

Interview with architect Inês Lobo

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It is with great pleasure that we have as our guest the architect and teacher Inês Lobo. Welcome! We would like to start by asking you about your academic journey, about teachers that had impact on you, about some exercises that were important and that you still remember.

I joined the School of Oporto and this was the most striking of my academic journey. Unfortunately, I had to leave at the end of the first year due to family reasons. However, I was fortunate to have a group of teachers of whom I am friends today, such as Sérgio Fernandez (who was the coordinator of the first year) and Professor Henrique Carvalho (who sadly has passed away). And Professor Fernando Távora lectured History.

The course was similar to the one from Autónoma University. It was a small course. There were about seventy students in the first year and we had classes in the same room, in a very beautiful pavilion. And it was pretty intense, with a very close relationship with the teachers, who were extremely dedicated. It was a very interesting experience. Most of the students were from outside of Oporto and this generated a very large complicity, we had all left home, which greatly increased the intensity that that year was lived in. Another interesting point is that most of my colleagues, nowadays, are people we all recognize: Nuno Grande, João Pedro Serôdio, Cristina Guedes, Francisco Vieira de Campos, Pedro Cortesão...



It was a terrible shock when I came to Lisbon, because when I arrived things were done differently. It was a very different school and it was difficult for me. But I had to continue. And I had teachers who I remember very well... for instance Daciano Costa, from Drawing – with whom I had a difficult relationship with, but very intense. Only with Project with Professor Silva Dias, in fourth year, I was enthusiastic with university again. Afterwards, with a lot of luck, I had Carrilho da Graça in my last year, which was worth the whole school... Architect Carrilho da Graça challenged us, the classes were very difficult, and he was always questioning us. But it went very well, and was extremely interesting. And this was very important because I ended up working with him, it was moving to a professional environment from school.

Choosing Architecture was it well thought out or more intuitive?

I don't have any architects in the family. My father was always very connected to the arts. He worked in the libraries of Gulbenkian and is a very knowledgeable man, and was perhaps my main teacher throughout my life, both in architecture as well in many others. And he still is! He told me that when I was a child I used to say: "When I grow up I want to build houses!" I don't remember any of this, nor did I think about this. But I also don't remember thinking in doing anything else. When it was time to choose, I only chose Architecture in Oporto and in Lisbon. I had never thought of doing anything else. But this doesn't mean that I don't see myself doing all sorts of things, with the same enthusiasm and as interesting as Architecture.

Did you bring any ideas and academic experiences to the early start of the course in UAL?

Creating the course in UAL was very interesting. When I finished my degree there were four courses of architecture, in Oporto, in Lisboa, Lusíada was just starting and Árvore, in Oporto. And quickly architecture courses started to appear everywhere. I started teaching at Lusíada as soon as I finished my degree. And when the course was created in Autónoma it was necessary to do something entirely different from all those other private universities that appeared in the meantime. A group of architects from Lisbon gathered, who hadn't had an academic experience as interesting as those who had studied in Oporto that, like it or not, was a School.

When the course at Autónoma was thought of, we didn't think of doing what other private universities were doing, which was mainly a course with many people to make money. We tried to make a course from scratch gathering people from everywhere and to make it look like the School of Architecture. There were people with different experiences in this group, but with a very clear idea of what a school should not be. And this was extremely important.



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And throughout these 14 years, where do you think the course at UAL is at?

It is a very difficult question... we didn't know what the world would be like and the world of architecture in the years following the creation of the course and I believe we are not facing an interesting moment, nor in teaching architecture, nor in architecture itself, nor in the life of an architect... and I believe that universities are going through the same problem.

The first problem I think UAL is debating with has to do with the number of students. And not because there are a few students, but because it isn't possible to choose the students and when I say "choose", this doesn't mean there should be a selection. It was important for many people to show up, for the "best" to remain. And when I say the "best" are those who want to stay, are willing to stay and finish the course.

A second problem would be the fact that the courses are disappearing and so are the students. There are fewer students entering in Architecture and there are also more public schools, I think that in the last fourteen years several public schools appeared, that come before the private schools – for many reasons but mainly economic ones. Therefore, a private university of Architecture in Portugal, at the moment, has a difficult path, however good it is, while there are still so many public universities.

