaborate with contemporaneity and its tools – “About computers and technology it is the way you are directing technology and technics of architecture” – and then you mention the pavilion of Siza and Souto Moura for the Serpentine Gallery of 2005, in Hyde park, as piece of traditional timber construction, beautifully crafted and highly sophisticated made by computers, because each piece and each shape was different, cut with a laser. The process was computerized but the result felt like craft.

Well, we felt that very strongly. A year ago, maybe two years ago, we were going to an exhibition in Verona and we saw the most beautiful stair case made by the building workshop of the university of Syracuse, in Sicily. They made this fantastic stone spiral stair with cantilever steps. They were combining solid stone with post-tensioning. So, again, it is the combination of a new technology with the historic craft. There is nothing more exciting than to be able to hold both and not lose the presence of one because of the sophistication of the other. To be able to hold those two things together is wonderful and important. Then you are not afraid because you can place a value on the ancient and bring it together with the highest of technology. It means one has to orchestrate.

How would you describe the daily meaning of the relation between master and apprentice?

The way that we feel is that we are always apprentices. We are always learning from younger architects; from architects that are alive; from architects that have passed away; from younger colleagues. I think we are always apprentices and that is wonderful because you're always being challenged and always learning.

You once also said “Something fantastic about architecture is that still at the age of 95, you are

still realizing you are learning. Architecture is an amazing discipline”.

Yes, and it is. Alejandro de la Sota said a wonderful thing about teaching, which I can't remember exactly but something as “The only difference between the teacher and the student is that the teacher has more experience, and the thing that they both share is doubt”. This is really interesting and really important because nobody is sure in the making of the project. Nobody has the answer. It's not because you are older that you have the answer. I mean, very often the younger architect finds the answer much more quickly than the architect with more experience, or experience gets in the way of being able to see clearly. It's very interesting. There is no certainty.



Yvonne Farrell & Shelley McNamara, Grafton Architects

I believe it is also something very positive about teaching. Shifting from academic approaches to office projects allows one to open the spectrum of reality. And for last, did you have a master figure, a reference?

We did, for sure. Le Corbusier was our master. We apprenticed ourselves to Le Corbusier almost fully, as the nature of our education. We still go back to that work because of the fantastic range. Of course, you have a master when you are young and then you put the master aside and you go off and find many other things that enthusiast because you are free and open but, I would say the solid ground, still is that initial deep exploration of the work of Le Corbusier.