

Interview with architect Nuno Mateus

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We are very pleased to have architect and university lecturer Nuno Mateus as our guest. Welcome. First, we would like you to tell us a little bit about your education, your teachers, and exercises you remember...

I attended the Faculty of Architecture but mine was a degree in Fine Arts, classes took place in the old facility, in Convento de São Francisco (Saint Francis Convent). It was an impressive space, really interesting with its long and wide corridors and not so interesting inside the classrooms. For someone out of boarding school, an extremely organized space, it was a rather vague location where I felt especially lost. I entered university in 1979 and left in 1984; at that time the university was not a very exciting place, I found it rather uninteresting.

I did not choose architecture though I was aware that was the degree I wanted to do. We are pressured too early to choose a degree and so I eventually chose. I chose what I believed was more similar to what I enjoyed doing: working with my hands, drawing. In truth, I felt that everything interested me, that I could have chosen any other degree; moreover, throughout the years I attended the degree I did not find any especially exciting academic stimulus. This was just my daily destination, an activity I had included in a series of other activities that I was interested in. I had just left boarding school - full of rules, where people's individual personality is shaped by the interests of the collective. I was looking forward to doing other things but I felt taking a degree was one

of my responsibilities. I believe that the time that followed somehow met my search for individuality, which boarding school had prevented from blooming, and for the things that really interested me. Among those the degree in Architecture was partially filling a gap. What I was actually into was sports and I did competitive sports. My story in terms of education is not very interesting or motivating.

The most important professor for me was Daciano Costa, he lectured Drawing to second year students. More than the subject itself, I was fascinated by the ethics of his relation with the students: he tried to understand them in their relation with themselves, he sort of deconstructed their reality through drawing. Drawing became, from then onwards, a more straightforward and structuring tool in my relation with the degree, a relation that was, up to that moment, very vague.

When I was in the second year, I started working in architect Costa Pecegueiro's office, I started having work routines and that made me a student who, either more or less interested in the subjects at university, did his projects rather easily. My relation with architecture became much more evident. My relation with the degree became closer and more confident because I felt I gradually mastered the tools. At that time, I started to work on the office's projects, which was very important for me because I really understood what I was learning, how what I learned was applied in real life and how it affected others. That was a very motivating experience.



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Why did you decide to look for work while you were studying?

Basically for economic reasons but not only. I was born in a middle-class family that struggled to put four children through school and I was always very independent. For many years I worked in grape picking, in Portugal and later on in France. The degree

widened my cultural horizons, but I had no money to travel or buy books. For me, work was a very practical way to have access to other things but it obviously became an asset in terms of learning.

There's a funny story that you told me and that had to do with your first salary and a special book...

Yes, the first book I bought was *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal* (Popular Architecture in Portugal), which I bought in installments. It cost 20 thousand escudos, the equivalent to 100 euro today. It was a huge amount of money for me at the time and it took me a year to pay it. There was another special book, which I bought in Berlin, with my first salary at Daniel Liebskind. He paid me cash at the end of the month and I went into a bookstore and on sale was *Complete Works* by Le Corbousier, a set of symbolic books for any architect, whose price is usually so high that you never buy it. I walked into the store with the money in my pocket and I could not resist, I left almost all my money there and I left with the set under my arm ... really struggling because it is so heavy! I was never the same...



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Did your experience as a working student influence in any way your work as one of the founding members of the Architecture team at UAL?

After I graduated, I continued to work in the same office - Costa Pecegueiro's - for two years, in which many houses were designed but whose working model, after some time, became rather monotonous for me. At that time I was also lecturing at the Faculty of

Architecture as a 4th-year trainee assistant, I worked with architect Guedes de Amorim. After two years I felt this was not fulfilling me. In economic terms my life was OK but I realized this was not what I wanted. I traveled a lot (that was where most of my money went), I read, viewed architecture at a level I knew I had not been prepared to practice and which I looked for. I went to Columbia University to do a Master's and then I worked with Eisenman in New York and then Libeskind in Berlin. Shortly after I returned to Portugal, the group of architects that would found the Department of Architecture at UAL - João Luís Carrilho da Graça, Manuel Graça Dias and José Manuel Fernandes - contacted me; they aimed at creating a different school of Architecture, focused on professional practice by some authors. At that time, my office was getting to be known due to my professional experience and that of my brother José Mateus.

