

ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN SOCIAL ACTIVITY AND NON-DISCURSIVE ART: CONVERSATION WITH EDUARDO SOUTO DE MOURA

During my stays in Porto, I visited the architectural objects of Eduardo Souto de Moura. The shelves of his office contain lots of books devoted to his work. These books naturally include the objects in Porto. It makes me wonder whether these and other works belong more to the architect who designed them or to the cities and places where they are located. In philosophy, architecture is also defined as a collective art. In his text “Le Thoronet,” Souto de Moura describes architecture as a “social art” and emphasizes the importance of “collectivity” in the life of architectural objects. I have noticed that, at least in one of his lectures, he favors the term “social activity” when talking about architecture. “It is better to put quotes around the word ‘art’”—says Souto de Moura—“because I don’t consider architecture to be an art.” I ask him why.

“Art is autonomous; it does not depend on function. In art, we decide, and we are independent. In architecture, although we do decide, we are dependent because no one creates architectural work just because they feel like it: architecture is produced because there is a demand from a client who pays us. There is a problem, and just as a doctor is called when someone falls ill, so is the architect. A plot of land, a family or friend who wants to build a house, but does not know how. This is a problem, and so you call an architect.

Architecture, for me, is an activity between science and art, but it is not art. It is neither pure art nor pure science. I believe architecture follows this trajectory: there is a problem, and the architect is called. A painter, for example, needs nobody: they paint and do as they like. When they are unhappy with the work, they tear it up. When an architect makes a mistake, the trace remains, and the defects cannot be hidden. So, architecture is not an art. It has a subjective beginning; it comes into existence, and when it does, it provokes a collective reaction—either positive or negative—and when that reaction is positive,

it becomes a legacy. When it becomes a legacy, it no longer belongs to its author but to the collective, to society.”

One of the books on the shelves is *Eduardo Souto de Moura: Atlas de Parede. Imagens de Método* [*Eduardo Souto de Moura: Wall Atlas. Images of Method*], edited by André Tavares and Pedro Bandeira. I tell him that I knew he was interested in construction at sea, such as aircraft carriers or oil platforms.

“I am drawn to construction at sea because I like Le Corbusier’s idea that ‘a house is a machine for living.’ A machine, then, is not an object with the initial function to be poetic; it may become that later, like Duchamp’s urinal that becomes a fountain, but in the beginning, a machine is made to serve the community and has another function. When it stops having that function, it can become a sculpture or be whatever it wishes. I like the idea of a house as a machine, although it is later no longer merely a machine, but has a different function, perhaps an artistic one.

Architecture is not only a social “art” (with or without quotation marks), in the sense previously mentioned, but also a collective activity—teamwork in designing buildings—that involves the ability to improvise and respond to various stimuli in a timely and efficient manner. Knowing he is a jazz lover, I ask whether he sees his collaborations with other architects and members of his bureau as a sort of jazz performance.

“As for the analogy between the architect and jazz, I believe the means are different, but the goals are the same. We work with stone and concrete; jazz musicians work with sound. A jazz musician begins with a theme, repeats it, makes variations on it, and then other musicians enter (who develop and vary the theme further); it’s much the same in architecture. There is a theme (it is a program); the architect draws, then the engineers come in and often make their own variations on what the architect has drawn. So, the analogy holds. And it’s no accident that I have Miles Davis here, who used to say, ‘Leave behind the notes, liberate sound.’”

There are various jazz albums in Souto de Moura’s office. I remember spotting Enrico Rava and Stefano Bollani’s *The Third Man* in a shot

from *Reconversion*, the documentary about the architect's work, directed by Thom Andersen. Álvaro Siza describes the joint work of two architects as a jazz duet, and Souto de Moura worked with Siza.

"Yes, it can be a duet, but in the critical moment, he is the one to decide. If we agree, we make the decision together; if not, I'm not going to pretend to be important, so I say, 'Siza, let's do it your way.' Because I admire his work very much (and Siza's work rarely turns out badly), I can easily agree with him. It is like the Portuguese saying 'to write straight with crooked lines' [*escrever direito por linhas tortas*]. That happens with Siza. Or like that Albert Einstein sentence: that the shortest distance between two points in uneven space is a curve, because it must avoid obstacles. That is what I like about working with Siza – he goes slowly until he reaches the end."

