Illustrated fragments on the “Porto School”

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JOELHO

#04

ENSINAR PELO PROJETO TEACHING THROUGH DESIGN

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Illustrated fragments on the “Porto School”

1. Opening

I was first admitted into the school as a student fifty-five years ago and I have been teaching there for forty. I lived through several episodes of its history, being a traveling participant.

The first statement I would like to make is that I believe the Porto School does exist. It exists as a space for permanent thinking on architectural teaching, always trying to find its own discourse on method. Thus it has been done, and continues to be, with the simplicity of those who fulfil their duty, not impairing thought nor overly theorizing. I state it not with pride, but realism!

Following the interest expressed by some sectors of international criticism, rather than at the national level, in determining the defining parameters of an hypothetical style and the temporal boundaries in the development of this “school” (regarded in the sense of a “trend”), we gradually became aware that this title should mainly relate to a group of architects who recognize themselves, like it or not, through their own existence.

I leave it to others, younger, smarter and with a more academic spirit, to speak of it with chronological rigor, risking (supposedly scientifically substantiated) interpretations, concluding with intense overviews of ground-breaking content. However, I must say that each episode I experienced within the school draws parallels to many others we have all lived in Portugal. It would not be fair to think our particular place unique and exclusive, when considering the construction of knowledge that shook the ‘60s and ‘70s. This construction always takes place within a network, overlapping broader territories and drawing the advances and retreats of a comprehensive ever-transforming reality.

I have also never been in favour of any interpretive theory that is based on the permanent presence of a genius commanding the school as if it was his own. A school is a group. We were and are many. The story of each and every one in particular can never be the history of the School, but rather his own story. It is the crossing of several narratives, from those who knew how to reverse their direction for our common home that stands as the true history of the institution and of how in it architecture is taught or learned.

Of course it is important to know the Masters, choosing those that we believe had more meaning and relating them with their buildings. The same people who were both at the building site and at school, making it impossible to speak of one without referencing the other. The school, in fact, has always depended on what was being designed in the studio, making that the understanding we have of architecture springs from its practice. But because this compared chronology is not always synchronized, one must be wary of approaches that are forged only inside our mind, forcing dates, languages, concepts or methods.

I have for myself, and I have defended it on numerous occasions that in the School of Porto the common understanding, over time, can be explained through circumstances outside any prior

1. Faculty of Architecture, drawing
by Álvaro Siza, s.d. AAC archive.

conceptualization, generating preconceived programmatic architecture.

We never aimed to establish a sum of formal codes but rather to transform a common perception of the phenomenon of architecture into an institutional teaching project.

We have never discussed, believing it pointless and known, neither what is teachable in architecture, nor the problems that it arises, because this could not provide a stable knowledge. We were all aware that architecture cannot be learned *strictu sensu* and therefore its pedagogy may only propose exercising learning through design.

The proposals of Modernity, of which the Reform of 1957 was a late representation, brought about feared demons: the sectorization of knowledge, specialization, the partial apprehension of reality or the blatant refusal of common sense and humanistic studies.

In the Porto School, with architecture far removed from its rational determination, the attempt to meet the reality of a tradition together with the assimilation of the innovative elements from a stance integrating common sense (taking place within the discipline in a sensitive and conceptual manner), lead to a methodological awareness that designing is not a linear and analytical process.

Radically we rehearsed new organizations, proceeding to the integration of various subjects into a structure composed of a central core – design, encompassing aspects of composition, construction and urbanism. History was seen as a positive retreat into the past towards its productive appropriation. Drawing emerges as an instrument of sensitive perception, as a tool of critical analysis together as a synthesis which extends the intelligibility of things.

And thus was drafted a design for a theory for teaching, growing inextricably connected to the vicissitudes of professional practice.

Even though I'm fascinated by long History, where I read (as in the Portuguese case), more continuities than disruptions, my time is that of Fernando Távora.

He gave me incentives, teachings and commands (in reality his wishes, that I soon made my own), signalling a profound reciprocal friendship. I have never felt a passive instrument of his will, but rather an active one.

I owe him almost all that I know or have been learning, in his homage.

He, on the other hand, also owes me my unending disquiet and uncompromising commitment. I know I have disquieted him and made him committed, attentive, active and awakened.