With the Bologna agreement, the belief was that the situation would reverse itself a little allowing a free competition between the students who would move around private and



public universities, but this is not happening. We haven't researched this point yet, because public universities are not as expensive as private ones.

It is also clear that Autónoma has changed dramatically! When it started it was very much connected to the core – with the architects Manuel Graça Dias, João Luís Carrilho da Graça and José Manuel Fernandes – who were very important figures in the early years of Autónoma – and then younger people joined, and older people, and from different areas as well. It has always been Autónoma's major goal to say that an architecture course can not be only done by architects. We always wanted for other subject areas to have a certain weight. Then, over these past fourteen years and with a critical view, we can not be without a course in which Project is the main theme and which occupies, probably, an excessive space in relation to other subjects. Another thing which is important is that Autónoma has always believed that we were there to develop planning architects. As it is a small school, I think this is what we always wanted to do and it works. Anyway, if we look at the amount of architects that we are developing nowadays, I think that teaching architecture can no longer be seen as everyone becoming a planning architect, because this is not possible. To become an architect, it is necessary to reinvent a little and go through other experiences. This doesn't mean that Autónoma should do it, because it has a profile to develop those planning architects, however, we need to think a little about what should the training of these young architects be.

Your first year in Oporto was very significant and you named several people who are well known in architecture in Portugal – do you think it was carried out by chance? Was it the spirit of a generation? Did it have to do with the architecture at that time?

I don't believe that things happen by chance! They happen because something was built for them to happen. What happened at the School of Oporto, at that time, was that the course was well structured, and well made. I think we were lucky to have been students at that moment. I was just thinking that Ricardo Bak Gordon also attended the following year. What could have happened was a group of people who were more interested in the matter had gathered and now you have the feeling that many people graduated in a time where many of them survived. If I try to remember my classmates from Lisbon at the time those who survived were very few.

Do I think this could happen nowadays? I don't know if it can and if it happens in the same way. Something I think Autónoma has managed to do: that many students work together, propose to do things... this doesn't happen every year, because this also has to do with the group of students and how the class works, but it happens many times. Because the course is very intense throughout those five years, people don't want to lose the good things that this intensity brings, the relationship between people and the desire to work together. They have the tendency of extending it in time and I believe this is extremely important for the professional life that follows.

What principles do you have in the subject you lecture – Project, in the fifth year – and what changes have you made over these fourteen years?

As I said earlier, I gave lessons at Lusíada and started teaching the second year, which is a year I really like, because the students are not yet "deformed" and it's not their first year, without the initial shock from arriving at university which is more difficult. There,

they are more relaxed, the first selection was made and they are still very available for everything that can happen.

I remember that, when I was attending the fifth year, João Luis had been teaching the first year the previous year. So, he decided to do something that was highly subversive which was to do the same exercise he had done in the first year, but now to the fifth and he got students from the first year to discuss the work with us. And the first year's tasks were much more interesting than ours. This was the first clash with João Luis, with him explaining: "You have been here for five years, but what you have learned is of little interest! Let's go back!". It was to clean all the debris from the previous four years. But it was a very funny experience.

I think the first years are very interesting years. It's clear the last years allow you to do other things that you can not do in the first year. I'm a little bit restless about what to do during classes, I think that it never works, it's never good, I think about how I should teach and do the exercises.



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Should the exercises done by the students be or not adapted to the reality, or to the potential existing market, or, on the other hand, should they be completely free exercises where the students have the last opportunity to do something they dream of doing?

In relation to the chances an architect has nowadays, twenty years ago no one could have imagined that this is what we would have now. What is even worse, but at the same time fascinating, about what we are going through is to think that we don't even know what is going on. The architect has to position himself to be a sort of an investigator, at



the moment, looking at the world – there are too many issues to think about –, it's an endless work, to all the possible ranges of an architect's work. Much more in work groups than as individuals, in focus groups.

