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In continuum: Interview with Tom Emerson [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

As you know, this interview has to do with the topic we are working on in our studio and it's divided into different themes. The first one is "cities, can we define them?" - and the first question is: 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?" If we cannot describe our cities through models, how can we operate on them and find the logics for their requalification?

All of your questions are extremely difficult. Each one could be more than an hour. The Jacques Herzog quote reminded me a little bit of a similar quote from… That was from 2003, right?

Yes.

From a quote, probably, 30 years beforehand, 1974, from a book by Georges Perec called Species of Spaces. In it, I think, there's a line, and I might be misquoting it slightly, but he says: "Do not try to find an easy definition for the city, it's too big, you will only get it wrong." So, a quite similar spirit. In the book he sort of tries to develop certain exercises by which we could maybe generate some kind of insight and they are practical exercises to do with looking and recording about – particularly, kind of everyday lives - things we normally don't pay much attention to. And it's a book which I like very much because it's very light, it's very playful, and it has little games about how we perceive, and then understand and then use the city.

I would say that, as a model, as good as any other, I suppose that I very much agree with Jacques Herzog's view, partly because I come from London. London is a city that doesn't have a plan, that has never had a plan and is a city that, when people have tried to have a plan, the city has rejected it really forcefully, because it's a city that somehow sort of produces itself, like an organism. So you can have ideas about specific parts, or specific buildings, or even specific fragments of buildings and spaces, and some of them can be very big like a park - and, to be honest, London does parks very well - but the idea of trying to encapsulate the city and how it works and how it should work within one unified theory will just never suit the occasion. So, you have to find ways of engaging with it at much more empirical experience levels.

So, what will work for one part will be completely inappropriate for another, and that's because the scale of the city, the topography of the city, the history of the city, establishes certain characteristics, which are not really producible. I think we can compare it to a body; how you deal with a foot injury is very different from how you would deal with an eye problem. You can't just establish a principle. Every part is different. It's a very bad analogy; I probably would scrub that one.

But you know what I mean. I guess, as architects, we are maybe much more interested in a kind of genuinely lived experience. Also, I think that Londoners may have a lot in common with other port cities. Cities that are big ports - Lisbon, Porto, London, Hamburg,

Rotterdam, let's say for the European ones - of course it's the same in Africa, Asia, and the Americas - have a very particular metabolism, which has to do with import and export.

That's to do with knowledge, people, things, goods… You often have a very complex arrangement of conditions which can be as much to do with very, very faraway places as they are to do with local conditions. So, cities that have long histories of trading and shipping generally have a very hybrid condition, and that is, in a sense, the richness of those places - is that they're kind of impure and they're mixed, and I think that that's something which I sort of feel like is a little bit what lies behind Jacques Herzog's quote. And so, how do we operate on them? Then I would say we operate carefully… We have to be very attentive to what we find, we have to be very attentive to what we think we know, which is often incorrect - and being misunderstood can be very productive - but it needs to be critical, you know? We have to be critical. So I would sort of say that our work coming from this context, which is very different to if you were maybe a Parisian architect, where your understanding of the city might be a much more orderly affair, will be one of, I would say, constant attention to what is visible and what is barely visible, so sometimes things like the social history of a place might be caring more influence, than the physical stuff that you find there, sometimes the physical stuff that you find there might be the beginning of a story into, let say, a material culture which leads you to geology, which leads you to climate, which leads you to cultural habits, and I would say that a good architect should be very sensitive to these things and should be very curious about why things are the way they are, which is very different to trying to find an overall understanding. I would say that that would be the thing that I would try to avoid, because with an overall understanding come generalisations that may be helpful in some respects, but may also mean that we miss the opportunity for very specific interventions and inventions and discoveries.