It was really interesting to watch this project being created and, after 14 years, it is very interesting to see how the project is now established and realize that it maintains the same type of objectives and ambitions; see students and lecturers still committed, despite the context of weaknesses we are living in, and that are still present.



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As a lecturer, do you aim at providing students with what you felt was lacking in your degree?

Above all I aim to understand the students as people. I cannot think of the architect as a person who does things. An architect, for me, is an ethical mediator between physical reality and reciprocity in terms of behavior and use. I aim to work from an ethical perspective because I am preparing the students to intervene in a rather uncertain future. I do not work focused on the past or based on the models I was educated in. I believe those models have become a part of me and translate in the way my relationship with the students evolves. I do not aim to teach fixed models besides raising awareness to

the responsibility of our work. I aim to build something that belongs to each student, belongs to both of us, which promotes student's acceptance and real progress. I do not lecture in the sense that I do not teach tested and fixed thinking. I do not see myself as a person that has more information than the student but rather as someone with a focus, a perspective that allows me to learn and that I want to pass on. I learn a lot through teaching because it pushes me to constantly assess my perspective and brings to the conscious what was unconscious or intuitive so that I can work on the student's progress.

I see many lecturers who use different methodologies and I find that also very stimulating. It makes me doubt, makes me choose specific strategies, often in the search of complementariness that allows me to find new learning possibilities.



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Will you give an example of an exercise you have made with students? For example, what are you doing this year?

The fourth year, which is the class I am teaching to at the moment, is the first year in the second studies cycle, it is the penultimate year - it is when students design their big project which includes a written part, a designed part, similar to a professional model. In the fourth year we prepare students the best way we can, and within the constraints, for their future profession, always keeping in mind the conceptual and cultural elements. We want there to be a close relation between school and professional world, and that students view the profession as a place to dream. Many of UAL lecturers have their offices and design very exciting projects and that is a very demanding but necessary activity, as you know well.

At this moment, several fourth-year course units are focused on a common theme: the city. As the fifth-year project is usually on the city of Lisbon or on Portugal, in the fourth



year we have decided to do projects on several European cities and through them understand our city better as well as our role in the world. Last year we were in Barcelona, this year we are in Amsterdam... The projects takes the two semesters and includes different approaches. We know our work is global - we may work in any place in the world. We must develop learning strategies for places we don't necessarily know. This year we started analyzing Amsterdam using concrete scale models. The students use and learn about concrete in terms of model design, plastic capacity, need of armature and weight. The room is a physics and chemistry lab, where students experiment.

In the second semester, the exercise focuses on housing, which is probably the theme we all think we master and, because of that, it is a theme that is revealing once we focus on it and research the models that fit the progress of contemporary systems. Each city is built by specific housing models. Knowing the house helps us understand the city. And in a 1940s house in Lisbon everything was separated and socially segregated. Today the kitchen is the core of vernacular houses, yet within a new social model. Cooking is nowadays at the center of family life, the kitchen is gourmet, it is chic and it no longer is a place apart where those invited into the house never go into but rather it is a place to mingle and share. We aim to understand what the house is like today in terms of other hierarchies and models.

The exercises you describe are very contemporary and relate to the current state of the profession.

