

In continuum: Interview with Jeremy Till [1]

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Abstract

This interview forms part of a series of five interviews conducted between December 2022 and June 2023, based on an exercise developed by the architects Inês Lobo and Miguel Judas, in collaboration with a group of students from the Department of Architecture and Urbanism at the University Institute of Lisbon (DAU-ISCTE). The exercise began by identifying the issues considered most fundamental and relevant to the theory and practice of contemporary architecture, and resulted in the formulation of a set of questions. The city, the articulation between ecological and urban systems, housing, the common ground, forms of collective living, the durability and reversibility of construction, the binomial of tradition and industry, and the relationship between the discipline and society were the themes chosen to structure the conversations.

Based on this framework, five interviews were conducted with architects who combine professional practice, teaching and critical reflection on the discipline. Hailing from different geographical regions, cultural contexts and generational backgrounds – Tom Emerson, Ricardo Carvalho, Fernando Viegas, João Nunes and Jeremy Till – the interviewees were presented with the same set of questions, allowing us to observe not only differences of opinion but also points of convergence regarding some of the central challenges of contemporary architecture.

Keywords: Architecture, city, transformation, continuity, heritage, ecology

Good morning Professor Till. We want to take this opportunity to once again thank you for coming here and taking the time to speak to us. As you may already know the purpose of this interview is to cover topics that are related to the manifestos we are writing in the final year of our architecture degree and as such, the interview will be guided by questions relevant to the overarching question of what the role of architecture is in 2023... We can start with the first topic, which is “Cities _ can we define them?”. In a text written in 2003, Jacques Herzog says: “It is about time to get rid of manifestos and theories because they are not the heart of the matter. There is no theory about the city; there are only cities”. He then asks, “How can we define it, since we can’t understand the most complex and interesting creation of the human race?” and the question is: If we cannot describe our cities through models, how can we operate on them and find the logic for their requalification?

Well, first of all, with gracious respect to the Pritzker Prize winner, what a stupid thing to say. I mean, really, it’s an appalling thing to say to students that there are no theories about the city, because it suggests, therefore, there are no theories at all. If you can’t have a theory about a city, you can’t have a theory about anything. Which means that architecture detaches itself from any criticality. As I have talked about in much of my previous work, architecture then becomes a kind of autonomous, self-contained, self-obsessed discipline - because of his suggestions that you can’t have theories about the things that architecture engages with. So, I think it’s a stupid quote - I don’t know the whole quote so maybe when it is set in a wider context it makes more sense.

So, I would dismiss that quote as a starting point. You must, of course engage with cities at a critical level. You must understand the relationship between space and power. You have to understand the relationship between politics and urban design. One has to understand the relationship between gender inequality and public space, and so on and so forth. Therefore, in order to, I think you use the expression, “requalify cities” you have to engage with their complexities in terms of their politics, their criticality, and yes, their theories. Now, of course, many theories of cities are reductive inasmuch as they try to totalize the city into a single organism, or a single instrument, or a single form of knowing, and that doesn’t work either. You have to understand cities as these difficult, complex, interrelated, ecological systems, but to dismiss them as just “there are only cities” is just, straightforward, stupid.

Now moving on to the second theme, which is “Entangled Life”, our question is: In one of his writings, Paulo Mendes da Rocha refers to the idea of “urban” by saying: “The urban is nothing. The urban is a state of mind. The urban is man, we are the urban. And the city is our intrigue. A new intrigue between the men who inhabit it. That, in my opinion, is what urbanism is. The existence of an urban being who lives in the trust, hope and solidarity of the other.” Nowadays, humans spend most of their time in “designed” spaces; is it the responsibility of those who design them to remind (humans) that they are part of nature? What is the role of nature in a city?

I'm not sure that the question follows on from Mendes da Rocha's quote, so let me take his quote first. Again, I'm not sure I totally agree with it - "The urban is a state of mind" - suggests that the urban is made up of existential individuals who wander around the city in their own state of mind and that there is nothing above that as a controlling force; there are no politics, there's no ecology and so on and so forth. So, I'm not sure I can agree that "urban" is a state of mind, particularly having seen what I think is his greatest building, almost his last building, which is the urban SESC in São Paulo. It's a fantastic building, which is much more than the state of mind. It's a deeply political building about rights of individuals, about opening up a form of democratic space, and that's much more than individuals as existential beings; that's individuals as sentient political beings, and the building responds to that absolutely brilliantly. I'm less keen on some of his more formalist stuff, but I think that SESC provides a sense of what a city could and should be. And here I would agree with Mendes de Rocha that the existence of another being is of trust, hope and solidarity of the other. That building for me expresses this idea rather brilliantly.