Our next theme is "entangled life", and 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 the 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 can enjoy the first part of that quote: "the urban is a state of mind"… I would probably say that if we are in a situation where we have to remind humans that we are part of nature… then yes - then I suspect that we probably need to take a step back, because we are natural, so therefore the urban is natural. Cities are a form of habitat, just like every other form of habitat. I think maybe the thing that we need to learn to do now in the mindset - let's say of Mendes da Rocha's - the urban mindset is to remember that the urban includes human and non-human habitat, and perhaps we have in recent history - and by recent, I mean since industrialization - so give it a couple of centuries, two to three centuries. Certainly, in the West, I think, we have overprivileged the human at the expense of the non-human, which then has also had implications in the current climate crisis. So yes, I think that we should treat the urban as a fundamentally natural condition, and therefore we need to be thinking about it much more in terms of coexistence with non-human actors, which are kinds of plants, animals, but also climate and geology and

so forth. And we need to somehow live with, rather than against, those things. So you'll find that during the modern period there were a lot of attempts to tame, and control nature, you know? Building riverbanks and preventing certain natural phenomena from operating in their full condition, and I think that's caused a great deal of damage. When there were the floods, in 2012, in Houston - those very very bad floods and the rivers burst their banks - it turned out that the ground surface of Houston was 80% concrete. So, when there was a sudden flood, there was nowhere for water to go. That is a fundamentally unnatural condition, and Houston may be an extreme example, but to some extent the same applies to many, many cities. Which causes things like the heat island effect, loss of biodiversity which causes all sorts of problems to humans and non-humans.

So yes, I think that the urban is a state of mind, and the urban is a state of mind that really needs to be expanded to be a natural condition. So, I think that, I find it very problematic when people - architects in particular - say that they would like to have a connection with nature, because that would seem to imply that they are not natural in the first place. If you are natural, you do not need to make a connection with nature because it is just a state of being, a state of mind. And so I think that if Paulo Mendes da Rocha is right - which I think we could go with - then that state of mind that he talks about just needs to be big, inclusive and really take on the idea of coexistence of systems, of designing, you know? You say we live in designed spaces - I think we need to have a big understanding of design, which is a process as much as an artefact, which is systems as well as fixed spaces and structures. So, it's basically an agreement with the statement, but probably with a more expansive notion of what the urban mind might be.

Our third topic is "capital-city". The 20th century was marked by a quest to provide housing for the greatest number, and its mission was central to architecture and city-making, mainly by public initiative. More recently, faith in the invisible hand of the market and in private investment as an answer to the problem of housing emerged. However, the current phenomenon of your bench unification provides challenges for these fights. Should the right to housing and to the city be a universal right? Is the right to the city the architect's duty, more so than that of the other citizens?

The answer to the first question is yes. Should the right to housing and the city be a universal right? Yes. The second part of the question is, I would say, also a yes, but a cautious yes, to both parts. There are two questions there. But below those answers is a much more complex condition because the question is: if you say yes and what you mean by yes. I had a professor at university in the 90's, a very brilliant professor, who would say very provocatively "There is nothing that kills a city like housing". Which is going to generate a little bit of a kind of «woah, careful», and I think what he meant by it is that housing and, probably, the typological underpinning that comes with that is very dangerous. And the city is much more complex.

I'll throw you back to the first question, the Jacques Herzog one. And then that professor would also describe the city as the best thing humans have ever invented to resolve conflict. Which I also think is a very beautiful way of understanding the city, but essentially as a species - humans are pretty conflictual. They make a lot of conflict, and the city is quite a good way of getting off somehow - putting conflict into some sort of

public domain, and therefore the city needs to have all sorts of other institutions alongside housing for it to operate fairly, for it to make equitable environments. So yes, the right to the city is fundamental. The right to housing is fundamental, but I think that housing as a singular topic cannot make a city on its own and cannot be, I think, the sole agenda of Equitable City-making. Politically, architecturally, spatially, environmentally, it has to be understood in relation to all the other systems and spaces that are made by the city. And so, I think that's why I would sort of say yes, but a kind of a qualified yes that we need to make sure that we don't bring one typology or one condition up as more important than all the others, be-cause we could end up making what has been very problematic, particularly in the post war city - in a sense, all over the world - where there's been very significant housing development since the World War II, that have come with all sorts of social, economic, environmental problems associated, which is not balanced by all the other urban and cultural economic conditions that are necessary for it to be sustainable.

Common ground is our next topic, and our question is related to what 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?

I like her term that she "inserts herself obliquely and not directly", which is something. I sort of identify with it quite well. Is public space a mechanism for social cohesion? Maybe, I don't know. I find the term public space slightly unsatisfactory. What do we mean by public space? I think, it feels like the term public space belongs to a modernist discourse, which I don't think is up to date. When you say "public space", do you mean space which is publicly accessible? Right? Which is different from space that is owned by the state or public agencies. So those are two fundamentally different bits of public space. So again, going back and saying this as a Londoner - the great parks in London, Hyde Park, Regent's Park, St James's Park, Victoria Park in the East End, none of them are public. They're actually Royal Parks, right? They belong to the head of state. And they are not technically public space, but they are fundamental to the public life of the city, to the citizens' well-being.

