

Interview Manuel Aires Mateus + Francisco Aires Mateus

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First, we would like to thank architects Manuel and Francisco Aires Mateus for being here, it is a pleasure to welcome you. We would like to start by talking a little bit about your background as students. Which course units and lecturers have inspired you?

MM -We graduated in the Faculty of Architecture at a difficult time for the institution, at the time of the post-modernist wave in Portugal. I was then working in the office of architect Gonalo Byrne and Francisco was working in the office of architect Eduardo Trigo de Sousa.

The most important professors for me were (Fernando) Conduto, who taught Drawing and Manuel Tainha, who taught Project, in my 2nd and 5th year. Another professor was also becoming important at the Faculty of Architecture, Carrilho da Graa, but I never chose him but rather opted for Manuel Tainha. I remember his classes vividly. He was not only a great architect as well as a person who taught us that architecture is about life, life at the core of something. There were other important professors who I remember as well: Maria Joo Rodrigues - she was quite a surprise because she was very knowledgeable - and Maria Calado, who was a wonderful History professor.

FM -I also had the same professors but my time was not as good ... I had Manuel Tainha in my 5th year but he was rather absent because he had a lot of work, Daciano and Fernando Conduto. I remember Conduto because of his thoroughness, his emphasis on

how you should focus heavily on what you are doing, I learned a great deal. However, I must say that, in terms of Project, I do not remember a year in which that subject was especially motivating.

MM –This had not only to do with the professors. It had to do with the time. The Faculty was not motivating.

FM –These were times when there were problems in the school, a struggle to control the school. Things that we consider ordinary at a school were not a concern then. And we felt somewhat disconnected, there was not the necessary involvement ... there were classes but the environment was not very interesting. Manel's class was much stronger, the more so because the students remained the same until the 5th year and had more luck with the professors.

And how did you manages classes and working in an office?

MM – Classes started at 8 a.m. and ended at 2 p.m. and many people worked in offices. The times were different! We left the faculty and went to the office and only after that would we do our projects for university. We did not study much...



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Was Architecture an obvious choice?

FM – I would say it was pretty much a natural choice. Our mother is a painter and our father was an architect, so our choice would always be something related to that. I even checked Design, Architecture ... I attended a vocational course at António Arroios (School) and realized Architecture was what I wanted.

MM –You were always able to do a lot of things. First, you were a drummer and wanted to paint, to create T-shirts, do animation, so you were more open to other things and perhaps that's why you hesitated more. I didn't. My choice was Architecture. As a kid, I considered doing Law because of my grandfather. But, in truth, Architecture was always it. My godfather, José Grade, was the director of the Faculty of Porto and a great Drawing professor. I would have loved to study at Porto but the times were hard... in the 80s, everything was complicated, there was not much money and I ended up studying in Lisbon, and so did Francisco. Our mother was friends with the generation of Siza and Soutinho, so I was sad that I couldn't study in the Faculty of Porto, because it was clearly at a different level. The Faculty in Lisbon in the 80s was mediocre.

When you started teaching, was it your intention to do differently?

MM -For sure! However, we started teaching at completely different times. I started teaching right when I completed the degree, when I was 23. I started teaching technical courses and then started teaching Project. I also taught at Universidade Lusíada while I continued teaching at the Faculty of Architecture. I was lucky enough to have two very interesting experiences: one was to assist Tainha and the other to assist Manuel Graça Dias who, for me and from the teaching point of view, was probably the richest experience I have ever had. I felt a student as well because I learned to teach with Graça Dias, who is an extraordinary professor, who, besides motivating us, also opened our minds (mine and the students'), always very thorough, yet open to everything. Both in teaching and in professional life.

When Carrilho da Graça and Graça Dias leave the Faculty of Architecture, I start lecturing the 5th year, which was what I did the longest (teach 5th year) until I was fired. At that time I was already stepping out, though. This was an interesting time at Universidade Lusíada for me, especially because I was teaching with our cousin José Maria Assis e Santos. We started experimenting internationally - I started teaching at Mendrisio first and then Francisco as well. This was 13 years ago.