What should this be like in the last year of college? I have a selfish attitude towards what university is, because I think I'm always doing what I like. I can not do anything else. And what I have been trying to do in the last year of university, especially in the last four to five years, is to put the students facing a problem which isn't clearly stated and I don't even know how to put it. For example, this year the theme I launched was Monsanto. Monsanto is something that doesn't work in Lisbon at the moment. It has accessibility problems, because it is cut in all its limits. It is a big structure that was invented by Keil do Amaral to be a Park where you could go by car, in a period where there were very few cars... today this is not the habit of the people who live in this city. It is a space with a great dimension, completely abandoned. And what I try to do with the students is: "There is this problem! Let's see how we can solve this." Clearly, it's a giant problem that is not solvable, either by me or by them, in six months of classes. So, the idea is not to solve the problem, it is to enunciate possible strategies and experiment on a small scale a possible solution as part of that strategy. What I am interested in is the construction of this thought, which occupies more than 50% of the time, until they finally find a way to act, with which they are very excited, and can also find possibilities to build on that territory. It is a very difficult exercise, which depends on the group you are working with. There are times when it works very well and there are times when it is a disaster!

The strategy of a teacher grows within himself. What you do today is not what you did 15 years ago and today your "I" is more diversified and is transported to what your students do. This diversity and the acquired experience over time help to fill the generation gap?

What connects me to my students is not the subject of Project but the issues we have at hand, which are the same – regardless of being 20, 40, 60 or 80 years old. We are all dealing with the same thing. So, we are connected to what is happening at the moment. We are all here to think simultaneously about the possibilities of work that we have now. I had a recent experience which was to be curator of the Venice Biennale. I had to set up a work in two or three months and, perhaps, without thinking much about it I ended up doing an exercise as I do at university – I only realized this after it was done. It was, once again, choosing a territory, which was the city of Lisbon, and instead of doing it with the students I did it with the architects and I told them: "Let's reflect on a number of topics about this city!".

The architect Nuno Portas, on a guided tour of your exhibition at CCB, said that in his time there were fewer studies and fewer events, but those that existed were published and everyone knew them, and they had continuity and impact. And nowadays much more is produced and it all disappears. Is it the counterpoint of an overload of information...

Much is produced in little time and then there is no continuity. It doesn't provide much depth. I would love to have a centre for studies only about Lisbon and I wouldn't mind doing this all the time, because there is always work to be done. And the most important is when you want to make a work about Lisbon you have to start from scratch. You need to find the blueprints, nothing is ever found... in any period of history, things are not well



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Talking about your students and their final paper and then they all leave. Where will they go to?

Nowadays they go abroad! But I think the possibilities to work are still out there. I think it is a big mistake for everyone to emigrate. Despite also knowing that it is now very difficult to find work in Portugal.

I think there is a lot to be done, but things are not immediate. These days, in which little is built, is the perfect time to be thinking a lot. There is a lot to think about, but there is no money to build in the same way as twenty years ago. We were one of the most backward countries in Europe concerning basic needs and, therefore, we got all the construction of what is "Parque Escolar", first for Higher Education and also for Basic education, for building Museums and Hospitals. All the basic needs that Portugal didn't have unlike the rest of Europe. This has ended. But in the rest of Europe this ended a long time ago and this doesn't mean they stopped building. It seems to me, at the moment, that a lot was built, and also a lot of housing, perhaps unnecessarily. We currently have a housing stock much larger than we need if we talk specifically about Lisbon. But Lisbon still does not work well. It is one of the most beautiful cities that we can find around the world – I know many – it is a fabulous city, where people live very well contrary to what one might imagine. It is a city where it is easy to live in, with plenty of positive things, but it is necessary to continue to think about how it can work well. And this has to do with proximity issues, with mobility issues. Issues that have been solved, but not repaired, in a disperse way and, therefore, there are still many problems. They are possible to solve with small interventions, subtracting instead of building. Making a series of operations that do not have only to do with building, but to do, for instance, with the discussion of the problems – how programs are distributed by the city, how the city is organized and structured, etc. And for this the architects, without a doubt, play a key role. So I think we need to find workspaces that are available for architects to use what they know how to do.

