

Diogo Seixas Lopes

Interview Francisco Moura Veiga | Photography Francisco Nogueira

There is no sign on the door of the building, actually there is no clue at all to the reality that lies inside. The office occupies what previously was an auto-workshop in one of Lisbon's historical neighborhoods. The triangular floorplan sets up a two storey room that went through minor interventions, remaining in a typological ambiguity that lends some sort of palpable meaning to the work environment. At one of the edges of the triangle, cornered by two wooden walls, stands a single cubicle, once the mechanic's office, now the small work room Diogo shares with his wife, Patricia. A wooden desk, smoothed by time and work, stood between Diogo and me. He calmly sat back, smoking at a steady rhythm, invitingly answering the questions posed to him. This was not the first time we met, I attended a lecture he gave to a group of swiss students on a study trip to Lisbon. The topic he chose to address was not the obvious choice; hidden historical streets in Lisbon. In the course of his lecture, he drew our attention to the fact that this decayed streets that lay behind and under avenues are, at least, as deserving of a visit as the rest of the city's monuments. The uncommon way he presented Lisbon to the students matches his approach to Architecture. Diogo studied architecture at the FA-UTL in Lisbon at a time when Porto was at its prime. He focussed on acquiring a strong theoretical base before jumping into practical work. He co-authored a book on urban realities¹ shortly after his studies. He was co-editor of Prototipo, a magazine he co-founded, he is now co-editor of the Portuguese Architectural Guild magazine (J-A) and co-curator of the next Lisbon's Architecture Trienal. He works with his wife in Barbas Lopes Arquitectos. He shares his work and the results of his work. Diogo is worth sharing.

Were theoretical production and theoretical contemplation a part of your academic work or did that emerge later?

¹ Lopes, Diogo Seixas / Cera, Nuno, Címêncio, Lisbon: FENDA, 2002

The first sign that theoretical production was something that interested me happened during school, because of this professor who asked his students to give presentations about several projects. Flagship projects, in some sense. At that time, access to information was very limited. We were handed several projects under the spectrum of Deconstructivism. I gave a presentation about the Jewish Museum by Daniel Libeskind. This happened during my second year in school, round 1990, and back then I had little knowledge about the theoretical production of architecture, let alone this specific practice, so it was a kind of a revelation to me because it was something totally unlike everything I had been exposed to until that time. Even if we do not consider it a theoretical production, we could certainly call it an experimental activity. Eventually, this got me to Berlin and New York doing internships for Libeskind and Asymptote. Because of this, I had access to the work of other architects hinged between theory and practice. So, I developed some interest for that hinge that allowed projects to be vehicles for different subjects besides space, tectonics, or function. This relation between theory and practice would later coalesce with the editorial project of *Prototypo*.²

² prototypo.com

And how did that move to the editorial world happen?

Prototypo was produced with two other colleagues, one of them the graphic designer of the journal. At some point, we thought that it would be more productive if we created our own project. The first steps date back to 1998, a moment of a certain optimism in Portugal. This made it easier to raise funds to finance the journal as a completely independent venture. The magazine had a structure, an editorial concept, that was a success in terms of its scale of operation. Every issue presented a monograph from a foreign architect set side by side with that of a Portuguese architect. A “face-off.” There was some criticality in staging contrasts between the work of Portuguese and foreign architects. We tried to play with the interests of different markets, different

³ barbaslopes.com

⁴ March 2015, Park Books will publish „Melancholy and Architecture: On Aldo Rossi” by Diogo Seixas Lopes

audiences. Prototypo had from the start a mechanism of self-destruction. It was set to end when it reached the ninth issue. P.R.O.T.O.T.Y.P.O.: 9 letters, 9 issues. Along the way we organized a big seminar in 2001, “Performing the City.” It was truly a strong event because we had a lot of people coming over to participate as speakers. Not just architects but also researchers, theoreticians, critics. The outcome of those days of discussion was very intense. Our stance towards Prototypo was always about the export of contents and the import of knowledge coming from external agents. When it reached the ninth issue we claimed the right, if not the privilege, to terminate its editorial and critical project the way we wanted to. Afterwards, I made an altogether different kind of move and went abroad. Back then, I was teaching in Lisbon and had been advised to pursue a PhD.

Why and how did people alert you?