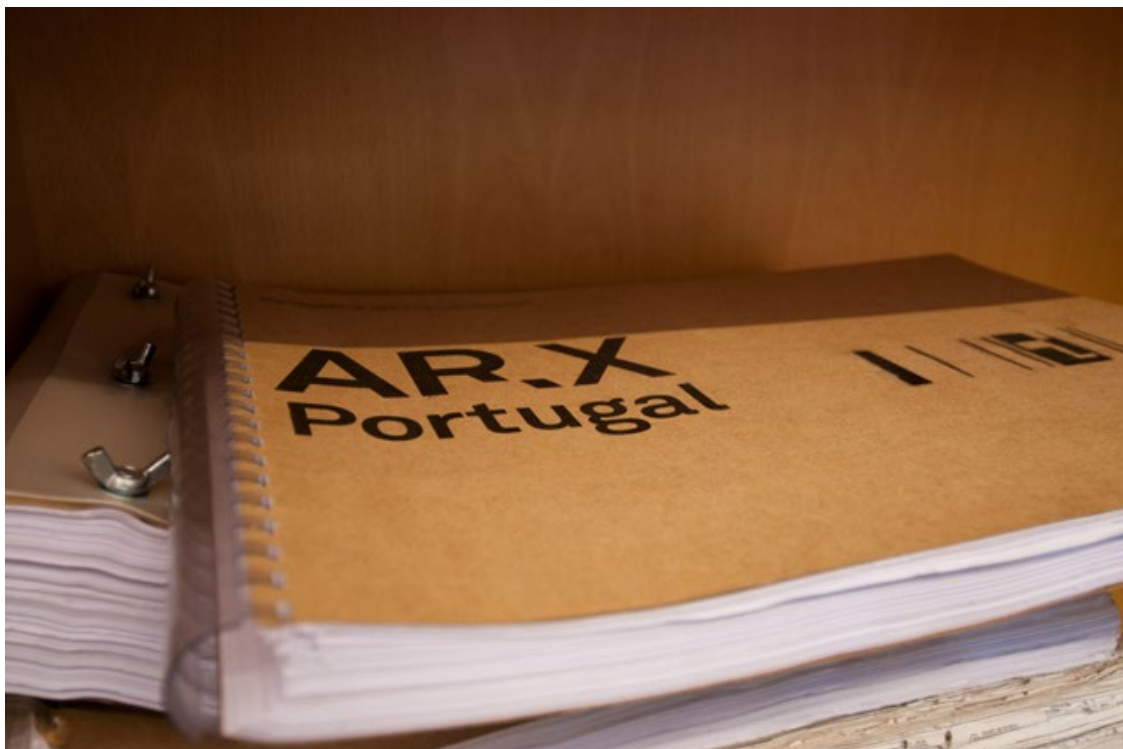
These experiences on the European cities have been very interesting because both of the discovery they imply as well as the fact that they show and relativize the specificity of our territory. The idea that we will work for our city is completely untrue. Today we all know that it is cheaper to travel to Barcelona than to Oporto, for example. And that is a pity, because I like Oporto very much. Working in another city prepares the students to become familiar with what would be foreign some time ago. We get to these cities, we have classes in one of the local architecture schools and we try that these lecturers continue to communicate with us throughout the year. The students are citizens of the world and they will have different needs at different times in different places and they should be prepared for that. This feeling at ease in a world wider than our city or country or Europe leads to a very appealing, optimistic and hopeful feeling of freedom. We must not let ourselves be dragged by the psychological drama of the crisis that permeated our activity; it is extremely limiting and I try to not bring it to the classroom.

The idea that the world is here is something you always sought for. When you graduated you started an interesting professional experience in different countries.

What I did is what all kids do today, right? They go to other universities on Erasmus, more than two thirds of my students are foreigners, and they come to UAL to do the 2nd studies cycle. Today we are European citizens - world citizens. I believe many borders will crumble, many have already informally disappeared. At many levels, we are not closed to the world and I certainly will not contribute to be. My students already think that way, they very easily travel to other countries where I was very afraid to go. The world has changed as far as that is concerned.

You have students from different countries and simultaneously there is this idea of making Portuguese architecture stronger. What do you think of that? Is there a culture clash or you do not see that in the younger generations?

I was never into creating a supposed identity of Portuguese architecture. Architecture exists and, in certain places, for a series of reasons, it acquires certain shapes and that is where I work: on the reasons, the bases, the literature on what architecture is in a certain place. And this is a universal phenomenon among people and specific among places and probably among programs. Even among colleagues, I see that some are more into that idea of a Portuguese architecture as a means of identity. This is a phenomenon that I firmly reject, I do not care for this branding in architecture (that is my critical perspective, they probably do not see it that way). I am a huge fan of several types of architecture as long as I see the reason for them, I see the relation, the cultural, geographic, material, economic and human relation. Our territory is incredible from that point of view, it is more open than the minds of many architects. Sometimes I travel through huge countries where there is incredible homogeneity in terms of architecture, of construction systems, of landscaping, etc. and we, in our small country, have a wide variety of terrains, agriculture, architecture, typology, it is amazing! From this plethora of shapes that is our culture I find it very easy to deal with specificity. That is perhaps why we, the Portuguese, have been so successful when we traveled to world and found ways to relate in the four corners of the world.



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Does that open perspective of the world have to do with the start of ARX Portugal?