Awarded by the common reconnaissance of all those who made the School, his importance justly grew. The School was his because we gave it to him, and not to any other stepping forward or aiming to conquer it.

Siza was also present, having returned to the School to teach Construction.

We were all always architects.

As teachers we grew conscientious of the difficulty of organizing an Architecture School that should continue, as we have stated, to organize

itself both from the direct contact with practice as from the application of strict theoretical foundations that support said practise.

All of this not lacking autonomy or judgement.

The possible synthesis came from hesitation and miscegenation, ever stable or perfectly balanced, always, above all, with a common definition of a School.

2. The refusal of design

I was invited to teach in the Architecture Course of ESBAP in 1972. As a teacher, I lived through the clear moments of the pre and post 25th of April, both of intense political calling inside the School. Those were the years of the *refusal of design*, as later came the ones of its urgency.

Pressed to choose social issues, the teachers would embark in a series of missteps.

Believing or not in the former social premises of the Modern Movement, the students wished to enact a “progressive exercise”. Clamouring against the “idealistic” nature of surveys, the students claimed a scientific knowledge of reality, only made possible through an active intervention towards its transformation.

Fortunately, safeguarding everyone’s bad conscience, in this confusing situation the mainstream was the refusal of design and its history.

At that time Fernando Távora was our single tutelary master, never yielding to *thematic and aprioristic distinctions*. He remained firmly within the field of design and there he focused his serene pedagogical action, always attentive to the notion that “*there can be no solid practice without a solid theory*”.

The idea that an architect should primarily be a wonderful pencil is outdated because there can be no wonderful pencil if there is no wonderful head.” (Távora, 1971)

The individual shelter was the chosen subject, a sort of foreign body in troubled times. And thus we designed creatively, not only our own well-being, but also the right to choose our own consumption, not requiring a renunciation of the world, but rather stating that one is claiming and communicating what we are and how we wish to connect. *This step, from necessity to desire*, as Gregotti wrote, “*is not a luxury of a wealthy society. It may be the statement of one who is committed to combating the repression that lies in us and in the structure of our society.*”

With the awareness that man needs to imagine its own survival, and that surviving without any imaginative effort is indigent, the exercise was a creative gesture that awarded revolutionary value to imagination.

I was privileged to be his assistant during this time of intense debate, of the recovery of both memory and history, of the need to establish ways and means for a new pedagogy.

Many doubts lingered.

Meanwhile, many have learned to go into positions that later would move, giving them and the School a privileged position in the processes that followed the 25th of April, where some of those doubts were able to be solved.

2. Satirical pamphlet about police repression in Coimbra. "At this point it is known that activists already converged to Coimbra", 1969-04, Coimbra. Arquivo de História Social – ICS-UL, FG1384-ME1296.

3. SAAL, Drawing by Manuel Correia Fernandes, September 1976.

4. SAAL Demonstration, Porto, 17 May 1975.

The school's internal situation was growing worse, with allegations of commitment from some teachers with student struggles starting to show. (fig.2)

The mobilization achieved by the end of 1973 and the most advanced forms of struggle mainly rooted in the refusal of the colonial war, met violent responses from a crumbling regime – vigilance policing, disciplinary action and the expulsion of teachers.

The attempt to restore the technocratic Reform of 57, that had since been suspended, had as background music "Grândola, Vila Morena".

3. SAAL: the urgency of design

The 25th of April found the majority of students of the School in the popular and degraded areas of Porto, whose renovation, within the SAAL / North, often came to be handed over to architects appointed by them.

In Porto, the SAAL was a concerted and coordinated action. This common experience cemented alliances, points of view and a method. It was the school that was there. (fig.3)

The interventions had a familiar feel. Why should they not, if our aim was the continuity of the city? The frames of reference were the same, with the common purpose of dignifying the city of which we were taking possession with the silent understanding of the first settlers.

Modernity had been domesticated in the wise expression of Nuno Portas.