But to go to the second bit of "what is the world of nature in a city?" You can only answer that question by asking what is the world of nature from the start and, of course, one of the tragedies that we are confronting at the moment in terms of climate breakdown and the potential of the 6th extinction is the modern mind's separation of humans from nature. As soon as you separate humans from nature, intellectually, conceptually, and then operationally, then nature just becomes this kind of inner reservoir to be emptied, this inert set of matters which are there to be exploited and appropriated – in the end this will lead to our downfall. I just read this morning that despite with the remaining native forests, rainforests in particular, we lost the equivalent of Switzerland just last year, and that's because those forests are seen as places for capitalist extraction. So, I think you can only answer the question - what is the world of nature in the city? - by asking the bigger question which is "what is the relationship of human to the beyond human? The trouble with your question "what is the role of nature in the city?" is that nature becomes a kind of reduced symbol within the city, of something which isn't natural at all. You see this happening in the way that so-called sustainable architects greenwash their buildings by planting trees on them. So, the idea that nature in the city can be refound needs to be always realistically understood that this is no longer nature, that nature and the city are no longer nature – inasmuch as it only exists as an artificial symbol and representation of nature, rather than what nature really is, which is a living, breathing, ecological set of relations. However, if one can understand the city in those terms – as a living, ecological system – I think it becomes more interesting. But the idea that if we just put more green roofs into the city may help a bit, but it's not going to make climate breakdown go away.

Our third topic is the capital city, and it has to do with the right to the city and the right to housing. The 20th century was marked by a quest to provide housing for the greatest number, and this mission was central to architecture and city making, mainly by public initiative, more recently facing the invisible hand of the market and in private investment as an answer to the problem of housing emerged. However, the current phenomenon of urban gentrification provides challenges for this phase, and the questions are: Should the right to housing and to the city be universal rights? Is the right to the city the architect's duty, more so than any other citizens?

So, to answer the first question, you have to say absolutely yes: the right to housing and to the city is a universal right. And the idea that housing has become simply the kind of financialization of space, particularly in cities like London, where the commodification of housing is part of a wider financialization of space for profit, means that any right of housing is completely overwhelmed by the so-called right of the market. The right wing will assert that there is some kind of ethical duty to go along with the so-called right of the market, and so the markets become for them something of moral purpose.

Whereas in fact the right of the market overrides and overrules and overwrites the right of people to housing. The way that a right-wing government in the UK has completely handed over housing to the market has led to the collapse of affordable housing. And that in turn has a whole set of economic and social consequences in relation to inequality. So yes, absolutely, the right to housing is a universal right. One of my favourite documents of the last year was the draft constitution for Chile. Unfortunately, it was not voted in, but it's a remarkable piece of writing; I urge everyone to read it. It starts with something about the rights of nature, referring back to the previous question, but the bit on housing talks very clearly about the rights of housing as a universal right. It doesn't come up with solutions; it comes up with principles, upon which policies should be based.

In relation to "it's right to say it's the architect's duty?" Well, yes and no. I think that question overdramatises the potential role of the architect; the architect is not going to provide the right to the city. That has to be a societal and political will. But the architect can engage in those discussions and then empower some of the ways in which the right to the city might come out. But of course, architects in their traditional role of just providing so-called nice spaces are not going to provide the right to the city because – going back to Jacques Herzog – they detach themselves from the political and social arena.

“Common ground” is our next topic, and our question is: Doris Salcedo, the Colombian contemporary artist, says in one of her interviews, “My process is to interfere, to insert myself in the public space obliquely and not directly, so that others can in turn claim the space for themselves”. Is public space a mechanism for social cohesion?

It can be, yes – of social cohesion, but also democratic life. One of the tragedies of the contemporary city, whether it is in authoritarian states such as China or whether it is in the kind of privatised world of the UK and bits of Europe, is that public space has become private space. As soon as public space becomes private space - and what in London are called POPS, which are privately owned public spaces - as soon as that happens, then the demands and privileges of the people controlling the private space assume authority over what the public wants to do or is able to do. So, one example is the space outside Central Saint Martins which looks like a really beautiful public space, but actually is privately owned. If you try to do anything in that space – if my students went outside and put banners up, within seconds they would be stopped by the private security people. So, we also need to look at what constitutes public space these days.

