

Interview with landscape architect João Gomes da Silva

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It is with great pleasure that we have as our guest professor and landscape architect João Gomes da Silva. Welcome! We would like to start by asking you to tell us a bit about your academic background, your degree, what outstanding lecturers or exercises you had.

I studied landscape architecture and graduated from the University of Évora. During high school I was very interested in studying the forest, my study strand was in the area of sciences. I knew architect Silva Dias and his children very well, I made him some models and I got curious about architecture. At one point, Silva Dias told me: "You have to talk to a colleague, landscape architect Celeste Ramos - with whom he collaborated - for her to explain to you what landscape architecture is, because it is probably something that interests you more than architecture". One day we met, and it was a very immediate thing! I was very curious, she told me what she was doing in the Sines Area Office, which was a very complex process, with several levels of work, and that interested me a lot. And I decided, in the middle of the 7th grade (which was the last year of high school), to study landscape architecture.

At the time, in 1978/79, there was a degree here in Lisbon at the Institute of Agronomy, which involved studying agronomy for two years. I was not interested in it nor in engineering - and I decided to go to Évora, where Ribeiro Telles was, who is a person with remarkable energy, with amazing luminosity, in society, and also within this disciplinary field!

He had participated in the re-foundation of the University of Évora, setting up the landscape architecture degree in 1972/3 and I had no doubt! I applied to Évora (I lied to my parents, as I told them that I was applying to both Lisbon and Évora, but it was only to Évora) because it was exactly there that I wanted to go. I was at the University of Évora for 5 years, still in the very early stages of the university, and it was a very interesting experience, with a group of fascinating lecturers, excellent lecturers, agronomists, landscape architects, art historians - Ário Lobo de Azevedo, Eduardo Cruz de Carvalho, Alexandre Cancellada de Abreu ... Fernando de Mascarenhas himself was my professor of philosophy and

aesthetics. I think I picked up perhaps the best period the university has ever had, which was the initial period.

It was a time when everything was still to be done...

Yes, deep down, yes. Although the first generation, that of Ribeiro Telles, had already finished and there was already a generation above mine, which had essentially found jobs in the local or central public administration, and there were two or three studios. So the profession had roots going back two/three decades, but it was in full development. And, in fact, my generation - which also includes that of João Nunes (from Proap) - started looking at another aspect, which was the construction of studios, investing on the construction of a creative fabric where landscape architecture could be carried out.

When I finished the degree, I went to work at Malagueira. I went to work outside my field, with a team coordinated by architect Álvaro Siza Vieira, with whom, deep down, I began the internship period and with whom I continued to work for seven years. Deep down, I transferred directly from the degree to the professional market. In 1987 I finished the degree (I had two years of practice in Malagueira), joined the team in a more permanent way and I was there until 1981 - in the studio that Álvaro Siza created in Évora to work on the Malagueira plan. Also in 1987, I applied for a teaching position as assistant lecturer at the University of Évora, in my degree, and I was an assistant until 1994. I started working and teaching - I remember that when I had the interview to be an assistant, I said that I could not teach the project subject without working, my intention was to do both. Therefore, my beginning of the profession coincided not only with my professional practice, related to the project and the work, but also with teaching, as assistant to Professor Ribeiro Telles. I had a very comprehensive entry into my profession, and in several dimensions, one more practical and another more theoretical.

And when did you set up your own studio?

A little later. In 1991, I, together with Inês Norton and João Sousa Mateus, competed for the Schinkel Prize in Germany, and we won it, which conferred us public and professional visibility and gave us some encouragement. And it was when we started the studio, which was something that almost did not exist in our area. In 1994, I stopped teaching. I had my first daughter in 1993, and decided to leave Évora, come to Lisbon and focus exclusively on the studio. This coincided with another work cycle. I collaborated with Siza until 2002, but started another cycle, which was to have a studio and start collaborating with many other architects. It's a theme of my life, collaboration.

In 1994 ... And when did you start teaching at Universidade Autónoma?

As usual, I started 'softly' ... In the end it was João Luís (Carrilho da Graça) who called me and Inês Lobo, who was working as an assistant. I had already collaborated with Carrilho da Graça, first he asked me to go to make critiques, then to give a class ... At some point he invited me to teach a year 5 subject, still in the pre-Bologna system.

