



Workbook of Affinities

Updating the Grand Tour.
Memory and Invention of the
European Built Environment

The *Workbook of Affinities* comprises 7 sections that synthesise the results of the exercises undertaken by the UpGranT Consortium in the conception of a learning by travelling pedagogical model, re-empowering the Grand Tour's long-standing practice.

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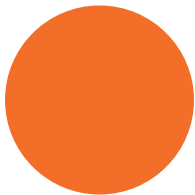
Section 3 Faculty of Architecture – University of Porto · FAUP

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Carandá Market, Braga:
urban ruin garden



4 A modern neoplastic device:
paper model.
Readings developed with Anna Lopes,
Hugo Pereira, Maria Gião, Parisa
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Travels with
Nuno Melo Sousa

– Silvia Ramos,
Helder Casal Ribeiro

Short conversations were organised with the oldest and the youngest architects from the Porto’s selection of the 10 Grand Tourists – Álvaro Siza, Eduardo Souto de Moura, and Nuno Melo Sousa.

The interview script addresses three major areas of concern – Foundational tours undertaken; Travels not realised and relevant even today; Itinerary for a contemporary Grand Tour (a suggestion for students) – to provide an updated reading on “learning by travelling” in Porto’s architecture practice.

The text for this publication was transcribed and translated from direct speech, seeking to preserve not only its meaning and intent but also its informal and spontaneous character.

“There are places I will never go. Due to laziness or boredom, or premature fatigue. But there are also landscapes or buildings I should have visited a long time ago” (Radić, 2019, p. 127).

Travel in Nuno Melo Sousa’s generation (born in 1988) is a commodity, socially available for exploration with relative ease. Portugal’s peripheral condition is no longer a decisive factor, and the distance between continents is significantly shortened.

Nuno’s curriculum clearly reveals the imprint travel has left on his personality, choices and architectural intent. For him, travel is confrontation, physical and mental, seen as an opportunity to go beyond one’s expectations, move away from one’s comfort zone. Travel is taken as a trigger to open perspectives, not to experience estrangement as an outsider, but rather to be embedded into the culture as a gateway towards personal insight or transformation.

The conversation with Nuno Melo Sousa began in the early afternoon on September 6, 2024.

1 Foundational travels undertaken
My most memorable tours are those that completely pulled the rug out from under my feet. Whenever I felt I was in a context that wasn’t natural to me or in an unexpected environment, I was constantly challenged to review my

expectations with the given reality. I had to overcome these obstacles in order to feel comfortable and at ease in that environment.

So, the first time I went out, apart from family trips to Spain, where the context was always very similar, was to England, where I attended summer camps to learn English. I remember it was quite a different atmosphere. I wasn’t studying architecture yet, and the difference I felt was in the texture. It was all made of bricks - the floor was in brick, which turned onto the wall, which was also brick.

This reality resurfaced in the Netherlands during my Erasmus. I remember being in Delft and realising that the ugly became less ugly because it was all part of the same brick mass. It was the same thing, so it seemed I forgave more. While here [Portugal], because we use different materials and there is a clear difference between the floor and wall surfaces, we are less forgiving due to the much greater contrast and complexity. So, this whole thing about the unity of material, mass, and texture had a great impact, a first learning experience.

Despite this contrast, within the logic of background and foreground, life in the Netherlands followed the same parameters as in Portugal. The shops opened at nine o’clock and closed at noon, then opened at two and closed at six.



4 Learning by
travel with...

People had routines and customs that were very similar to mine, so this way of living was very similar to what we had in Portugal. Ultimately, in terms of scale, the doors were bigger, the ceilings were higher, and the bathroom layout was different; nevertheless, everything was pretty standard. So, it wasn't exactly a shock, nor anything that would make me invert my way of doing things or think differently.

I remember, in the first semester in Delft, for example, I tried to do a project as if I was still in FAUP. So, I chose a professor who would let me maintain this natural continuity, because I didn't identify with the studio's way of thinking about the projects' plasticity.