And here we were profoundly Portuguese, seeking criteria more in the efficacy of the response than in the artisticity or in the active and personal domain of language. And everyone took their action seriously. (fig.4)

Within the intensifying internal debate, the few of us who were left considered that it wouldn't be possible to solve the contradictions and misconceptions that had remained in architectural studies for years by driving away students and teachers from reality and removing the immediate commitment they wished to have with impetuously developing popular movements. Aware of the disciplinary autonomy of architecture, a precondition for interdisciplinarity and rejecting the sectorization of an analytical view of its teaching, it was argued that the engagement in reality would be the crucial point of departure for overcoming such misconceptions.

Knowingly running the risk of the dissolution of the School – rather losing it than not having it – we believed that the pressure exerted by the urgency of the real needs and the prospect of facilitating their resolution would force the desired synthesis at this unique historical moment to understanding architecture based on its practice, given the *refusal of design* now meant a refusal of social intervention. A unique moment to establish a methodology in keeping with the current process of design that everyone finally wanted to unleash.

It was a dangerous, yet effective, wager since the restructuring of the studies was experienced by everyone as an absolute imperative to safeguard the teaching strategy that was being set in place.

The *refusal of design* became the *demand for design* and the conditions to start the restructuring process came about in an atmosphere of great commitment. Not resulting from immediate aspects of reality but under its pressure, this process was constructed without improvisation, supported by the former and reassumed pedagogical heritage accumulated at the School of Porto. (fig.5)

In the words of Jorge Figueira: SAAL was its centre, showing an unsettling faith in architecture.

Having exhausted the “third way” and definitely breaking away from “the problem of the Portuguese House”, the School reinvented rationalism and its late poetic progressiveness giving, as in classic architecture, more importance to the structure than to the matter.

That may be the reason why, just last year, I was more moved by Mies’ Farnsworth than by Wright’s Taliesin. The Farnsworth is an abstract composition, lacking all the figurative ingredients that make up traditional architecture. For Mies, the House is always, without a doubt, a symbol of dwelling, of Man settling in the ground, thus establishing, not an immediate, but rather a conceptual link between the building and tradition.

On the other hand, in Wright we find the will to fill the work with meanings, making given images consolidate in an unequivocal closed-off sense.

It was only really now that, with the help of Carlos Martí, I understood that our connection to tradition had stopped being immediate to become, above all else, conceptual.

This was our School on the 25th of April. (fig.6, 7, 8)

4. Second year Design Studio: the theoretical model

The so-called institutionalization of representative democracy, led to the extinction of SAAL in October 1976 and its subsequent integration into the municipalities. (fig.9)

I, myself, wrote on this fatal setback for participatory democracy:

“Architects shall not be near the completion of their designs, nor the conclusion of those already started. Those same architects that dramatically can not use the newly acquired tools precisely at the moment when its historic crisis seemed surpassed and architecture was, by not having resigned, finding its genuine dimension.” (Costa, 2005, p.29)

Together within the School and apart in professional life, the output that each of us found in each particular client placed each of us before himself and before a reality in an intense process of fragmentation.

After recovering its energy in the artistry of the creative action, the acquired method and its morals allowed once again, and without perversion, handling the diversity of languages.

A method and morality are enough to sustain a communion. Moreover, one that is desired!

5. “é uma casa portuguesa com certeza” (“it is a Portuguese house for sure”), drawing Abel Manta, 1974.

6. Second year Design Studio, ESBAP, 1975.

7. Preparation of Street Theater, ESBAP, 1975.

8. Preparation of Street Theater, ESBAP, 1975.

9. Poster against the end of SAAL process, ESBAP, 1975.

10. Poster posted in the Second year design studio, ESBAP, 1978/79.

11. A School of Architecture, Drawing by José Manuel Alves, ESBAP, 1978/79.

In the subject of the 2nd year Design Studio, now removed from the real ground, we, Alberto Carneiro and I, have invented a didactic. And I have to mention us both because both the Design Studio and Drawing built together a program and an outline for its development, some sort of discourse of the method. Not distinguishing specific fields, we graded together and the grade was common.