First of all, ARX Portugal has Portugal in its name. When I came back to Portugal, I came because I wanted to, because my brother and I thought our greatest challenge was in Portugal though we would not restrict our work to the territory of our country. Still today, the biggest challenge for any Portuguese will be to stay in Portugal, where everything is increasingly difficult. At the time - after being abroad for so long - I thought "I want to express Portugal in everything I do". And I think that in Portugal we are kind of ashamed of being Portuguese, of our country, we do not have our flag in our front door like the Americans (I don't either). However, we have a country with extraordinary thinkers and doers who have inspired me tremendously - architects as well as writers, surgeons, engineers, doctors, musicians, etc. And we celebrate, foster and promote merit very little and promote the most absurd things (politicians, football commentators, soap operas, games...). It is not at all stimulating.

At the time we founded the office, architects and architecture always came first, there were the masters. I did not fully understand the idea of masters (I probably did not have the tools for it yet) but I realized architecture was in the hands of a large set of people and I did not want my activity to have our name, Nuno and Zé Mateus Arquitectos because I always considered the architect as the core of a network of knowledge focused on a given issue in a specific place. ARX was a play on words: Architecture, Texture and Text. Texture in the sense of network and Text in the sense that it was written and could be read - we were building something that conveyed information. Not necessarily an aesthetic object but one that could be coded and decoded and conveys knowledge and interaction.

Presently we are looking for work abroad and the name ARX linked to Portugal and we often realize that our country is viewed as a place of excellence in terms of architecture. The fact that it has the name Portugal associated adds it charm and eventually an asset. To sum up, our office's name represented the depersonalization of the company's name in a country we viewed as viable and, at least at the time, in need of our contribution, our individual participation and our responsibility to make the country more plural, more inhabitable...

Will you tell us some of your references?

In my everyday life at the school, all the lecturers, both those who were and those who are now at UAL, are people that stimulate me and who make me do better every day because of the way they teach and produce architecture.

I cannot mention references because I have too many. I do not have a doctrine. I can enjoy very different works for different reasons. I cannot agree with some colleagues, who I esteem and admire, that only the work of a specific architect is good or that only specific materials, certain shapes and angles are good... I do not care for that.

I enjoy a plethora of work. And the reason for it is not having a criteria but rather that I am not confined to a model. I could wear jackets of all shapes, fabrics, linings, with zippers, buttons... I would still use a criteria to choose. The same is true of design.

What about offices of younger architects?

Ours is a slow profession. I have been a lecturer for the past twelve years and I know the work of some of our most successful former students - Miguel Marcelino, for example, has received some media attention. I have also come across Andreia Salavessa, one of UAL's first graduates and who won the Secil Universidades Award, a joy to all of us, students and lecturers. One of the major advantages of our school is the closeness between the academic staff and the students. UAL is privileged in terms of teaching and

learning. We are not contented people. The energy at UAL is very stimulating and I feel it as a lecturer. And those coming from the outside also feel it.



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You mentioned atelierMOB (Andreia Salavessa's office) and your opinion of the fact that the work by young architects today is not what we traditionally associated to an architect ...

An architect is a multifaceted person whose education is neither fully humanistic nor scientific but rather a combination of the two made manifest through art. This is a very complex educational model which reminds of the Renaissance. We are specialists in diverse trivialities, our action adapts to the context and the issues we are faced with... It is true that over two decades, in view of our accession to the EU, a lot of public construction has been required: museums, libraries, schools... In the recent past - and I think the last edition of the Lisbon Architecture Triennale (2013) also gave that media attention - a lot has been said of the social aspect of architecture which I believe was never absent in the work strategies of the most interesting architects. Not only in architecture but in other fields as well, and as a consequence of the violence imposed by the economic readjustment we are facing, these issues arise also in architecture.

Doctors always have patients and architects as well because buildings become sick all the time and need refurbishing. Buildings are an asset that require intelligent, knowledgeable and more durable interventions that add value to them. An educated architect can understand buildings much better than builders or owners. The architect can see further, I have no doubt, because he has other tools. I have friends who are great musicians or painters, influential worldwide, whose knowledge of their field is extraordinary but in terms of other fields, such as architecture, understand very little. We

realize that knowledge is very specific. I dare to say that the architect uses different knowledge more. We are taught to know the limitations of our knowledge and the need to complement it by resorting to other fields or people. An architect, every time he or she submits a project to the municipality, has to submit another fifteen projects and gets used to that. You get used to the fact that you are not alone.



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Architecture thus processes knowledge and produces a synthesis. We can assume that, in terms of knowledge production on architecture, there is a crossroads ...