I was advised by people outside the architectural circles who had experience from other academic areas. Sooner or later you would not be able to teach without a PhD, at least in Portugal. I started to think about this prospect as a “five-year plan.” I chose to do it at ETH Zurich where I already had a small network of contacts via Prototypo. During the same period, I established my own architectural practice with my partner and wife Patrícia Barbas: Barbas Lopes Arquitectos.³ It is my main activity ever since, even if it happens alongside other projects.

What about teaching?

Teaching also, yes. But all of that revolves around my position as a practicing architect, which I consider to strengthen its theoretical dimension. Nevertheless, I see my resolution to pursue a PhD at ETH Zurich, doing research about Aldo Rossi⁴, as a major turning point.

Let me go back to when you were saying that your main occupation is to be an architect, which means building. Built work requires other faculties, even if those faculties are a little latent. You have criticism, theory, you also teach. I would like to quote you: “References al-

low us to make choices that are meaningful and, by being meaningful, they are precise”. You said that about the Polytechnical Theatre, by Barbas Lopes Arquitectos. My question is a little obvious but I really want you to be clear about it. Do you feel that theory influences your work and do you feel an improvement in your other project faculties regarding your effective work?

I do. Specially due to these last years of research work in an academic context. I found references on a formal level, but I also became aware of procedures to interpret and transform them. For example, the process of choosing sources. A memory, or an idea, can lead the way of a project. I think there must be an organic process of interaction between all these things. In this sense, to study the legacy of Aldo Rossi was an important contribution to this perception.

I would like to ask you about two moments that I think are important in your biography. The first moment is the J-A⁵, alongside André Tavares. The second would be the Lisbon Triennial, also alongside André. Is J-A’s editorial concept, somehow, going to be extended to the Triennial?

They are different realities in different times. Both came about after several collaborations with André, such as a seminar we organized at the Canadian Centre for Architecture while we were both doing research there. At that seminar, we presented projects that employed strategies to bring Portuguese architecture closer to an international debate. Provokingly, we finished our presentation with a summit organized in a remote corner of the country revolving around “powerpoint fights” between a group of colleagues. At the time, we wanted to debunk the proverbial sterility of these meetings, using nonsense.

That led to another thing...

Later that led to CPAM [Concentration of Portuguese Architects in Mação], with a more institutional concept. We hosted these gatherings because the local professional scene lacked a display of critical mass. So, we orchestrated our own.

And what did those gatherings create?

These gatherings created moments for architects to come together, specially from younger generations. Thereafter, this led to a series of other initiatives that further highlighted the work of these generations and their new modes of practice. Directing J-A has been a useful manner to chart that activity. It has also been a pretext to engage in teamwork creating a staff of writers, photographers, and graphic designers. Since this series of the periodical started, two years ago, we walked this path together developing skills on how to report about architecture. One of our first instincts was to get back to the ethics and aesthetics of a newspaper, because this also had to do with the financial terms of the project and the fact it had less money. So we decided to make the whole magazine in black and white, with the look and structure of a newspaper. Meaning flawless and factual writing, no footnotes, no ambiguity towards academic production. The first editorial set the tone: “Topics are out. Bring on reality.” This happened during times of great hardships in Portugal, also for architects. The first issues express this in terms of the editorials and the topics we chose to discuss.

Getting back to a point that is very close to you and that results from my analysis of your work. You gave an interview to Público, in January 15 2014, which I shall quote: “We must end our misunderstandings and this turning our back on each other, so that we can better address this crisis that is affecting our occupation”. I don’t want to talk about the crisis, I would like to focus on “end our misunderstandings and this turning our back on each other”; Is joint authorship something you are aware of as a natural result of different situations in your life?

I am obviously aware of that pattern since it has been happening for a while. I managed to reinforce these collaborative processes through the architectural practice in partnership with my wife. We have established this joint venture under the name of our studio, as it happens so often these days. Part of this work of shared authorships responds to a critical field of interests that became progressively wider. This allows me to work



within an interdisciplinary scope of subjects, favoring multinuclear interactions instead of mononuclear ones. Like a molecule with different cells moving in all sorts of directions. In our office, we value the individual skills of the collaborators and a sense of diversity that comes from that. It is about appreciating this diversity, but a diversity that is disciplined by work. Furthermore, we do not condone a total separation between life and work. In a way, we live this all the time and it would probably be the same if we were operating in a different field such as politics or the arts. Working under these guidelines is all about creating a core, resulting from a fusion between all these things and how they ultimately can converge to architecture and to architectural projects.