What we wanted was to test the instrumentality of drawing in designing, and when reviewing the process of the students we knew full well what was illustrative and acritical and what was operative in the sense of giving form to the idea or finding alternatives. (fig.10)

We were also interested in making the concept a conscious process being simultaneously built in the case by case of every student. We envisaged that their definition could be drawn through the formalization of a theoretical model, paving the way for utopia, considering it not as a proposal for a future design, but as a strategy of desire. (fig.11)

Creating a new structure, free from constraints, and performing an action contrary to the formulas of utilitarian rationalism, we were to draw a critical / symbolic opposition to the oppressive status quo. Students liked the idea that allowed or even required them to find themselves and their own project for the future. Therefore we explained that the concept, for the architect / artist, is drawing.

In developing the work, keeping with the same theme, now with a program and a consolidated urban context, the theoretical model served as critical criteria and helped the students understand the necessary constraints and reductions that the encounter with the real always provoked. So, bound to remain faithful to the theoretical model, the students were always aware of the path to coherence that they could not escape, except when deceiving themselves.

It was an extraordinary experience in Design and Theory of Architecture.

History was also coming, and we all understood its operativity in understanding the ever changing reality.

Some students had sessions with psychiatrists because the confrontation with oneself is sometimes painful. We considered this a good sign.

5. Building a History

In 1980 I wrote my first text on the teaching of architecture, when forced to perform public exams at the School of Fine Arts, in order to obtain the title of Tenured Professor. (fig.12)

The group that at that time performed the exams together with me was comprised by my colleagues Cristiano Moreira, Domingos Tavares, Manuel Correia Fernandes and Pedro Ramalho.

The school was under attack from the outside by the technocratic attempt to standardize the curricula of the only two schools of architecture, Porto and Lisbon. We decided to elaborate on our own

history, defending the autonomy to decide on the nature of teaching that, although undergoing transformation, never aimed to break away from the past.

We felt that it had its own distinctive character, which had been sedimented ever since Marques da Silva, going through Carlos Ramos, and later, in the void of his absence by Távora, Lixa Filgueiras, Arnaldo Araújo and later, Álvaro Siza and many others.

We started being called “the Porto School” and a style was being imposed upon us. Since we have a school, (we were saying with a smile), it was fitting that we discuss whether we want to have a style. And for that matter it would also be fitting that we disentangled the mesh of particular consensus that we have formed, whether we like it or not. This before someone does it for us.

As the art critic Cerveira Pinto (apud Costa, 1995, p.86) was saying:

“If it is possible to detect eclecticism and even neobaroque architectural concepts in the “School of Porto” they, however, oppose the entire tradition focusing on façades and decoration arising from seventeenth and eighteenth century religious architecture, as well as the provincial taste that consistently marked the Portuguese culture after that period, contrasting as a cultivated alternative to what, in former times, was overly subjected to the demagogic and formalist excesses of successive reactionary powers. I.e., the aesthetic protestantism of this “school” calls for careful consideration, or we might otherwise ignore something crucial to its understanding, i.e.: that it belongs to a deep underlying aesthetic current, dialectically articulated with the History and linked to the anthropological magma of the North of Portugal.”

This challenge has given me encouragement to continue on the basis of my reflections that were still not the required careful consideration.

Either coming from unity or difference in regard to the national whole or within the local differences, we are interested in emphasizing, and to a certain point, determining the specificities, joining the reaction to the homogenization through the image and the way of life it raised, if it is true that these years are characterized by the predominance of the ideologies of communication and the uprooting of all “national” or “local” ways of living.

With what conflicts, compromises and commitments was, after all, our school built? Trying to answer, we started writing our own highly revealing story. And every year we told the new students, as a sort of an act of initiation.

Our writings for Tenure had been the kick-off.

In 1983 the new curriculum of the course, now integrated in the University, was approved.

On the same year, our text refusing to participate in the Post-Modernism exhibition made a clear stance of our convictions. (fig.13)

Still on the same fruitful year, we organized a Meeting on the Teaching of Architecture, lasting four days. Gregotti and Bohigas were invited. (fig.14)

12. Alexandre Alves Costa, *Dissertação...*, Edições do Curso de Arquitectura da ESBAP, 1982.

13. Exhibition catalogue, “Depois do Modernismo” (After the modernism), Lisbon, 1983, p.115.

14. Meeting Programme "O Ensino da Arquitectura" (The Teaching of Architecture), ESBAP, Porto, 1983.

The following year I started teaching the new subject of History of Portuguese Architecture.