What is left of public space within the cities such as London is increasingly diminished. When ‘Occupy London’ – the campaign against global capital – tried to occupy London, there was nowhere for them to occupy, because everything's privatised. The only place they could occupy was the steps of Saint Paul's Cathedral, and even the church got fed

up with them in the end and booted them out. So, I think that public space can absolutely be a place in which democratic life can and should be pursued. If you take examples like the occupation in Madrid, when the public spaces were claimed for a democratic purpose, you can see the potential of the right to the city. We have to keep holding to the idea that public space is the space of democracy and, with it, potentially the space for social cohesion. But that idea of social cohesion sounds a bit determinist to me, because social life is uncomfortable, because it's agonistic, because it's not all clean, because it's confrontational – then that's what public space must allow, whereas what happens to the privatised space is regimes of control, of surveillance, which wipe out all those differences.

The next theme is “to inhabit”. Hashim Sarkis addresses the question of collective living as follows: “We need a new spatial contract. In the context of growing political divisions and increasing economic inequalities, it is urgent to imagine spaces in which we can live together generously: together as human beings who, despite our growing individuality, wish to connect with each other and with other species through digital and real space; together as new families seeking more diverse and dignified spaces for habitation; together as emerging communities demanding equity, inclusion and spatial identity; together across political boundaries to imagine new geographies of association; and together as a planet facing crises that require global action if we are to continue to live (...)”. How can a residential building provide a strong experience of sharing and equity between its inhabitants?

Ok, that's a better quote! I can agree with that sentiment, though maybe, again, it suggests potentially too much agency and influence for design. I think that, to start with, one needs to consider notions of ownership of tenure, of land and of collectivity, before one can even get anywhere close to what Sarkis is talking about. The best examples of what he suggests are the of co-living of cooperative housing. Probably the most radical versions of those are in Zurich, where one can see these most extraordinary experiments in cooperative living. Not experiments; they're real cooperative living, but they are only possible because the ownership of the dwellings is shared and not part of the marketplace.

And so you need, first of all, to consider issues of ownership and of land, before one can even begin to address issues of the kind of sharing and equity, because if housing is simply down to a matter of commodity, then all one can do is enter what is called the housing ladder, and as soon as you're on the housing ladder, you are out in the position of trading, because you want to sell on your house for the next.? Through discussions with the collective and with the cooperative, you end up with these extraordinary spatial considerations and resolutions in which individuals, in some cases, are living in about 25 square metres, but they have access to about 300 square metres of collective space, and that is where you can see a kind of a sensibility of a spatial will. They want to live together because they are part of a collective and they have committed myself to the idea of collaborative living; you can see that social contract being played out as a spatial contract, and that is where you can see intelligent architects working with the collective in relation to this idea of sharing equity.

Moving on to the next theme, which is “durable and reversible”. In the book “On and Around Architecture: Ten Conversations”, by the duo Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates, the idea of looking at the design of a collective

housing building from the perspective of its lifespan is mentioned. Its skeleton, in the view of these architects, should have a long lifespan, and be seen as a permanent ruin, which can be inhabited transitorily. For this, it should be flexible and durable. The other life cycles are intermediate, i.e. they are cycles that should adapt to changes. The skeleton is thus inhabited by the diverse components of the building, such as those that ensure the functioning of the infrastructures or the façades, and the envelope. This separation into three moments forces us into another way of designing in which time is once again a fundamental factor in the process - time of execution and time of life. How should we define flexibility in architecture? What is its biggest obstacle?

Well, I could be on this for a long time because I spent three years researching this and Tatjana (Schneider) and I wrote a book about flexible housing, which I think actually includes some work from Sergison Bates in it.

What's stopping the idea of long-term changes, and how do I define flexibility? Tatjana and I defined it in two ways. First of all, what we call hard flexibility, which is when architects overdetermine the flexibility of the spaces by putting in gimmicks and lots of moving parts, such as in the Schröder house or the Corbusier minimum dwelling. This is where architects think that they can extend their control of the building beyond the moment of execution. Against this idea of hard flexibility, we proposed an approach called soft flexibility, which is where the architect works in the background and provides a framework for living without overdetermining it. So, typically, one might design a building in which the rooms don't have designated functions. So rather than having what's called type-fit functionalism, where every single room has a defined purpose and a defined shape for that purpose which ties people into certain ways of living, you design buildings whose rooms don't have a particular functional purpose, but over time can be changed around depending on the life of the building and the life of the occupants. This follows what John Harbraken talks about, which is the idea of a kind of layered system of understanding. Harbraken a support structure and then the infill. Stuart Brand talks about a kind of more layered system of the foundations having a kind of a very long lifespan, the structure having a slightly less long, and so on and so forth: the cladding and then the services and then the furniture.