And there is one very important thing that has to do with the separation of knowledge. I believe that the profession of architect has to be reinvented because in recent years,



when we were busy building, the knowledge was more and more separated ... and this makes no sense in our area, we are not specialists of anything, we are exactly the opposite – we are non-specialists. We have a quality that, perhaps, many people no longer have because they became experts! It is the capacity of synthesis and to grab all that knowledge and build something with that. That is our profession! And what is built? They can be an extensive range of things – it can be a building or a space in the city, it can be the definition of a program to use a space, it can be thousands of other things. We have to become aware of this ability we have and be more involved in several areas, particularly in another area that I think is extremely important which is Politics. Architects need to be prepared to be present in political decisions, because these decisions can collide with the space we live in. Architects, in recent years, ran away from these activities, which didn't happen with Portas. So there was a time when people were dedicated to building, because there was a lot to be built – this wasn't more or less detrimental for anyone, it was a context. But people dedicated themselves to this and clearly lost space in professional areas where architects are important. This didn't happen, for instance, with engineers, because they are much more and have more strength as a professional class, they are always trying to find ways to position themselves in society and have an important and active role in all the areas concerning them. Architects lost this ability and lost, perhaps, some importance too. I look at architects such as Nuno Portas, Álvaro Siza, Fernando Távora, Manuel Tainha, who are figures that crowds stop to listen to! They are not only talking about architecture; they are talking about the world! And what is their relationship with the world? Trying to be interventional in a world that is theirs!

Perhaps it makes more sense to find new ideas to fight for?

It does. Architecture is also confronted with a giant problem which is the loss of importance of the human being. And we work for the human being. We build for people. If people cease to matter, architecture ceases to exist. And this is perhaps the biggest crisis we are dealing with. We have to continue to fight for the world to exist for everyone who live in it.

Do you see any changes or hopes in the projects you have at the moment?

I think there are many changes. We have experiences from South America which we look at with great enthusiasm. But we can not say that the great figures of architecture, and important in the world of communications, don't do their part and don't help architecture to continue to be discussed and heard. So we can't radicalize the positions!

There is one thing that people today can do when they finish their degree: they need to find a space to work in. They need to have an open mind because the space they will find is probably quite different from the one they had in mind; but they must be able to use their training to do a job that can go from monitoring a construction sight, working in a city hall and discussing important issues, in politics, in a museum, in their studio, wherever... they must have the ability to use the knowledge they have acquired and may acquire further towards the same goal, which is to continue to reflect, to build and to use the spaces we have in the city in the best way. If this is the approach I think anything is possible. There aren't any better or worse jobs. Architecture also has this interesting aspect which is to act in thousands of contexts and not in only one. Being an architect is a very complex activity which can be very diverse. Even in areas where we are not the

main attraction! It's another thing that architects have little ability to do. An architect may be working with a team that is developing an airplane, where he is not the key person, or he may be working with a team that is reflecting on a community that moves and starts living in a country in which the main figures are an anthropologist or any other profession... we have little ability to work in this way, which is a pity. We always have the tendency to lead! This will stop happening...



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When opening the subject that has to be done and should have always be done, how do you see the importance of research and the relationship it may have with practice?

I believe architecture is a very new subject in this area. If we go to areas such as Biology, research is the engine of the subject. In architecture, the professional practice of architects was more the engine than the research. Research has always been something parallel and often people who are not in practice are not those investigating. I think this should also change. I try to do what I do also as research. I had the opportunity to do a series of works which were very difficult to do because I was not in the research area – and I had to turn the studio upside down to deal with other types of work. Lately, I have been developing a work for CML (City Hall of Lisbon) on the Santana Hill. Which is research – it is to look upon that piece of the city, where there are already a number of architects working on, and reflecting on what it can become, with the intervention of all those architects, what the other possibilities are and why it should change. In order to do this, I had to go back in time and research that piece of land over time, I had to equate problems and do a work that in the end is a book with four hundred pages of project – which if we want to look at it conservatively, has very little project. But it's a great project! So, this is the research I'm interested in. As you can imagine, I have been thinking a lot



– and it is a question that often arises in architects of my generation – if I’m going to do a PhD or not. In fact, I haven’t had much time to do a PhD, and, as the practice in the studio is intense, it puts aside the issue of research. I don’t feel the need of doing a PhD because I spend my days studying!