I thought it was going to be something particular, but it wasn't, and since it didn't offer me anything I wanted to learn, I tried to be with a teacher who identified with Porto's customs, traditions, and way of being. This doesn't happen in the second semester, because I exposed myself by going to India. I consider it to be the first great travel, in which we faced a reality whose norms and ways of being, even in the public space, have nothing to do with ours. The buildings are designed in such a way that good public architecture is truly open to interpretation, change, use, and has to last. So, this is the first time I think about a building, I look at a building, and I realise that this building is designed from the ground up to absorb all the changes it will be subject to, without compromising its DNA, its basic structure. From this comes the understanding of what constitutes a good siting, a good structural metric and a good spatial composition. The building's finishing (outer shell) must be autonomous from all this. In India, the way a building is coated or cladded is very different on the first day and after four years, when it has been inhabited. So, the building has to withstand these changes and hold in terms of scale, proportion and architectural promenade, which must be independent of

the building's ornamentation or finishes. My trip to India was the first encounter with these notions.

So, India, without a doubt, because of the huge shock was a way of freeing myself from any constraints or embarrassments linked to the faculty. I would be a completely different person if I had stayed in Portugal. Then came the second phase in Asia, mainly the stay in Bangkok, because it is already a more refined Asia, as raw as India, but still with a lot of space to experiment, which liberates Architectural thought.

A first-person experience is always a first-person experience. Seeing an image, I imagine, is not the same as visiting Greater Kenya or the Pyramids of Giza. In fact, I have never visited a pyramid. I've never been to Machu Picchu either, it would also be one of those must-do trips. In fact, [Smiljan] Radić has a very beautiful text, "Every So Often a Talking Dog Appears", in which he talks exactly about what he didn't visit and what he thought about so many times that he ended up, in a certain way, visiting.

I did the same exercise with Peter Märkli's La Congiunta. I have "visited" this building many times through photographic records and plans, and I have studied the approach, the layout, the sequence of spaces, the cuts of each chamber, and I have imagined what it would be like to pass through each of those different openings. Now, visiting the building *in situ* validated an entire dreamlike space in my head. It was about conquering that space, being with the building, touching it, walking, sitting, and feeling time pass.

This experience has nothing to do with a photographic reading of the building. Especially because photographs can be very misleading, because they are not to scale, most of the time. The photographs do not capture our true interaction with the building.



Lina Bo Bardi's SESC Pompéia Factory, in S. Paulo, for example, is much more impressive, interesting and powerful *in situ* than all the images I saw. None of the images I've seen of that space actually represent it.

Another example: most of the photographs we know of the MuBE give the impression that the building is much larger than it actually is. The building is much smaller, much tighter, limited, making it quicker to walk around outside. However, when we go inside, it is surreal how much larger the spaces are than we expected.

In contrast, the Lewerentz Church is much smaller. This means that when we enter that space, it is impossible to photograph. You can guess the dynamics of the space from the sections and plans, and imagine what it will be like to walk through it, but it is entirely different to experience the building. Even arriving at the place. It seems like I've seen it I don't know how many times, but between parking, opening the trunk to get the camera, and realising which side I want to see the building from for the first time – I want to enter through the south façade, I want to go around and enter through the façade he wants me to enter through, etc – an expectation is created that transforms the perception of the building. The same happens in Dhaka with Louis Kahn or at Doshi's CEPT [University, School of Architecture], where feeling the different intensities of light, although suggested in the drawings, is completely unpredictable.

[The conversation continues with other destinations and impressions.]

2 Not realised travels
My last trip to Brazil was really a long-overdue travel that had been a fantasy of mine for many years, and in keeping with the fantasy, I didn't feel disappointed. I would also have really liked to visit Brasília and other

works, for example, by Lina Bo Bardi and, possibly, more works by Paulo Mendes da Rocha, but it wasn't easy to do. This would be a second Brazil travel, and it would also be very powerful.