[Inês Lobo] That's a big difference between Portugal or Lisbon and London, because in Lisbon all the public space is public. Eventually, you have sometimes small spaces that are publicly accessible but are not public, they are private, but it's not normal.

But let's say a cafe. A cafe is fundamental to the public life of the city, but it is not public space. Or is it?

[Inês Lobo] It is.

Right? So, I would say that the second part of this answer relates to the fact that one of the terminologies in architectural discourse that I find quite uncomfortable is the notion of public and private. So, for it, and again, it's a very modernist discourse to separate these two things, maybe it goes back to Nolli, right?

[Inês Lobo] Yes, the plan of Nolli.

Because right now I would say I would be very interested to know how, whether you feel you are in public space or in private space. Because I think I can see Ana's grey kitchen behind her, you know? I can see Mariana's curtains and some of the objects on the fridge or on the cupboard behind you, right? We are all, to some extent, private, and we are all, to some extent, public. And I think that that's a kind of permanent condition that we operate in. Even when we sit in public space, we may well be entertaining private thoughts, right? I find this notion of the public and the private to be slightly unsatisfactory in terms of describing the urban experience, because you end up between land ownership and political participation, where they somehow fall over each other in ways which the public and the private are never really capable of articulating or giving meaning to. So, and particularly as we go into more and more digital, more and more globalised experiences, the less the public and the private as kind of spatial conceptual vectors to me seems satisfactory.

I would be much more interested in how one describes, let's say, I mean the wood of the door behind Alexandra looks like a hardwood. It's not a wood that I would expect to see in Northern Europe. Unless it was imported. Which might then go back to port cities. It's a wood that I associate very much with a colour and texture that I associate with Portugal, and it reminds me of some of the joinery items of amazing projects by (Fernando) Távora and (Álvaro) Siza and that sort of thing. So, I could identify a little bit where you are. Some of you I have no idea where you are. Because, maybe, Leonardo, your shelves and plant pot - that could be anywhere. That's really hard. You know, so essentially this notion of public space kind of creeps into our private room. Is it social cohesion? Maybe. But maybe I would be much more interested in trying to explore other ways of describing social participation, political participation. Then, through, what I would consider a slightly post-war welfare state-ish idea of the public room and the private room, because I think your question sort of touches on the sort of way that the market has sort of overtaken the welfare state in terms of the management and provision of urban space and urban facilities. Which is definitely problematic, and I think it was super problematic in 2009, 2010, 2011. I mean it kind of, made the world stop operating. It causes an enormous amount of inequality. But nevertheless, maybe we just need new paradigms, which are able to connect with the experience of the last three years. Somehow throw that into the future. So maybe no, public space is not able to provide social cohesion.

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 crisis 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?

Well, I think that quote is actually a very good answer to the question before. You know, it probably said more concisely what I was trying to say. How can a residential building provide a strong experience of sharing and equity between its inhabitants? The question

contains two questions, because sharing and equity are quite different notions. Okay I'm going to skip to the second one, because I can't formulate an answer for the first one. How can a residential building provide a strong experience of equity between its inhabitants?

I mean, equity just might come from making sure that residential buildings manage their conscious and unconscious hierarchies extremely carefully. Residential buildings, housing as a type, are relatively recent compared with buildings where people build houses. Apartment blocks and things like that are in the story of human history quite recently, and they have and can have very progressive hierarchies, in the sense that they provide a continuous level of dignity to design from the most representational parts: entrances, facades, to the most everyday parts, the operation of certain elements, and I think that that kind of managing… I don't think that you can ever have a building that doesn't have a hierarchy, that is completely flat, but I think you can have ones that sort of manage a kind of a rhythm of different dignities throughout the apartment, in the details, in the layouts, in the quality of light, the fresh air, that those are distributed in a way that's equitable and that provides equal dignity and comfort to its inhabitants, regardless of if they are large of small or what kind of domestic unit they host.