Yes, there is a lack of self-examination. We are so focused on that complementariness of knowledge that we neglect self-examination. As an architect, I am an avid visitor of the works by colleagues I admire. And, fortunately, there are many of those. We realize thought those works, that there is an amassed knowledge in Portugal that is incredible - that is visible in the buildings. Yet it is not written and therefore not available for consultation when we are learning. Today lecturers are forced to focus on doing their PhDs so that the schools have the required ratios according to Bologna. This has widened the gap between the academic and the professional worlds. Architects are forced to leave architecture schools and be replaced by lecturers who are specialists in theory rather than in projects.

When faced with the pressure of writing a PhD thesis, I opted for developing research on my own design and thought process in the buildings I designed at ARX. I opted for closing the circle between practice and research. I used the model, a research tool I opt for at UAL and which is known in academia because of its methodological link with the physical object, i.e., the model as a place of thought and a conveyor of your reasoning.

My first step was to collect, repair, and list them so as to analyze the type of model I made. Because it is one thing to be in your office, under pressure, designing project after project, and a completely different other to look at the models, realize you have over three thousand of them, have a wide perspective of them and analyze all that work to finally write about it.

The title of my PhD thesis is "Taxonomy and operation of architectural thought" and focuses on two issues: Taxonomy deals with the analytical perspective of the models and dividing them in group typologies - structure, context, detail models, diagrams, etc.; Operation in the sense of understanding the sequence of models and how they are connected and how reasoning evolved by means of a series of choices.

The second part of the title is "Model Design" and is based on the idea that design is not opposed to model but that the model itself is a design. A design in the sense that Siza Vieira refers as "wish for intelligence". It is a three dimensional design, not the model as representation but rather as shape, place and organization. It is also an object, and that is still important in my thesis - the fact that it is three dimensional, it is tactile, subject to gravity and made of joint materials in specific shapes - is related to a series of issues in making architecture, to other materials, to other scales but still subject to gravity, to three dimension, to habitability and exposure to light.



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Doing your PhD this way is also a claim that research in architecture is more than research on the history of architecture or town planning or research towards a specific project. Are there other ways of doing it?



There has not been any but I believe that the change in paradigm that is taking place in architecture, together with the increasing number of architecture schools, will necessarily lead to new models arising that will increase critical thought, less closed and defensive and more open and less prejudiced. I have had the opportunity to participate in international academic seminars on research in architecture where I realized the world of research most participants were focused on where very interesting for me but rather disconnected from the world of building architecture, inhabited by people, part of cities and subject to extreme weather, part of the history of architecture which I devote my time to. That was what I needed to move forward.

What is your idea for the future of ARX? And for architecture in general?

Clearly internationalization is something we must devote time to and the same methodological rigor I have dedicated to my PhD up to a while ago. We are used to arriving to a place where British and Americans are already working, where their diplomatic, economic and defense representations work together to attract business to their companies. When we get somewhere we realize that our diplomatic representation does not work in connection with the economic and social reality of the place they are in. When companies ask for connections, there is hardly any support...

We have to do everything on our own. We, Portuguese architects, have to deal with prejudice - the idea that we are from a country where thoroughness is scarce, where you overspend and have to borrow from others, that is disorganized ... We deal with projects that involve large amounts of money, large projects must be well organized to be completed on time and within budget, which is in opposition to others' idea of our country. That makes our activity even harder. That is why when architects like João Luis Carrilho da Graça, Manuel and Francisco Aires Mateus or Gonçalo Byrne, start working abroad they are faced with huge difficulties! If they were from Switzerland or Germany they would work abroad much more. Yet a lot of people are now working internationally, also because of our present economic difficulties as a country. Presently, working in Portugal is rather limited. Time will come when people will get fed up with the restrictions and money will start circulating again and more work will be needed - it will take time but it always happens. We must realize, though, that working in the country and abroad is natural; architecture schools understood it some time ago and have embraced the Erasmus spirit; most offices have work both in the country and abroad, perhaps mostly in Portuguese speaking countries but I am sure this will spread to other countries.

In 1974 most of our colonies became independent - at that time our work was mostly for those territories; after that we focused on our territory, as money coming from Europe let us continue to design high quality architecture. Suddenly, all that was taken away and we are making an effort to change the paradigm! There is pain involved but for me there is clearly a more exciting future ahead.