

A letter to RG

Luis Pedro Pinto

At the time of the events reported, my employment contract with the architecture studio in Lisbon where I was working, was inexistent or, actually, I was an “independent worker”¹. In this situation it was not specified if working outside the studio was illicit or not, although I have always questioned myself about the Republican idea that ethics only exist within the law.

¹ Independent worker are workers of a company but are not their employees, at least regarding a legal point of view

² Valorsul is the company responsible for the treatment and recovery of urban waste in the area of Great Lisbon.

Lisbon, May 2015

Dear RG

The story I wish to tell you goes back about ten years. For a number of reasons I never shared this neither with you or anyone else, and so this story has become a secret. A secret that now I share with you.

When in 2001 I started to work in your studio I was twenty-two and although I often seemed to appear very certain, I had great doubts about the world, about work and architecture. University had taught me some theoretical concepts, little practice and a great deal of illusion. Working for you was the beginning.

The beginning was marked with a project and a client. Such an extraordinary client, PCR himself! Unlike that saying, “when you sign a contract with the client

you get to know your enemy”, in this particular case this was totally untrue. PCR triggered the story of a friend, the story of a house, the story of how to build a house and develop a project, many projects. No gimmicks, no recipes, no bullshit.

During that time, while I was doing the Portuguese Architectural Association internship and I was a wage earner at your studio, I got an invitation through my father, who knew one of the administrators, to present a fee and cost proposal for a building of washing facilities for Valorsul.² I confess I don’t quite remember what went through my mind in that moment. I remember a tremendous amount of happiness, almost childish. That project could facilitate being on the road towards my own built project! But I also remember being afraid and having real doubts about if I could do it alone, after all, it was natural that I felt that way considering that I hadn’t even finished the Portuguese Architectural Association internship. I was not even officially an architect.

Three possibilities emerged in that situation. The first one was to decline the invitation by claiming my intern condition. The second one was to bring this project to your studio. Finally, the third one was to present the mentioned financial proposal and do the potential project by myself.

The first option was never really an option because it meant quitting, and I had already learned with you



not to do that. So the doubt remained between the other two options. Bringing this project to your studio would certainly result in a real structure and negotiation leverage with the client and it would also win an undoubtedly level of quality. On the other hand, although this would reduce the level of risk, I could waste a real opportunity of working by myself, which probably would never be repeated again and I would also lose access to the entire profit of my work. Oh mercenary spirit!

I chose the third possibility. I presented my proposal, elaborated according to the current established financial and covenanted logic and I didn't tell this to anyone, especially to you. And my proposal was accepted! From one moment to another I had my first commission. I was about to design a proper building, with time schedule, a real location and a client to work with.

If projects weren't already easy to execute at the studio together with you, imagine this one alone! Working between the kitchen table and the desk of my room, models, preliminary studies, execution drawings, budgeting, billing and all the necessary tasks, which we very much enjoy to do, found their way. Everything was done during the night, after dinner and through entire weekends at my parent's house where I had just recently finished the final project for the university.

Beyond my enormous hesitations about what I was architecturally offering, constantly accompanied by my appreciate Herzog & de Meuron monograph, and beyond the difficult task of fitting 250 lockers and I don't know how many toilets from that program, time management was so far the hardest and most complex task. Especially during the construction period, where weekly technical meetings and construction visits had to take place during the day. I strategically scheduled them for 8 a.m. so that I could be fresh at the studio at 10.30am the latest, as if nothing had happened. All this for one entire year.

I remember passionately defending the option of using Viúva Lamego's tiles in the restroom walls during a construction meeting. The contractor wanted to change for a cheaper option, claiming that it was a misuse the tiles in restroom facilities. I couldn't dis-

agree more with him! For me there is no such a thing as first or second-class work. The tiles stayed. The exposed concrete I also managed to keep it. And the same goes for the U-glass at the main facade, the white crushed stone in the garden, and all what I had thought about at home, alone.

Even considering the circumstances, it didn't went that bad. During all this process, I guess some sort of innocent luck accompanied me, beginners luck maybe. Adding to this, the willingness of the client to forgive some extra work and dubious choices.

So many times I wanted to tell you. I wanted to share with you my anguishes and architectural doubts. I am sure that you would have greatly helped me. That you would have said "change this, do this instead of that, sun!" that you would have told me to come to work later and that I could have skip some work in order to go the site. But I didn't! At a certain point I thought it was too late and that you would be upset for me not having told you about the project since the beginning. I thought that you would have considered that as a disloyalty, a breach in our friendship, which was long by then.

And this is it. The construction was finished. There was even an opening ceremony, which I did not attend because it coincided with my working schedule at your studio. Likewise, I had never photographed the building. In fact, I never went back there. This was probably my way of keeping it a secret.

Luís Pedro Pinto was born in 1978, in Lisbon. Fascinated by cities, he graduated in architecture at Universidade Lusíada de Lisboa. For over a decade he has worked enthusiastically in projects and constructions at Bak Gordon Architects. In the 2015 spring, as a consequence of a natural state of restlessness, he thought it was about time to continue... on solo.

Photography: Daniel Malhão