In terms of sharing, on a level that's super simple that's to do with common parts, it's to do with open spaces around, access to them and the quality that they have, in terms of partly experiential pleasure, textile materials, light and so on, but also in terms of safety, visibility, making sure that everybody feels that spaces, somehow, have the right level of visibility, the right level of intimacy, which is a very subtle art, which is also deeply cultural. Some cultures are much more collectivised, and some are much more fragmented and private so… Housing in Scandinavia is very different from housing in Japan, which is very different to housing in Portugal, because the cultural differences are very striking and obvious, but nevertheless, there are moments of encounter between people however cold and frosty or warm and somehow exuberant they are, which is very much to do with climate, to do with how much time people spend outdoors during the year. This is a bit of a generalisation, but northern cultures are a little bit more private and restrained, and southern cultures tend to be a little bit more exuberant, because life outdoors is a very significant proportion of one's life. Life outdoors in the far north is a much more challenging environment, so it goes back to climate and so on, but nevertheless, I think the sharing side is probably fairly straightforward, and it's really to do with all the places where people meet each other and the equity side is much more subtle, because that involves elements of design as well as political structures that then support them, but maybe that's one of the reasons why, I mean, since I was a student, I was very taken by the work of people like Álvaro Siza, particularly like the Malagueira housing scheme, how it was built in a sense of dignity or special quality, in the most unlikely places. So sometimes the things that are the most secondary, tertiary right down the list of kind of significant architectural moments, are the ones where somehow the project blooms the most, and you really find out. And it's a very subtle game because you have to spend quite a lot of time with it to discover these things and you have to go quite deep into the project structure, you can't stand outside it and then somehow find its meaning, a lot of it is either invisible or barely visible. And I think that's why the work is so striking, at lots of levels, formally, socially, politically… So that would be my best shot. It's a difficult question.

In the book "On and Around Architecture, 10 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 in a transient manner. For this it should be flexible and durable. The other life cycles are intermediate; 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 facades and the envelope. This separation into three more 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?

It's interesting. In the quote, he says it slightly differently than the question; he says that this should be durable and flexible and then your question is about "how should we define flexibility?" Flexible, maybe I will put it into the same category as public and private in one of the terms I mistrust that we inherit from modernism. Is a modular building system more flexible than a cave? I don't know, I think in modernism and modern architecture, flexibility has been often confused with kind of moving interchangeable parts, when flexibility is maybe more related to the durable that Stephen Bates talks about and it's basically buildings and the only exception that I would take, I would very much agree with the Stephen Bates quote, the only thing that I would disagree with is where he says he proposes the idea of looking at the design of a collective housing from the perspective of its life span. I would say: propose the idea of looking at the design of architecture from the perspective of its lifespan.

I don't think this is something particular to housing. One of the things I really like in, let's say, kind of urban fabric in London, particularly in the older fabric in London is that what are often described as terrace houses, that kind of basic building blocks of the city has been houses, has been factories, has been offices, has been institutions, goes back to housing, becomes apartments, the apartments gets then join back together to become a house, and then they sold to an insurance company and becomes an office, and then it becomes an art gallery and it just goes on and on and on, and that's somehow one of the thrilling things about the design and built world – is the way that it can be reinvented – which is maybe another way of saying it's flexible. In order for something to be flexible, it needs certain basic parameters to do with inhabitation, which generally have to do with accessibility, daylight, fresh air – very fundamental life-giving conditions. It probably needs some level of beauty. I didn't want to go there because it's difficult to describe, but nevertheless, it does need some kind of sensory, visual, tactile, sculptural, spatial quality in order for us to return to it over and over again. If it's really dump, it gets abandoned, right? So, it needs a certain level of culture - let's call it culture rather than beauty – so that we can kind of project meaning onto it and do all the things that our culture needs to develop. I would say flexibility just corresponds to the capacity of a place to absorb life, whether it's working life or other types of life. And the only other thing is that I really enjoyed the quote from Stephen Bates, but I'm not sure I would describe it in terms of primary structure like the skeleton and the other elements because, actually, even the primary structure can be adapted; even the skeleton can be changed, you know? Everything can be changed. It's usually a question of how much effort is involved in it, and I think that as we step into, let's say, your generation's career, you will be doing a lot more adaptation than probably, certainly, any generation. Beginning a modernism and adaptation is going to take also different forms, it's really going to be how you reuse

the existing both from a kind of operational side as do we needed to change our habits to adapt to a distinct condition – do we need to change our expectations, do we need to change building fabric, do we need to change primary structure – you know, we're going to be counting carbon so much more precisely than ever before that I think that the way which we make decisions about what is flexible and not flexible will really change very radically.