Do you want to talk a bit more about the topic of collaboration? In year 5 you also focus your teaching on this idea of collaboration...

Collaboration is a kind of longitudinal topic to my professional life!

Before starting my landscape architecture studies, I was in some way involved in the environment of architecture studios, but I was not an architecture student, nor do I have any kind of family or professional relationship with architecture. The collaboration theme arises from the knowledge I have, from a very early age, of what activity in Architecture is - due to these practical reasons, making models, helping assemble things...

When I finished the taught component of the degree, I had an urban planning lecturer, Architect Paulo Gouveia - who has died already - who later became my colleague. At a lecture, he spoke of various projects that were taking place in Sines, Santo André, and Malagueira. He invited architect Siza, who was not available, and Nuno Ribeiro Lopes went to the class to present those projects. I remember that the presentation was fascinating. We were in Évora, we saw what was going on (in 1983/84) and, at the end of this class, in the q&a part, I asked what was going on with this entire landscape, which is created and transformed there - "Is anyone working on this? We're here in a landscape architecture department... What's going on?". And, in fact, nothing had happened yet. I then contacted them and offered myself as a trainee. There was an interview, which went quite well - it was a conversation with Siza, who went to Évora weekly - and I began to collaborate with him. I collaborated very intensively and that is very important for this collaboration topic - of course, people in my department said that I was going there alone, that I was in the hands of an architect and that put me in a fragile position.

This is how the collaboration topic started almost as a conflict; not in the bad sense, but in the sense that there are visions that are not juxtaposed. Therefore, I did my internship in a field and in a space of discussion and production that was

from another discipline, where I had to be responsible for proposing disciplinary visions.

And, in fact, all the contact I had with Álvaro Siza, Nuno Ribeiro Lopes, and with all the architects who collaborated on this project, was very stimulating. And I realized that what I brought to the discussion and analysis of the problems were topics of great interest to everyone, especially to Álvaro Siza, with whom I then began to collaborate in a more intense way.

The first thing I remember ... He gave me a pile of sketches and photocopies of his notebooks and said, "Look, these are my ideas about Malagueira, about the external areas, the open spaces ... What do you think? Next week I will come here and then tell me what you think about it. Because this is a starting point for me."

And I, in fact, was examining all the drawings and, in the end, what he gave me was imagination... And when he came back I said to him: "I think it's a set of references, which I recognize in my own experience here in Évora, and I have something to propose, let's take a walk". And what have we done? We climbed up the valley, Malagueira is a transept in the valley of the river Turgela, and we went up that river visiting several recreational farms. In the end, it was the noble outskirts of the city, where there were farms, houses, and irrigation systems with gutters, tanks and tiles, all those themes... And I explained how that landscape had come about, what Malagueira represented in that sequence, centred on the river - Malagueira, in fact, corresponds to a transept, a cross section on this natural reality, which contrasts with an urban axis that points to the centre of the city. He said that what I was saying was very interesting, he discovered an approach that interested him, and began to get me involved.

And so a work process began, which was fascinating to me. It was like a revelation because from the scale of planning to the scale of the project and the scale of the work, everything unfolded. With the community participation requests, residents' associations ... The participation topic, which in recent years has been much talked about again, was almost a requirement, even for political reasons.

Therefore, for me, the collaboration theme began in this very intense way. And when they told me I was unsupported, I said no. I do not think there are enmities between disciplines that are similar. I think there is a huge contact zone, and it is at this intersection zone that I want to position myself. I am not interested in encapsulating myself, I believe that between architecture and landscape architecture there is an immense potential for development, for production and, above all, for creation. And that's what I've done all my life, over the course of almost thirty years. It was, basically, to believe that reality is so complex that there

is not a single discipline that achieves specialization. Modern knowledge has removed us from a fundamental thing, which was to be able to submerge ourselves in several perspectives and to look at problems from their complexity and not from their disassembly, which is what the paradigm of modern knowledge defends.

In that sense, were you a different lecturer when you taught landscape architecture students and now architecture students?