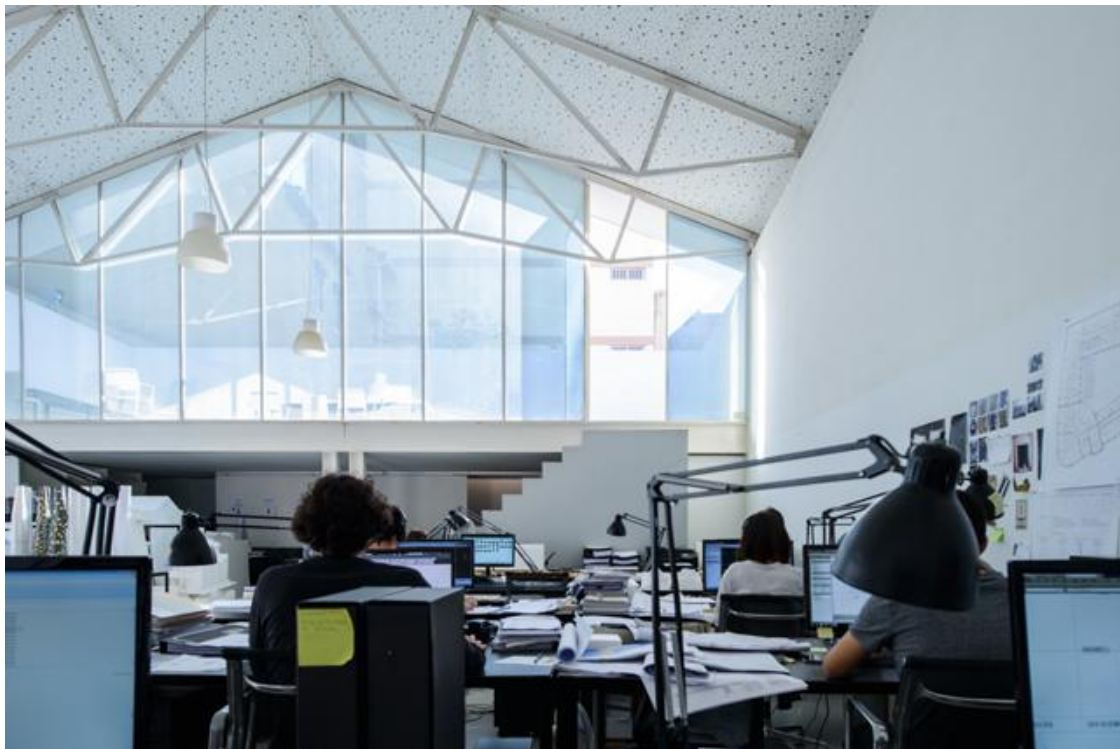
FM -At that time, we were already at Autónoma (UAL) but, as we were supposed to teach 3rd year, we started teaching at Mendrisio first.

MM –Mendrisio meant working with Peter Zumthor, a major reference for us as an architect and as a professor. I remember going to see the projects by Zumthor's students' at night, when everybody would be going to bed. That faculty became our Faculty. We also went to Harvard but it ended up not being a striking experience; we also did a 5-day course in Spain and in Oslo, in search of different classes, in Slovenia, where we also taught. At the universities where we work, we tend to teach what we know because we know the students and they know us and sometimes we must go abroad to, in a sense, assess our own work.

In any case, from the moment we started teaching together, teaching became a core activity. We don't have an office and teaching, we have an office and we teach. I am not

an architect who teaches, I do not separate one from the other. For me, teaching or working is basically the same thing.

FM -Even in terms of time, my time is divided between the two..



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Do you consider teaching an extension of the office?

MM – Or the office a part of research ... there is no distinction. We always considered crucial that the office had a close relation with teaching. Teaching is one of the most straightforward activities in terms of results: you get what you give. You cannot receive unless you give and when you give, you always receive.

How did it feel to participate in designing a degree as you did at UAL?