At a time when research was made, going back to Nuno Portas’ generation, people didn’t have PhDs. People made things and recorded them. It wasn’t a common practice, or the professional life of an architect, or even the life of an architect as a teacher. Nowadays it is proven important or necessary – to continue a teaching career – going through stages not only with a degree and now a Masters. You have to continue that path. If I don’t have to do it...I will run away from it as fast as I can! But I’m risking it, of course. I have no space in a public university, I have no PhD and I’m not in a rush to do it. I also think that, unfortunately, it has to do with an economical phenomena – which is to make money out of this and PhDs have to do with economic issues... there are times when everyone is going after these things but then everything seems to calm down again. I guess time will tell how things will go in reality. I believe research is a crucial activity for the development of subjects, and I think it’s a huge area in which architects should devote themselves more, but dedicated using practice, which is what is done in other areas – at least in areas that fascinate me most, areas like science in which research is applied directly and permanently. Research is at the service of practice. And this is the only way.

You are the only woman in our university with an activity that is still predominantly male. From all the names you referred to, if I’m not mistaken, you only referred to one, didn’t you? Do you think it makes a difference, or work is work...

The problem about women exists and will clearly continue to exist. The other day I received a distinction from the Secretary of State for Culture and the general director of the arts said something that I entirely agree with: “it would be good if we didn’t have to give these distinctions...” Why should people be distinguished by gender? They shouldn’t be distinguished. People should be distinguished by what they do.

Why does this happen and is far from happening? For many reasons. Many have to do with cultural and education issues, which have been rooted in our society for centuries, such as girls being raised differently from boys, we tend to educate our children as we were. This is what we find, which is wrong, but true.

I was lucky not to be brought up this way! I was lucky my parents didn’t raise me as a girl or boy. I owe my parents for having always looked at the world not by my womanhood but as a person. Then there are things that are still evident in our society or female nature: women have children, but men don’t. Despite them being fathers. But this question of motherhood is a big difference at a given time in a woman’s life. And there are things that can not be replaced. Women breastfeed, but men don’t. There is a first moment in children’s lives where women have an important role. Does it affect her professional activity? It does. And is society ready for this? It isn’t. I managed to do both because I have a studio which is mine and it has day care. We took all the children into the studio – me and the women who work there and men, too. But this is something completely unnatural and that implies a huge effort and often may not even be the best situation, I have that possibility, but I’m not an example. It continues to be difficult, but I

personally think I wouldn't like to be replaced; society has to adapt more to this situation. The work environment is made for you to work from 8 am to 8 pm and be permanently available and connected to your mobile and this is not compatible with wanting to be a father or a mother... it is a problem which won't be solved now, nor is anyone trying to solve it.



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How was your journey until you set up your own studio and what new principles/programs did you add to it?

I had never thought of setting up a studio on my own. When I left João Luís, it was for several reasons. These issues had to do with personal issues and forced me to find another way of making money at a particular time. I set up the studio with Pedro Domingos. Afterwards, we separated due to personal reasons and not for reasons of work incompatibility, and then I set up another studio with a partner who isn't an architect, and who is a crucial piece in my studio. Without him there wouldn't be a studio because he is a person who enjoys having a company and I'm not cut out for this. This is a wonderful arrangement. But honestly, I never had the urge to "now, I'm going to make a studio!"; and indeed, when I started the studio there was the issue of the name (and this is for the answer about women) and I said "We can put any name..." and everyone said "No, no! It's going to be called Inês Lobo Arquitectos because being a woman sells more!". In a way, it was an opportunistic view of the problem!

**If you could choose, without constraint, what to do next year, what would you choose?**

There are two things that, for me with the studio that I have and what I have to do at the moment are extremely important: on one hand, still be able to build – which is something an architect is used to doing for I don't know how many years, it's hard to imagine not having this possibility. On the other hand, what I would also like was to continue the work I have developed. What is interesting about doing research is that it never ends and so being able to move forward in what I've done so far which for me would be the most important.

What I would really love? I would like to keep the studio I have! Which is not only me, it is a structure with several people for some years now. Continue to be able for these people to have work, to have their lives, this is the most important. We have been able to do this so far – even though we are going through a difficult moment ...the studio reduced a lot. But despite that I have been doing the most interesting works ever! I have some work that I never thought it would be possible. It doesn't pay much, we are forced to reduce the studio, but the proposals are perhaps the most exiting I've ever had since I started working. I have that work on the Santana Hill, I'm making a mosque in Almirante Reis, which are unique works and very rewarding. If this could continue like this, it wouldn't be bad!