This poses very large didactic and methodological problems. At Autónoma, I teach a group of final year students. They are architecture students, therefore they do not have a basic training on landscape topics. The same applies to students at Mendrisio, where I am also a lecturer. In fact, I'm teaching in "another person's home". And I do it with great pleasure, even though I know and feel that there is a huge limitation from a methodological point of view, because I am dealing with people who do not have a background that allows them to understand things in the same way. And I have to be able, in a partly empirical, partly instrumental way, to dismantle reality and help to create the capacity for an architecture student to be able to understand the landscape as space, rather than as an image, a setting where things take place - which is the view that traditionally exists. My vision is that the landscape is space, is architecture, and is construction. It is the construction of a space in the territory. Sometimes I say, in a simplistic way, that the landscape is the architecture of the territory.

Two years ago I was visiting professor at Harvard University, at the Graduate School of Design, and then I went back to teaching landscape architecture students and also architects, and I felt that, in fact, working on the project there had another potential. We can go much more deeply, address other issues.

But, returning to Autónoma, the work I try to do is, first of all, to create language, notions, meanings - which are fundamental when we want to deal with a certain theme. Second, to create a critical view - propose to students that they begin to look critically into space and begin to interpret it. And for this, there are certain exercises of representation that necessarily lead to an analysis. Third, somehow we work on a fundamental theme of the architecture project which, in this area, is connected to the ideas of location and implantation - these are two fundamental themes in architecture, especially the implantation theme - it is a theme that Vitruvius defined as one of the principles of architecture. The localization theme requires a more territorial scale and the implementation theme a more local scale. Basically, what I do in the second semester with my students is to force them to look critically at the project they are doing in the Project subject. And what I try to do is move them to a discomfort area, make them observe their

architecture project from another perspective - that is the choice of a place, the relations that are established and the transformation of the place through the implementation theme.

And to all this you add the collaboration theme...

Obviously, I try to explain the potential they are creating there and which can obviously be deepened. Just as, of course, they feel the need to go and talk to the Structures lecturer because they realize that the fundamental idea of the project needs the view of physics, of static, and therefore they go to the lecturer.

The same thing happens in Mendrísio, even in a more established way, because in each area of knowledge the school appoints a lecturer who has to provide tutorial assistance to students who are conducting the final project. Basically, this is what happens informally at Autónoma.

The profile of our students has changed a lot in recent years, and your experience with students from other countries makes me ask - being landscape a cultural construction too - if working with students, whose references are not the same, is a different challenge. In other words, does teaching students from different countries, with different backgrounds, pose new challenges?

Yes it does, because half of the students I have in Autónoma are not Portuguese. Some come from Africa, others from Europe ... many from Italy, Spain, Northern Europe, Norway ... The knowledge students have, that people generally have, about the landscape is empirical. It is about life experience, we carry what we are building on our life experience. We all have a kind of mental construction, an idea about what the landscape is, either because we live in it, or because we travel, or because part of our family is elsewhere ... This knowledge makes us build this kind of memory, which structures us and stabilizes our view of the world. From our memory, we are constantly interpreting reality and analysing it, even if we do it unconsciously. And, therefore, what the university has to do, and that is what distinguishes it from an intermediate education, is to prepare people so that, in a certain level of abstraction, they are able to confront reality. What the university does is give us a certain capacity to be able to look at the world, to relate to it, to improve it, to be able to intervene in the world and transform it. That's what an architect does. To transform the world!

At one point, Siza, when asked what a Portuguese architect building houses in Berlin and the Netherlands was like, said: "In fact, I always carry my ghosts, my

references with me. But in fact, in the Netherlands, I am not working for a Dutch community, but for Turkish immigrants. And I have to be able to understand their way of life and I have to invent an architecture where I can synthesize all these communities”.

And I think that's very true. What is this about Portuguese architectures? These are issues that have always been much discussed and have many answers... This is to say that, in fact, what I expect is that students leaving the school are able to locate themselves anywhere in the world, and that they are able to create, regardless of where they are, always taking into account their memory and their roots, and that they are able to intervene in these realities.

This is a kind of ambiguity that I find perfect to explain what our role in the global world is.

I was wondering if I knew any publications about landscape architecture... There is very little dissemination of landscape architecture projects, at least in comparison with architecture... I remember that I was already in the first year of my Ph.D. when I read the article *Terra Fluxus*, by James Corner, for example. The amount of information I get about landscape architecture is very small.