MM – Three people designed the degree at UAL: (João Luis) Carrilho da Graça, (Manuel) Graça Dias and José Manuel Fernandes. Afterwards, Graça Dias brought Manuel Vicente to coordinate 2nd year and Carrilho da Graça brought me to coordinate 3rd year. We became the coordinators of the 4 years. I had been fired from the Faculty of Architecture, as had been Manuel Graça Dias and Carrilho da Graça. Yet, I am 11 years younger, which means there was an age gap. Then, each of us invited colleagues, Graça Dias invited Egas (José Vieira), Carrilho da Graça invited Inês Lobo and we (Francisco and I) were another team. This was the initial structure.

Funnily enough, when we started, we thought we knew everything about architecture and we were completely wrong. We believed that, when the students knew who would be their teachers, they would flock to UAL. That did not happen. UAL had the most interesting academic staff but that did not help the university to grow. Moreover, there

were other degrees, even by other private universities, who had many students and were more attractive to students than UAL. And the degree at UAL, as expected, only found its vocation after a few years. I think it is on the right track now, more focused on attracting 2nd cycle students who already know about architecture and whose choice is much more informed.

FM -This has been a winning bet. The 2nd cycle has attracted students in Portugal as well as students from abroad who come to study with some of the professors. This is really positive. It takes many years for a school to become known. The faculty at Mendrisio is only 15 years old and competes against schools that are 500 or 300 years old ... I don't know how old ETH in Zürich is. So, some things take long to be recognized, including being recognized by parents when choosing the school they want their children to attend.

MM –Yet today, in any case, recognition of quality takes place faster than before.



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UAL graduate students in Architecture are well recognized...

MM – MM -that information, which before took some time to spread is nowadays diffused much faster. Mendrisio is Zumthor's school. After 10 years at the university, he has left but his influence is still felt and that has a strong imp+act. Zumthor is rather unknown when he starts teaching at the university and now he is one of, if not the best known architect in the world and that has an impact on the image of the school, an impact that remains after he has left.

Things are different at UAL; the loss of some of its professors, such as Carrilho da Graça or myself, could place it at risk, since we teach very few classes now. But that is not true.

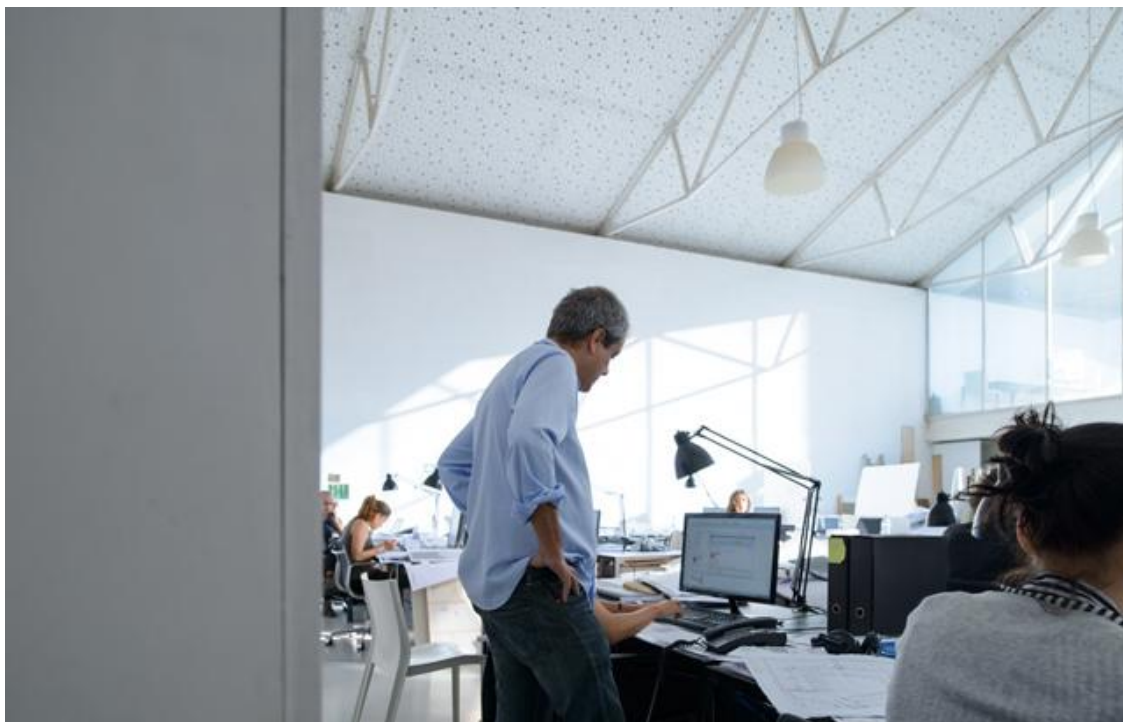
UAL can survive without us and its role is much clearer today. That clarity allows it to perform much better now.