6. History of Portuguese Architecture. A voyage.

The teaching of Architecture had regained its heading, closer to a regular process. It might be less poetic but it was closer to a "professionalizing" methodology. It was, as I called it, our "crisis of efficiency", an immediate consequence of our recent entrance to the University. That may well be the reason why, pressed by Fernando Távora, I agreed to take charge of the newly created subject of History of Portuguese Architecture.

I travelled through Portugal, trying, through the reading of the past to remake, from testimonies, the routes we, as a people, worked out on this fascinating voyage, not in search of lost time, but finding the time that was forever alive, entrenched in a hypothetical way of being Portuguese. I mean, in how the Portuguese adapted theoretical models that arrived here through the hands of foreign masters.

Our second year Design Studio continued, maintaining the central role of drawing in the perception of the processes and of the works retrospectively projecting what we were encountering, already sorted and placed at the right time by the historians who, with their irreplaceable wisdom, prevented us from the interpretative ravings to which we are prone, often out of ignorance or creative excess.

We have used history to construct the design, and now we used the design to construct a different history. And within this permanent reciprocal inter-relation, we have never abandoned our discipline, nor neglected the aspiration to train our students in architecture.

We wrote down some personal thoughts that, far from being consensual, are now part of a wider debate comprising all schools of architecture.

The history of architecture for prospective architects should be the study of the conditions and design processes that produced the works, the subject of analysis and critique, regarding specific examples in which one learns the "how", broadening one's references for the design.

This informative and formative perspective should primarily serve to qualify and upgrade our design as a structured projection of one's thinking.

Not denying the need for historians, this operative vision cannot help but be mediated by architects, because only they can know how to integrate historical knowledge in the method of design.

One handles what one knows and so, it is necessary to transmit knowledge that constitutes a shared cultural context, although always taking care not to encroach into the historians' field of knowledge. The resulting ambiguities have been harmful, especially for teaching and research within this field of knowledge, particularly in the schools of architecture that, not having learned how to find their own field, are engaging in spurious ways.

We studied architectural history for the sake of understanding architecture. Not as speculative thinking, but as a reflection from within the discipline, thinking what should be done and how to do it. Because by doing in concerted dialogue, the paths that were bequeathed upon us are continued. We need them, spaces and forms, their places and authors, because they mirror and measure everything new that is being done.

We assert that drawing is inevitable to the knowledge of the built reality. Without it one may not understand what was done and how it was done. With it, and complementing other ways of knowing, we will understand why and, above all, how.

To see, more than looking, we use drawing. Therefore we travel, we look, we draw, we see. The drawings do not replace the real, but explain it better than our lazy direct experience, because between it and its representation is a gaze that deciphers all its riddles.

And we record, rather than on paper, processed in our own memory, and therefore available for use in the complex process of creation.

This is what Fernando Távora knew. For him, drawing was not merely acquiring knowledge, but also researching. What he drew, under his eyes, was stripped away from the mist that fuses everything whole and acquired the presence of a defined identity.

The experience of seeing through drawing is profound and intense, and explains why many, like him, turn drawing into an obsessive passion.

Drawing soon showed its usefulness in the subject of history, first of all for researching the essence of architecture – the nature of space – through an analytical process of case observation, regarding composition, proportions, scale, volumetry, structure, textural values, connections with the context and even some intangible factors such as light or color. Designing visitable architectures we realized that we ignored them.

The students, when asked to travel our land, recorded in travel notebooks the observations they made in their field trips. Not for the purpose of getting to know them, represent and later report, as in the tradition of archaeology and ethnography, but only in order to get to know them. This is drawing as a means for knowledge. Every one individually learns with it. (fig.15, 16)

The students are thankful. First, for the pretext to travel around Portugal, and second, for the chance for having direct action and experience with the object of their learning, without the mediation of an image or a text.

It is for this reason that we never speak of aesthetic purpose, the so called *endless purpose*, viewed by Kant as the foundation of the work of art. This drawing is utilitarian, a precious and irreplaceable instrument of analysis. (fig.17, 18)

We knew that only taking possession of something that is offered, is not genuinely learning. We only begin to learn when, exercising with

15. Architecture students traveling, Veneze, April 1992.

16. Architecture students traveling, Lindoso, April 2007.

17. Travel Sketchbook.

18. Travel Sketchbook.

19. Designing within the History of Portuguese Architecture Course, ESBAP.

what is offered, we begin appropriating something through the use we make of one's own reasoning.