It has its circuits and its specificities. I would say that there was much more communication in the past, but it also applies to architecture. When I say communication, I refer to structured communication in the form of regular publications. In Europe, there are several journals which, ultimately, are the references, had their golden era and today are much smaller. There are also many websites, including a very well-known one called *Landzine*.

Still, the problem with landscape architecture and also with architecture and other arts is that, although we have much more information available, this information is much less filtered, structured, criticized. And, in fact, we have more and more information, but it is information of a generic nature, to the point of being very difficult for a student today, and I am talking about year 5 students who should already have some experience, to have a critical view of the information collected on the Internet. So much so that at one point I had to force them to define the origin of these sources and the veracity of the information, given that there is a certain loss of consistency and of a critical stance about the amount of information available.

By the way, and what is your relationship with research, in your practice?

I think all architects who carry out projects can do research. I do not say that everyone does it because many of us, at certain moments, are not researching anything, we are only reproducing models, archetypes, or projects that we have already conducted and think are replicable ... Sometimes we encounter new problems and we have to do research. And this research is done in the studios and not in universities. This brings us to the problem of what is research in architecture, or landscape architecture. When we are in the realm of theory, of history, this is easy to answer. When you move to architecture itself, as a practice, things start to get much more difficult.

I was able to attend a conference at Mendrisio by two Swiss architects (Burkhalter and Sumi) who retired this year and who gave a remarkable presentation about the research they had done over the last twelve or thirteen years in which they had been at the Academy, in the classrooms with their students, and the extent to which it resulted in a body of knowledge relevant to the school.

They systematically did the same exercise with the students, which consisted in representing a series of works, almost all modern, using the same representation technique, trying to explain the relation between space, structure and infrastructure. And they made a set of diagrams, starting with the representation of the structure in section, and then in perspective, of the buildings, always using the same graphic system. And in fact, at the end of these 13 years, they were able to group a set of buildings that they had analysed and create a kind of typology about this relationship between space, structure, light, and infrastructure. And, for the first time, I found it truly clear what it means to carry out research in architecture.

Is there any current research that influences the studio's projects?

Yes, there is. And I think this has been easier and now it is more difficult because there is a kind of slowdown in the production of Architecture. There is a slowdown because we had a decade that fundamentally reproduced canons. In Landscape Architecture, this is very evident. If we begin to look at what has been published in the last two decades we realize that there are key projects that at some point indicate very interesting paths. Earlier we talked about James Corner, and there is a certain work by him where, for the first time, the construction of a park is made from the attempt to incorporate water purification systems, a technologically fundamental space in the life of a city or a region, and he proposes the reconfiguration and integration of these spaces in the organization of a park.

We have the product of this archetype here in Lisbon, in Parque do Tejo and Trancão, by João Nunes (from Proap in collaboration with George Hargreaves), where a landfill and a wastewater treatment plant are part of the design and structure of the park, and if there had been a third party, this integration between infrastructure and landscape would have been more spatially consequential. Like the collaboration that his studio has with that of Manuel Aires Mateus and an engineering group, transforming a WWTP into a work of urban landscape. Not being a public space, it is still a fundamental and referential space in the Alcântara Valley. Therefore, there are indeed archetypes that exist because they were allowed to reflect on reality and propose something new, a new model, a new typology of space organization, a new expression. And I would say that we have been less urged to reflect on reality and more on mass production - but this had to do with a time when there was an enormous accumulation of capital and the possibility to make works that repeated models which, bringing nothing new, spread another quality. I would say that now we are in another cycle. With fewer resources, we no longer produce in the same way, the objectives are no longer the same.

The type of orders I have in the studio are nothing of the kind I had a few years ago. At the moment we are working for agriculture companies. We have two or three projects carried out in agrarian space, in productive spaces, in vineyards, in wine-growing landscapes. Reformulating these landscapes, introducing the role of wine tourism, which is an important role for the economies of these productive processes, ecologically improving the production process itself, solving water treatment and drainage problems, organizing the work space, segmenting visits... These are topics that did not exist 10/15 years ago.

I was trained at school in a rural landscape environment, with all the problems that existed then. Today the problems are completely different. If there is any sector where there is a huge investment, it is precisely in the productive landscape. And I would say it's an incredible field of work.