FM –More clarity and more visibility. At the end of the day, UAL students have won Secil awards, one after the other, though the number of students at UAL is small. In fact, there are few students and many awards.

MM -There are awards, yes, but, which I consider more important, there is also the establishing of a School.

FM –I think academia acknowledges that. A students who is at the Faculty of Architecture in Lisbon knows that their type of work is not the same as in Autónoma. I believe the school has that quality.

MM –We must realize that this is a school in a context of crisis in terms of education. I am not referring to the economic crisis but to the crisis on the meaning of teaching and on teaching architecture. I don't know if there was a time when this crisis did not exist but I do know that this feeling has increased in the past few years. A crisis regarding the cultural meaning of architecture. These are moments of expectation, of change and teaching is also influenced by this. The advantage of UAL is that it has managed to find its position in terms of culture. It faces many difficulties when comparing to international universities (financial difficulties, technical difficulties, the well-known difficulties) and has always managed to overcome them. And, in some way, it has managed build its Identity. We can say that the concept of being a student at UAL exists and that is a concept that takes long to create, especially at a small school such as UAL. Autónoma was never a big school but rather a very small one. And managed to build that identity because of it. It took it less time as means to achieve it.



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Let's go back a bit, to the balance between office and teaching... We have heard students being told that they should enjoy their time at the school because they will never be as free as they are now. Do you enjoy teaching as a space of freedom as opposed to professional practice?

MM – We have never said that! We always say the opposite. Our experience tells us otherwise, I am much freer in my professional life that I was at university. What we tell students is that we make projects exactly the same way at university and in our professional life. There is no such thing as freedom at school and boring work at the office.

Can you have a boring life? Yes! But you can also have a boring school. Throughout your life, you need to face work the same way that you face school, where there is more freedom. To be 50 and feel as fresh and willing as when you were 20, that is real work. Neither Francisco nor I think that professional life is boring. Our professional lives are not boring. They may be hard but not boring. We do not think that there is more freedom at university. My biggest surprise, and I think Francisco's too, was that, when we started working (not in the beginning because we know nothing at all) but when we started to control what we were doing, we had much freedom at work. This is still my opinion today.

FM –That freedom is essential because if you do not feel it, if are limited. This is the idea that we want to get across to students. The idea that they need to conquer their freedom, to keep it and understand that freedom, which is only possible if grounded on integrity at cultural and intellectual level. Otherwise it becomes foolishness. That freedom must be integrated so that it becomes value.

We would like you to describe your career path. In our talk, you mentioned that you had both worked in the office of architect Gonalo Byrne and that you felt the need to have your own office...

FM – That was a very natural process and it was natural because Gonalo was very generous. We started having some projects, very simple ones, which became larger and larger and Gonalo, in fact, supported us (we had a room in Gonalo's office, a kind of satellite room) and we collaborated with other architects. At a certain point in time, some of Gonalo's colleagues were already in our office too. And eventually the work we were doing no longer could be done there (even in terms of ethics). So we moved. We moved to a building across the street. We were still connected. You could see the other office!

This is such a natural process that we do not feel that "there was a time when we worked in the office of Gonalo Byrne and then we stopped." It was a rather continuous process. And even after we left, we still collaborated for competition purposes, it was a very straightforward and peaceful process.