In his texts, collected in *Architetti, architettura* [*Architects, Architecture*], Souto de Moura often states that he does not enjoy writing. He also says he prefers to write about others. For instance, I noticed that all the writings devoted entirely to a specific building in that book are concerned with the work of other architects (as in "Távora's Tower").

"The problem is that I am very demanding. In architecture, I work hard to make everything right, to be a good architect, because I don't have the right to make something flawed for a collective (I do in my own house, because it is mine and I will use it—it can be ugly, horrible, antisocial—but in the city, I don't have that right). That is why, when I write, I feel the duty to write well. Because I am not a writer, I struggle and worry I will write poorly. And so, I read a great many books by writers explaining how they write, because I use the same analogy for architecture as well. They write better than architects, which is why they are writers."

In some professions, the word is the principal means of creative expression, such as literature and philosophy, but not in all, as is the case of painting or sculpture—the "mute arts," as Maurice Merleau-Ponty named them. For the latter, the word is of secondary importance. The question is where the architect can be placed between these two extremes—the desire to speak and the will to be silent.

“The matter of ‘mute art’ is mostly directed at architects who speak too much,” Souto de Moura responds with a laugh, adding: “What I wish to say is that the work is what it is. No matter how many speeches you give or how much you talk about it, the work stands on its own merits. It is ‘mute’ because it says nothing on its own: you either like it, or you don’t.”

With chatterers, before you have even finished your question, they already have the answer and have been speaking for half an hour. Siza was once in Italy with an architect, a friend of mine, who asked him a question that went on for so long that Siza simply replied: ‘I’ll answer you tomorrow.’”

The work of an architect is defined by what they have designed, but also, what they have *not* designed. What I mean by this is what they have decided not to design or never had the opportunity to. A truly remarkable body of architectural objects designed by Souto de Moura has been constructed, including the metro stations in Porto, the crematorium in Kortrijk, and the hydroelectric power plant in Alijóu. What about libraries?

“I am currently working on the main library in Porto, which occupies an entire city block. It has not yet been realized—the project is ongoing, and there is currently a call for contractors. Actually, one tender has already been held, a contractor was selected, and just as the contractor was about to sign a contract—between the city and the contractor—they asked for more money. The city government rightly refused to pay more. And so, the tender was canceled, and they launched another one.”

Architecture, as a social activity, involves many actors in constant interaction, as well as many limitations, challenges, and problems. I mentioned the Hospital de Todos-os-Santos in Lisbon.

“This ended in court, and besides, it is a process I disapprove of—the so-called ‘design-construct’ [*conceção-construção*], which should more accurately be called ‘construct-design’ [*construção-conceção*], because it is the constructor and money that make the decision in the end. In the case of the Hospital de Todos-os-Santos, the project was irregular because the program required all rooms to face south, while the

rooms were oriented east-west. I filed a lawsuit but decided I didn't want to continue because I'd have to pay for lawyers, which I didn't care to do, and so I lost the case. Later, I was given the project for the hospital in Évora, which is currently under construction."

Souto de Moura wrote that Fernando Távora thought of books as friends. If books can be regarded as friends, I wondered which books he considers his closest companions—those that accompanied him throughout his life and with which he mostly gladly spends his time.

"As for architecture, I read few architectural books, because I work a great deal, and when I come home, I have already spent around eight or nine hours around architecture, and I always have papers to read and correct with me. But there are two books that have left a mark on me as an architect: *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* by Roberto Venturi and *A Scientific Autobiography* by Aldo Rossi. The book *The Architecture of the City* is also significant, but *A Scientific Autobiography* contains an old wisdom—that architecture is not made based on a single method but through a set of circumstances that lead toward something. These two books are very important.

Then, I love writers. My favorite writer is perhaps Thomas Bernhard. I'm currently reading a book about his life, but my favorite of his is probably *The Loser*. There is also Vila-Matas, a Catalan writer who is very good and has written a very small book—one that I may love the most—called *Perder teorías* [*Losing Theories*]."