There is a tour to Switzerland that I have never taken. Despite contradicting everything I've been saying, Switzerland is anything but spontaneous, informal, and ordinary. Nevertheless, I think it could also be a very powerful journey to visit the German area, to visit a series of Peter Märkli's works, a series of Rudolf Olgiati, and even some Siedlungs.

I'm very interested in this tour, even though it hasn't happened yet.

Then a good tour of Italy, which I think is something I'm missing, because my trips to Italy have always been very occasional and work-related: Rome and Milan, in other words, Italy and Greece. The classics completely passed me by. They never sparked my imagination, nor were they ever a fantasy. In fact, they never stirred me up because I have this big gap in the historical perception of architecture. I only started looking at things that interest me that are very recent, from the last 100 years, or from 4000 years ago, things that are either too archaic or too contemporary, but never classical. Interestingly, some of the things I'm doing now are maybe even classic, but I don't have that background. So, maybe it would be interesting to question this, although I'm not aware of this influence; this could be a fascinating journey. Yes, Greece and Italy could also be powerful travel destinations for me.

3 Itinerary for a contemporary Grand Tour (a suggestion for students)
I think there are two possible ways out of this issue.

One possible way is the classic route, and the other is Asia...

Some friends won a competition and went to Asia for two months. They saw all those China/Japan/Korea/Taiwan buildings that pose a challenge, everything that is the most cutting-edge in terms of structure, imbalance, anti-gravity that you can imagine. Megastructures that, today in Europe, are completely impossible to build, but in Asia have not stagnated and continue to expand – the building could fall, but it has a centre of gravity. I will give an example: Taipei with the OMA [Performing Arts Centre], Mecanoo in Taiwan [National Centre for Arts], and OMA also in Beijing with CCTV [Television Cultural Centre]. All of this is, for me, very far from anything that can be found in Europe.

This has to do with tectonics and structure, but mainly with structural experimentation that can no longer be done in Europe, even in Switzerland, because nowadays, concrete and iron are increasingly being questioned, which is why recent competitions explore wood. So, to go see everything that can no longer be done here but can still be done and experienced in Asia.

Everything has to do with mental freedom, our understanding of sustainability, awareness of scale, and what should be done and what should be changed. This may be an interesting journey, in the same way that visiting a pyramid is visiting something completely out of scale, within a certain megalomania, which allows us to truly perceive our own scale.

This is a path. It could be a very powerful journey, which has nothing to do with what is still possible to build nowadays, except for the theoretical and practical sense of the structure. It is a bit like Paulo Mendes da Rocha’s work on the “great span” within Brazilian culture. I don’t think it’s something that can be directly translated into our reality.

On the other hand, if I had to suggest a personal tour, I would say that students should see Lewerentz,

La Congiunta by Märkli, the MuBE by Paulo Mendes da Rocha [Brazilian Museum of Sculpture and Ecology], SESC in Pompéia by Lina Bo Bardi, Kahn, it’s mandatory to see Louis Kahn in Asia, and it’s compulsory to see Le Corbusier in Asia. But this is the architecture that has had the most significant impact on me. It impacted me so much that it changed me, opened so many doors and opened my mind, perhaps much more than seeing the Parthenon or Classic Grand Tour examples at school. Possibly, the visit to the Acropolis, the Parthenon, would not have had the same meaning for me as visiting these contemporary Acropolises.

●
Two months earlier, in response to the same question, Eduardo Souto Moura, like Nuno Melo Sousa, placed an authorial and personal proposal: the reproduction of the trip which Mies took with his Bauhaus students in 1933. While Siza, with a humanistic approach and affirming today’s necessary freedom of choice, placed the “whole world” as a destination hypothesis.

The interview with Nuno Melo Sousa closed on the porch of his office in Penafiel, at the end of a hot afternoon. Nuno Melo Sousa had welcomed us with a guided tour of a project under construction, Armazém Corcet, which set the tone for the conversation.

The authors thank Nuno Melo Sousa for the authenticity and generosity.

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