MM –This all happened at a very peculiar time. We were fortunate to work for Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Grândola and that was the beginning of our relation with this institution. We also entered several competitions. In two of them, we were invited to participate as youth representatives (they would select a number of architects and then included the "young architects") - in the competition for the Engineer Association and for the Rector's Building at Universidade Nova. This change - from small scale projects, Santa Casa of Grândola, small competitions (in the one for the Canteen at the University

of Aveiro we were still in Gonçalo's office) to large scale ones, such as that for the Engineer Association - that forced us to leave his office because we needed more architects working with us. When the competition for the Rector's building took place, we already had our office. In fact, it took a long time for the decision to be public (we got second place at that competition).



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When you left, did you feel your energy renewed, were your ideas different, did you feel you were cutting the umbilical cord?

MM – No. We felt like Oedipus, we had killed our father, but that was a good thing.

FM –Leaving always provides you with an extra boost of energy, doesn't it? The same happens when you leave your parents' house.

MM –You just need to move, there's always so much to pack! At that time we were especially energized by the fact that we had a lot of projects, huge projects. There are no such projects today! State-financed and huge!

FM –Thousands of square meters huge! But that was just normal then. Every day you would find four new competitions opening.

MM –And we took advantage of that moment to learn the trade: how buildings are constructed, what is the building site like ... as we are at the other end of the process.

Then, suddenly, we have no work - I cannot even recall why that happened - and we realized our money would last for three or four months. And what we did was... forget everything. And start redesigning everything. And truly think about what we had been



doing. This ends with Casa de Alenquer, which we consider our first project. That was the first project that we felt as we could control everything we were doing. We stopped to consider and redesign everything we had done so far as if Casa de Alenquer were our first project.

And we resumed our career with small projects - Casa de Azeitão, a small house in Melides - and only after some time did we begin to work on larger scale projects. Yet, at this time, we felt in control, which was something we had not felt before. Funnily enough, we consider this was when we laid the foundations of what we are now, which would not have been possible if we had not experienced designing and building extensively as well as participating in so many competitions.

FM -The attention that we now pay to designing the project coincided with the stage in our lives when we had to think about what we were doing.

MM – It's not a question of spending more time making the project but rather paying a more conscious attention!

FM –Yes. But when you are making a 10,000-square-metre building, you have to be fast and that sometimes prevents you from thinking and fully understanding what you are doing. This fills the senses and is fascinating! The most interesting is that it was the smaller projects which made it evident.

MM –It's funny because, at that time, we used to say that "the simple fact of building makes it feel it is architecture!" The first time you walk into a building site and see your building grow, see the retaining walls... you feel that you have conquered the world! And then you realize you haven't and that, in fact, you have to see this from a different perspective because it has other meanings.

There is another fascinating factor: when some time has gone by after your first buildings have been made, time makes you critical of your own work; that is a rather tough but enlightening learning process.

FM –Time allows you to see these things at a distance...

MM –You cannot change what you have made. They are just there. And it's not always easy to accept that... you learn a lot from that critical view. Our crisis was good for us because it allowed us that distance and we were able to opt for a different attitude towards our work.



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In that process and even nowadays, do you feel that research in architecture helps you in any way?

FM – I believe it does, as a good book or film does, as an extraordinary painting does or as travelling does... it helps because it is part of culture.

MM –I partially agree with him... it helps because architecture has to do with life. So, anything and everything can influence architecture. All human activity is connected with architecture. In fact, architecture is a kind of principle of culture, in that it corrects Mother Nature who was not adjusted to our needs, or architecture as a profession would not exist.

Besides, there is a side to the theory of architecture that I think helps us because it allows us to look at things from the perspective of the other. It is like observing a landscape or seeing that landscape from the perspective of a photographer that admires it. Sometimes the landscape is richer, other times there is a critical eye on the landscape that makes it richer than it is in reality. Sometimes critics have that ability. Because critics are like architects, right? There are many architects but we find only a few of them interesting. I like that vision of architecture, of criticism or of thinking architecture - when it is ground breaking. The most important texts we have read were written by architects. Not by academics but by architects: books by Tainha or Siza (in Portuguese) Zumthor and Herzog.



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And what about references in terms of built work?

MM – I'll start by mentioning those who are already dead: Palladio, Borromini; the great modern: Mies, Corbusier, who must always be included... can we skip to the contemporary?