But, generally, architects don't like losing control and, therefore, the idea of flexibility is also the idea of the users asserting their own control over the building. This is why most pictures of architecture are taken at the second of completion because the second of completion is the one moment when the architect has full control. As soon as annoying people called users move in and start mucking the building up, then the architect's lost control and with the loss of control they feel that they are losing their identity. I've talked about in *Architecture Depends*, architecture depends on lots of things including time and users. So my argument is to just get on with it! These changes are going to happen! And therefore, you need to both change your way of thinking about control but also be prepared to work in the background and to be intelligent about designing a frame for living, as opposed trying to control the foreground of living. If you're working in design, the background frame for living, it may not look like anything, and yet it's a consummate act of design. It's an incredibly skilled act of design, to design the background. But of course, architectural culture mainly relies on the foreground for its publication, for its awards system, for its identity and so on and so forth. The classic example which I talk

about in Architecture Depends is Stewart Brand who criticised the Pompidou (Beauborg) Centre in Paris. Richard Rogers took a huge offence to Brand saying that the Pompidou Centre had a rhetoric of flexibility, and that when people tried to change it, the architects didn't like it. Eventually Richard Rogers sued Stewart Brand and demanded that that simple statement was taken out of the English edition of *How Buildings Learn*. And so, you get someone like Richard Rogers, whose whole rhetoric is to do with technology enabling change and flexibility, actually getting really offended when someone points out that the Pompidou Centre is very inflexible. Piano, by the way, was much more relaxed about it. So, flexibility for me is more to do with what Jonathan and Stephen say, which is to do with designing a background frame, but then relinquishing control.

About tradition and industrialisation. Today, we are aware that the construction industry, as well as the use of buildings, is, directly or indirectly, the biggest sources of pollution on the planet. But we continue to be called to build at a time of climate emergency. Therefore, the present time seems to be an opportunity to rethink what building means and must involve. This implies changes for all those who take part in the process: the designers, the industry and the builders. What is your perception of the changing role of the construction industry today? Particularly in comparison with other moments in our history when industrialisation had a predominant role?

Well, let me talk about the project I'm working on at the moment with Tatjana and a team called MOULD because that begins to answer your question. Called *Architecture After Architecture*, we make the argument that the modern project and the project of industrialisation and the project of global capital is severely threatened by climate breakdown. If we are going to face climate breakdown, we need a complete systemic change, which means that all the principles and ideas and tenants and operations of the modern project need to be reconsidered.

The second bit of the argument is that architecture, as we know, has been absolutely, as you say in the question, tied into the operations, principles, and tenets of the modern project. Thus, climate breakdown also completely threatens architecture as we know it. So, the question we're asking is what is architecture after architecture? How does one completely reconsider the operations of architecture in the face of climate breakdown? And that sounds like a very radical question to ask, but we think it's an absolutely necessary one. Now, of course, for the time being, buildings will continue to be built, but we need to challenge that as a principle. We need to say, "Do you need to build more buildings, or can you deal with what we've already got?", "Can you retrofit what we've already got?", "Can you redefine and reconsider what we've already got?" But if buildings continue to be built, of course they also need to be as carbon positive as they can be, and we need to take seriously the reduction and decarbonization of the built environment. But what we're asking is, if there is the need for systemic change, and including, and probably most necessarily, a challenge to ideas of endless growth on which architecture has resided and on which capitalism is addicted to. Endless growth comes with endless extractivism and endless exploitation of the natural world, and therefore we have to be moving into the world of different growth. We have to.

Architecture simply is not confronting that as an issue, because we have been relying upon an addiction to growth for our own internal economy to keep architectural culture

and the architectural profession going. So, what happens when we can't have growth? We cannot continue to extract from this world, so what then is the world of architecture? And what we are saying is that the new social contracts and social formations and economic formations, which we need in order to face climate breakdown, will have with them new spatial formations, and these may not be manifested through nice buildings which win awards. In fact, almost certainly they won't be manifested through nice buildings that win awards, or continue in the tradition of formalism, or tradition of aesthetics, or tradition of Portuguese vernacular or whatever.

These new spatial formations to face climate breakdown are not going to be reliant on the production of new buildings; they're going to be reliant on intelligent spatial agents, understanding these new social formations to understand their spatial consequences. So, I think that we need to consider, really urgently, what the other ways of operating spatially are. And this is not a negative thing; it's a really positive thing because it provides new opportunities for the deployment of spatial intelligence. But to do it, we need to break our addiction to the current way by which architecture, and the construction industry, is working.

Our last topic is "discipline". What is often valued among architects does not necessarily correspond to what is valued by the common person. A resolution of this divergence requires a shared understanding about what architecture is. How can we define it?