I think, essentially, we will have to become more flexible - I mean, that's probably the first thing. Our expectations, our norms, our regulations will need to change to show a great deal more flexibility so that we stop demolishing things and rebuilding things when we don't need to.

Continuing with that theme, and now 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 source 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 on 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?

The previous question obviously relates very closely to this one. Again, in the question are several questions, so if I go to take your first question very literally, "What is your perception of the changing role of the construction industry today?", my perception of the changing role of the construction industry today is, broadly speaking, quite negative in how slow it is at participating in a kind of change in paradigm about how we should engage in the built world. There is still more interest in, you know, selling us more products, more quickly, in greater volume, regardless of the cost. The construction industry will be the first actor to tell you that it's cheaper to knock it down and start again. And my wish is that it catches up fast and realises that it can still be a very, very productive industry without necessarily always having to… It basically needs to slightly reskill in order to address existing fabric first, and be much more skilled and resourceful in terms of how one can adapt existing infrastructure – add to it, change it, and things like that. Which means that then we need a different skill set, and I think that schools of architecture – my own included, I'm sitting in ETH here today, in Zurich, and still have curricula, which I largely inherited from a kind of modernist century that precedes us – so we still have a hardwired kind of paradigm around how to make a new and better world. And certainly, when I was at university, let's say refurbishment, adaptation, reuse was sort of quite a secondary part of architecture, even to the extent that it was seen as not real architecture – real architecture is new buildings.

The big paradigm shift is that that goes the other way, that the main topic of architecture is how to engage in the world that we find - that's certainly existing in the global north, right? So, we have to be careful here. Reuse and adaptation are absolutely critical, and maybe new buildings are like the exception; when the case can really be proven that it needs anew, then there are ways of doing that with less impact on the environment, on the carbon footprint and all of that. But I think that the big paradigm shift is that we need to be really much more focused around the notion of the existing and how that can be

reinvented and given a proper future, and that's different, that's a kind of a next stage in industrialisation. So repair, adaptation, maintenance, becoming sort of the subject of industry, which I think with digital fabrication it becomes a very plausible alternative, and there's a lot of research going on in that field like conservation, digital fabrication, digital scanning and so on - all sorts of circular economy things. Basically, the industry needs to catch up fast with the technologies, with the values, and it is, in my experience, one of the slowest to keep up with the current debate.

We are reaching the end of the interview, and our last topic is "discipline". What is often valued among architects does not necessarily correspond to what is valued by the "common person". Resolution of this divergence requires a shared understanding about what is architecture. How can we define it?

I think it's perfectly natural, maybe even desirable, that the architect will always have extra motives than the one of this poor common person - they seem to be getting a bit of a rough deal. But let's say the users, society, clients; (they) all have a different set of expectations of what is to arise out of architecture, and I think that it's really important that the architect is able to maintain a whole range of different layers around which their work operates so it needs to perform certain practical functions. The architect needs to be very attentive to those and share them and allow people to participate in resolving them as best as possible. The architect also has a responsibility, beyond the client and the user, to a wider section of society that maybe encountered these things as part of an urban or rural environment. They are also responsible to the future, they're also responsible towards users, as yet unknown, and that perhaps will come in a very distant future and that they are able to engage. This relates to the previous question about flexibility / durability. I think that they also have a kind of duty to the discipline and to making sure that they contribute something to this kind of very long and complex story of architecture, and some of those things may not be immediately accessible or relatable.

The ease with which you take the bins out, on a Tuesday morning, may not be interesting to the architecture critic writing, you know, an insightful article. Yet, let's say the references and relationships to architectural history and theory may not be so interesting to the person bringing the bins out, and I think that's fine. I think as long as nobody feels ignored and nobody's realm of interest and meaning is being ignored, I think it's great if you have hidden motivations and hidden quotations and references. You know, maybe one day, one architect will go "Ah! I can see an influence of this in here", even if 99,9% of the people don't see it, that's absolutely fine.

[Inês Lobo] Thank you very much, Tom. It was incredible.

It was really fun. Thank you.

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 Cardeira, 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.