FM –I am looking at our books. In architecture offices you can see who are the most influential by checking the books that have been most read!

MM –I once heard a German academic saying: "history is written in the future", which I found really funny. In the past months we have been looking at projects by (Sigurd) Lewerentz because we are designing visible mortar joints and he has made experiments with that. An influence from the past into the future.

Now, if you asked me: "Who would I stop eating my lunch for to go and see?" These can no longer make new things (laughter)... Among the living, Zumthor and Siza are two that I obviously admire. Among the younger architects, I would visit works by Sejima, Kerez, Olgiati....

FM –There are many others. Some things you revisit any time, architecture or architects you did not pay attention to for some reason become more evident and more interesting.

MM –In terms of countries, there are three you should go to: Japan, Switzerland and Portugal. These are three countries to go and see!



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What about the most recent ones? What do you think of the new experiments that have cropped up, architects that work with the community or those who themselves build?

FM – An interesting fact, though not in the most recent architect category is that José Adrião won the AICA award. The focus given by the jury regarding it his work was saving or refurbishing a building based on a critical perspective. I know that was not your question but it is equally interesting to realize that the world that is emerging, namely with young architects, is also possible now. As we are in a crisis. And there is no construction. You have to look around and see the potential.

And I think there are really interesting experiments. I am sorry that those experiments - because of lack of money or ideological reasons or otherwise - often become something that is in the edge of (being or not) architecture. Because helping a community have a sewage system is a noble attitude but it is not architecture but I consider this an interesting possibility and I believe that is partially the future, at least our immediate future - understand what exists and how it can be transformed. I find it fascinating that the younger generation is attentive because this is only the beginning. Huge opportunities will arise!

MM –The younger generations are much better prepared than the older! There is no comparison in terms of knowledge and abilities between a student today and a student from our time. The difference is huge! The younger generations are more ready to move forward and discover non-classic architecture. They cannot wait for the labor market, either, like other generations! They must create their labor market and find their way.

Just the other day I was reading a book by Niemeyer, one that is being published by Edições 70. He talks about love and passion for architecture, but also says that: "I am politically engaged, that is what I am." Because people are at the core of our lives, people are at the core of our concerns, these should be the real values.

Many times, in architecture, we tend to mix things. To provide support to the community seems architecture but it is not. This does not mean that these new experiments are no unworthy or uninteresting and they point towards a new direction that has always been part of architecture and which is now very visible. In a certain way, this is what great architecture has always been.

That was the passion we felt when Studio Mumbai appeared, a feeling that everything is given to the project. You realize that you have full control, you are aware of the craft implied the design and the production. And that gives time to project and to research, which is very interesting for architecture. On the other hand, there is the actual value, which is a person being socially or politically engaged. I do not consider that architecture should be only that, though. I think architecture must experiment in many fields. That is a concept that younger generations have grasped - the close relation between project and reality. I think that is positive.

FM –This is not unique. In Portugal there were SAAL operations which were constructions - now it is less clear - but involved working for the community and were strongly engaged in ideological and social terms. You just have to watch the films of the meeting and plenaries to see it... those were truly extraordinary times.

In fact, after that only social buildings evidenced good architectural work. Siza did not design a residential building for years... nor did Vitor Figueiredo or Gonçalo Byrne ... they only designed council housing. Private housing was either non-existent or not designed by architects.



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When you look back to your career, do you feel that your current critical perspective compensates not being "young" anymore?

MM – Yes and no, it depends. I think experience is valuable. And when we say that we are able to reflect on what we have done because it was a long time ago... that compensates, yes, but only if we manage to keep the disquiet of youth. Architects are no longer interesting when they settle and most of them do settle at a point in their lives and become uninteresting! That usually happens when they become well-known and had larger offices. Yet, in terms of architecture, they are uninteresting. They will produce a lot, though! I think that we will only remain interesting as long as we manage not to settle and to keep on questioning.

FM – This is a problem of creation. I usually think that something will tell me when it is best to leave things as they are and not be bothered anymore. There is that moment, in fact, and it has nothing to do with age, it has to do with you not feeling that disquiet and settling.

MM –That is the gravest danger: Experience is good but routine isn't!