Well, I think that the first bit of that question is really difficult because it is too often framed as an aesthetic question. Architects are very fond of certain aesthetic and formal ideas. And the so-called common man doesn't get that, and therefore the common man doesn't like modernism because it doesn't look as nice as old buildings. The common man doesn't like shiny buildings because they like... and so on and so forth.

So often that kind of disciplinary divide between what architects think the world should be like and the common man is reduced simply to a really banal aesthetic argument. In the culture wars, the traditionalists are saying the common man likes buildings with pitched roofs or made of brick which look like a village from 18th century in England or 16th century in Portugal vernacular. And that's what the common man likes.

But architects are their own worst enemy in these culture wars. Because they too are addicted to those forms of value, the value of the aesthetic, the value of the new, the value of the so-called innovative. That means that you get a set of very self-contained obsessions which actually don't deal with the urgencies of the world. And the biggest urgency is that of climate breakdown. So, the idea that you're going to address climate breakdown by designing so-called nice buildings which have a few trees on them is a complete distraction, because it detaches you from the actual causes of the issue. One of the things we're talking about in the project Architecture after Architecture is really simple - the only way that architecture can engage with climate breakdown is not to address the symptoms, but to understand the causes. And what most sustainable architecture does is just deal with the symptoms. The symptoms are simply put that there's too much CO2 going into the atmosphere. Therefore, we need to reduce that by having more insulation or more air tightness or whatever. Of course, that's important, but it doesn't deal with why CO2 is being produced in the first place. What are the political

and economic forces which perpetuate the use of fossil fuels and so are leading to climate breakdown?

Most obviously these are the forces of colonialism, of late colonialism, and the forces of capital. These are the forces we need to engage with as architects. We need to become much more political, we need to become much more critical, which is why the Herzog quote is so problematic, and we need to become much more social.

I don't think you can define architecture simply, because that would suggest a single definition, but one can set a framework (which follows from the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre) which is to say that social relations are also spatial relations.

And therefore, there is a relationship between how things play out in space and the design of space. Architecture then becomes a deeply social, political and now ecological manifestation of this relationship between social relationships and spatial relationships. I often say to first year architecture students: whenever you draw a line on a piece of paper, your first priority is not to see that line as defining a form or defining an aesthetic or defining a technique - that line is first determining a social relationship. Every single line determines spatial and so social relationships in some way or another. The height of a table determines how people sit at it. The size of the table determines power relationships. Look at Putin... The size of his table and the way he sits at the end of it, that is a very spatial issue to do with power. Every single line that you draw has a social consequence. That's the beginning of my definition of architecture.

Thank you. And I think we are done. It was a pleasure. Thank you very much.

It's a pleasure. Do you have any other comments that you want to make?

[Miguel Judas] Well, if they don't have, I'll budge in. I don't know if you know a Brazilian architect called Sergio Ferro.

Yes.

[Miguel Judas] His discourse is all about those kinds of tensions and the politics behind the discipline and all that stuff that we tend to, I would say, put aside nowadays, and I think as you mentioned, we have to engage in that.

This is a profoundly political profession. You know, Ferro and a friend of mine, Katie Lloyd Thomas and a team in Brazil are doing a huge research project called "Translating Ferro", which is literally translating his work into English, but also translating the implications of Ferro into our contemporary condition. So, Ferro starts with a very brilliant analysis of architecture and its relation to the construction site. So, you could go and look at "Translating Ferro" website, it's got a lot of really good stuff on it. But, of course, Ferro is a Marxist and to stand up now and say you're a Marxist in these contemporary cultural control conditions, you're onto hiding to nothing. Of course, Ferro's Marxism is a deep critical dive into the effects of capitalism. We need to understand the violence of capitalism, we need to understand what it's doing to our public spaces, about what it's



doing to our natural environments and so on and so forth. And therefore, I make no apologies for following through a Marxist analysis in the way that I see the world.

[Miguel Judas] Thank you very much, Jeremy. Thank you for your time.

It's a pleasure! Ciao!

Notes

[1] The interview was held by Zoom in April 2023, by Inês Lobo, Miguel Judas and a group of Architecture students together from the Department of Architecture and Urbanism at the University Institute of Lisbon (DAU-ISCTE): Alex Carneira, Alexandra Reis, Ana Rebelo, Carolina Joaquim, Daniel Assunção Silva, Diana Corte Real, Isla de França, Leonardo Esteves, Mara Santos Inácio, Maria Malato, Mariana Freire, Margarida Nogueira Correia e Rita Antunes.