There were, in fact, two or three important moments in the field of Landscape Architecture in the last two decades, which produced some very interesting works - works of compilations of texts. One of them, I think, is the one that contains that text you were talking about, *Terra Fluxus*, by James Corner. And I would say that it was possible in the last two decades to reconstruct a theoretical body, not modern but contemporary, and I think there are two or three works that are fundamental to expose what is contemporary Landscape Architecture.

One of them is *Recovering Landscape*, where that James Corner text is, and another is a compilation of articles by several authors, Simon Swaffield's *Theory in Landscape Architecture: a reader*. In fact, it's one of the books we use at UAL.

This is to say that there are cycles of a certain progress and a certain construction and then there are cycles of a certain reproduction. And I think we are coming to a sort of end of cycle, at a time when we ask ourselves, "What are we for?"

In landscape architecture, are there movements similar to what one is finding in architecture, which is the small scale, the informal, the local, the participated intervention? Is this also a trend in landscape architecture?

Somehow, yes, although the problems are a bit different ... One of the things I try to work with the students is this notion between local and global, or between local and regional. These are themes which, in Landscape Architecture, are not separable, and which are very distinct in relation to the approach that in UAL or Mendrisio is made with regard to space. Approach in architecture is done in a very objective and non-contextual way, although Contextualism is one of the identity matrices of Portuguese Architecture in the last three or four decades. For Landscape Architecture, the context is Landscape. Landscape is both the container and the content. There is a very interesting text that I used to give students to read, which is by Christian Norberg-Schulz - *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, where he speaks of this dual condition of Landscape, being both container and content. And there are aspects that are much discussed in architecture that are fundamental to landscape architecture, at least from the 1950s and 1960s onwards. There are many parallels, because the modern culture of the disciplines of architecture and landscape architecture has much in common. The modern roots of landscape architecture are often the same, although they are not cultivated in the same places, in the same schools.

And are there any new or more recent studios that you are following up? Are they conducting interesting projects?

Somehow, yes. In Portugal, the crisis did a terrible thing that was the destruction of the productive fabric of our creative area. There were a lot of studios that closed down or became moribund ... Mine also went through this brutal crisis. First we construct it, we spent twenty years constructing it. Then we spent four or five years deconstructing it, and deconstructing means abandoning, separating from people with whom I had built a common practice ... but they generated other studios. And I am delighted to see that there are studios that are being built from scratch, started from other studios. This means that there is a kind of reproduction of the productive system, something that my generation began to construct systematically. So yes, there is a regeneration, as I think happens in architecture. I collaborate and I have always collaborated with architects of a generation above

mine, but I also collaborate with architects much younger than myself, and this gives me a rather privileged view of reality, I realize what is happening - and I like it!

It is always difficult, in this day and age, to make predictions, but what tendencies do you see happening? What would you like to tell architects who want to collaborate with landscape architects?

There is one thing I think I have cherished, and my colleagues of the same generation have tried to do the same, which is to nurture this practice of collaboration. And what does that mean? It means that we must be able, without giving up our points of view, to place ourselves in the viewpoint of others to better understand what we are trying to discuss in common. That is, to depart from our creative practice, to depart from our perspective and to be able to get out of ourselves and focus on the object we are working on. And we should generously and confidently do so, and above all be able to discuss one problem freely and openly, to benefit from the points of view of others and be able to put ourselves in the perspective of others. This is what I call the practice of collaboration.

There is a very interesting text from an interview with Jacques Herzog and Pierre De Meuron, conducted many years ago, in which they talk about their collaboration with Rémy Zaugg (a plastic artist who has already died), and also about what they have absorbed from another artist who was fundamental to their practice, Joseph Beuys, and who had a profound impact on me. And so this question of collaboration (and willingness to collaborate) is what I desire for all emerging landscape architects and architects who are capable of promoting themselves as a common culture. It is to be able, without suspicion and without ulterior motives, genuinely and naively, to open up and to make themselves available to collaborate. This without losing their specificities and their capacities, as we must never give that up. I really hope so, even if this spirit is anything that never disappears or does not turn into anything negative, because it has taken a lot of work to create this mutual trust and it is very easy to lose it. But I'm optimistic, always! Now is the time to be optimistic!

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