I believe Italo Calvino should be included, but I steer the conversation toward philosophy. "I think that 'pure and hard' philosophy is difficult; I prefer poets who are also philosophers, like Fernando Pessoa. *The Book of Disquiet* is a book that is always by my bedside." I think of the intervention *Out Here: Disquieted Architecture* at the 2008 Venice Biennale of Architecture. I add that I remember him saying that Pessoa's book can be seen as a journal of an architect. "Indeed," he answers, "as to philosophers, I like Gilles Deleuze." When I ask why, he says: "Because he wrote a book that left a profound mark, *The Fold*, which explains Baroque and contemporary architecture very well, if we follow the analogy presented in it."

In an interview with *El Croquis*, Souto de Moura said he was interested in houses where writers and painters—discursive and "mute" or

non-discursive authors—live and work. “A house is the most conservative institution there is. My question is: why do avant-garde artists, who create new codes, shift from romanticism to realism, from realism to surrealism, and then to modernism, those who are avant-garde in their profession, live in old houses that are the opposite of avant-garde?”

I mention Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for a reason. His work is highly respected by Souto de Moura and, as he has written in a text that I will refer to soon, he collects books about him. “Yes, I have a lecture about why Mies van der Rohe never changed his house. But there are many such examples: all the painters I showed during that lecture. For example, Picasso lived in old houses only, and the more money he had, the older the houses he bought: from the 19th century, then the 18th, then the 17th, even though Picasso was avant-garde itself.”

Works can point us back to their authors. I find myself thinking about the questions of self-portrait and autobiography in relation to an architect. I ask Souto de Moura whether he regards his own buildings as self-portraits. “Do I see the buildings I designed as self-portraits?” he repeats the question. I confirm, adding that I mean abstract self-portraits. “Yes, of course; they can only be abstract, otherwise they’d have to be fat buildings,” he responds, laughing, and adds:

“But yes, perhaps self-portraits in the spiritual sense, in the sense that my style may be recognizable in the buildings I design. There are other interesting phenomena as well—like when, at the airport, I look at pictures in magazines and think, ‘This house is in Portugal,’ or photographs of exhibitions in magazines or newspapers and think, ‘This is in Porto,’ ‘This is by some architect from Lisbon.’ Yes, I can recognize that identity. Architecture has no stamp, but it has an atmosphere that we recognize.

However, I am not sure whether what I am doing can be called a self-portrait, because I change a lot. Luckily, I wouldn’t say I have a defined style. That is at least what I think, even though many claim the opposite, and it is not something I strive for. There are those who say I make all houses the same, and that all houses in Portugal have now come to resemble mine. There is even a lecture titled ‘Soutomourization of Territory.’ I don’t believe in it and have no wish to sound pretentious. I don’t care whether I have one style or ‘one’ architecture. What interests me is ‘architectures,’ in the plural.”

In a text about Thomas Bernhard, he wrote: “There are writers who believe all their books are autobiographical.” I cite his words to him. “Yes, I believe all books are autobiographical, but autobiography is not a linear movie. To understand the biography of a writer who has written an autobiography means to realize that they impose censorship; they are neither direct nor clear, it is not simple.”

An unpretentious autobiographical piece of writing by Souto de Moura—noticeably brief as well—is titled “Slightly Scientific Autobiography”—an allusion, perhaps with a touch of humor, to a work by Rossi he referenced both in his text and in this conversation. Here, he discusses certain philosophical and theoretical schools of thought that were dominant during his secondary school years and his university studies: existentialism, Marxism, and structuralism. The question of influences during this formative period naturally becomes relevant.

“I am unaware of my influences; I know only what subjects interested me. In my youth, that was existentialism, then structuralism (like Michel Foucault), then Gilles Deleuze, who somewhat challenged structuralism, some sort of post-modernity or post-post-modernity.”

I wonder what else I could have asked Souto de Moura. Maybe about the question of quotations in his architectural practice and in his texts. I am also curious about his thoughts on so-called anonymous architecture. After all, the mark of any good conversation is that it has a limit yet could be limitless.

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