Exercising with that which is being proposed is the purpose of the practice of the subject. Work with scale ranging between the city and the territory, the city and the building, with field work, surveying, organizing, reading and readings, the most innovative group of exercises was to study, using the disciplinary instruments of architecture, the conditions of production of form. Starting, for the first group of works, from the object to the understanding of the design process, it seemed possible to come from the design process to the production of the object.

The words of Jorge Gigante have been a stimulous, when explaining that he had only truly understood the Romanesque, when within the subject of Archaeology of the 1932 Reform, he developed the project of reconstituting the chancel of the Porto Cathedral, in line with Viollet le Duc, epitomized in Portugal by Rogério de Azevedo, also a master of our school.

And in this search process, students eventually developed designs that only differed from those developed in the subject of Design Studio because they implied the prior acquisition of a formal grammar and construction systems of the past, as well as the ability to interpret, in this light, a commission, i.e. the ability to mirror a culture through an original architectural proposal. Here, in fact, we could not be replaced by others, nor did we occupy anyone's space, and we remain unequivocally within the training field of architects.

One can ask whether we subordinate wisdom, the contents of knowledge, to the know-how, i.e., to a practical dimension. Absolutely. Wisdom loses no quality and we retrieve our specific dimension. Students are not the object of teaching, they learn.

The sedimentation and deepening of this experience would not have been possible without the contribution of Professor Marta Oliveira. The present number of students and the insufficient number of teachers prevented the continuity of this experience. (fig.19)

Then, what is to design?

It seems to be, above all, to assume and then confront oneself.

Being able to design is to be able to put one before himself, to believe, to learn to overcome doubts, setbacks, to know what one wants and the means to get it. All of this, decisively, with ourselves. Know how to be alone to be able to take action with others.

Drawing as creation and as design is a means for action. This means that drawing stands between the author, the design and the concrete realization that is embodied in other materials and spaces that are not those of the drawing. Therefore drawing is not an end in itself.

Artistic research, that does not resort to quantitative or statistical means to decide the best form, should be able to global and synchronously incorporate the highest number of variables and invariables that arise within the design. And this action, in the drawing,

is never neutral. The designer produces a hierarchy or prioritizes values, references, and images that will be embedded in every circumstance of each individual project.

It is the role of drawing, when producing images that refer to ideas or images that precede other images, to state a project, to qualify a design, to define a poetic. Drawing is thus a structural and instrumental subject to designing.

Students were asked to produce a design that appears, I would say, Portuguese, i.e., inserted in the system of national production that from our point of view, having its own specificities, implies a distinctive character for our architecture.

And here arises the last topic of this complex system we invented.

For me, and here I do not pledge any of those that over time have worked with me, the mediating subject matter between the individual consciousness and the world is comprised of the national circumstances and in and through it, by the sense of being a Portuguese.

And along the course, without it being an explicit subject, we were defending a thesis on Portuguese architecture that we confirmed through the science of looking or the knowledge to see, as Bruno Zevi had taught us.

Empirically transmitted knowledge, in Portugal, comes from the experience of building having learnt the models, lacking all-encompassing support theories. Casting away the models, efficiency is sought above all else, in the case by case of circumstance.

The diversity, spontaneity and eclecticism of the Portuguese City and its Architecture spring from its ability to adapt to a given moment, lacking formal or stylistic bounds. Nevertheless it always retains a familiar feel that allows us to identify it, from India to Brazil, from Portugal to Angola, from Morocco to China or the Azores.

This same ability was the cornerstone of the Porto School.

And what about the future? I gaze it with an irrepressible and ironic doubt. (fig.20, 21)

But still, hoping everyone accompanies me, especially here in Coimbra, I believe that *"the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams"*. (Roosevelt, 2005, p.2)

20. Designing within the History of Portuguese Architecture Course, ESBAP.

21. Study tour to Convento de Cristo (Convent of Christ), Tomar.

Tradução para inglês por Manuel Montenegro.

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