

LEARNING AS USUAL

NUNO LACERDA LOPES

More than a collection of projects or built works, this book seeks to describe a complete vision on the way of thinking, designing and constructing an ideal school or learning space, which we have developed over nearly two decades through various projects on different scales and, above all, with different programmes and demands.

The selection criterion stems from a narrative more connected to the perception we once held of the school than to the formal, plastic or even typological and stylistic sense of the works presented here.

It primarily reflects the learning and evolution process that we underwent regarding ways of designing and constructing schools, ways of thinking and designing teaching spaces, or even ways of fostering and intervening in processes of learning, training and the production of knowledge during a great shift in the social and cultural paradigm.

Even though there is one, it was not our intention to present the chronology created naturally by time, because in architecture the thread that binds works and buildings is always sprinkled with progress and setbacks, knots that are created and undone, experiences and tests that are designed but only validated years later, and other times are subsequently revisited and picked up. For this reason, we say that time is not linear when designing or constructing an architectural project. It is a rich process of relationships, filled with progress and setbacks, and so we do not want it as a fundamental criterion to justify a project that has been designed to be free from that time.

More than works, we speak of ideas and what is behind them, the initial desire to build, what justifies them, the programmes that generate them and also the ideas that we bring with us, which lead us to transform this desire into a built environment, in other words, we try to guide you through the unique and exclusive process which takes us from project to construction.

So we begin by revisiting a project we designed years ago when we conceived school as a market. The learning space was seen as a place for exchange, not of goods or products, but of contemplation and knowledge.

To think of a school during this process is to think of free and open spaces, spaces for sharing, places for experience and therefore for culture. It should be a place for relationships, open to meeting people, to the constant exchange of knowledge and ideas, and consequently a place that stimulates the incessant desire for change. As a result we have designed various buildings, with various programmes, with various shapes and in various contexts.

The Espinho Art and Culture Forum (FACE) is the project that best represents that ideal of a school as a space for exchange and continuous appeal to change and interaction, firstly with the surroundings and then with the multiple purposes that the ambitious and diverse programme enabled.

From the outset, the project for the Espinho Art and Culture Forum embodied the desire for new programmes for a cultural building, for a space that teaches us and is able to provoke a variety

of feelings and sensations.

We designed an open space, a revealing void, capable of combining experiences and know-how; an ideal of school which is open to the community, which could become an urban reference able to incorporate and absorb the different realities that the context always provides. And the project seeks to create continuity, to establish bridges with the past and the future; more than to design for the site or believe that architecture stems merely from the topographical location, we believe that a school is mostly a social and economic place, and as such a cultural fact.

FACE is an example of that quest, so this building restores pre-existing shapes and typologies. It is not because of the outlandish shape, nor an attempt to reuse other worn out shapes that have been fixed by time, that we intend to create new architecture. It is chiefly because of the way in which the building relates to that complex web of places and presents itself confidently, inviting in all those who bring it to life and infuse it with knowledge and culture to foster an exchange of experiences and glances, in order to encourage a reciprocal relationship of sharing and ongoing learning.

So transformation is encouraged. The goal is to transform the Museum into School, and the exhibition gallery into workshops, classrooms into meeting and dissemination hubs, the cinema into arts depot or fitness centre.

The school, the museum, the exhibition gallery, the library, the shops...their purpose is not essential, what matters is their ability to adjust to different requirements and different uses over time.

Even with this project the environment cannot be dissociated from the interior, just as the people are not. The most important thing is not to separate the building from the environment, but to acknowledge the place, the people and the surroundings, the blend, the transparency and the invitation to participate and confront ideas and generations, in a way that encourages a meeting of values, a place for the old and a place for the new, and to project a shared culture.

So FACE was intended to be a living school, a dream, a way, a desire to experiment and an attempt to construct, learn and investigate what is the real meaning of inhabiting the school. Ultimately, it conveys that architecture is progressively becoming a space for reunion, for people and sharing.

The projects for school buildings are always exhausting work and demanding on every level, especially in terms of coordinating the various specialties and its complex programme.

We always start out with the aim of interacting with the place, the territory and the people who live there, revisiting the idea of open field, of a space without walls and barriers. This would create an invitation to enjoy the space, encouraging people to walk through it, opening up the "library" to the community, the canteen to the population and the gardens to common use, thus recreating to some extent the expression and desire for continuity established in our other projects.

The landscape, the endless and sensual green, filled with light and depth, are project elements and the daily life, the proximity, the culture of the place substantiates the design and solutions. We design a school not to make sense of the world, but to make the world felt.

From the various design and construction experiences, we take away that the act of designing a school pertains essentially to the people and how they feel, how try to understand and make their world understood.

So we set out to understand how people perceive their spaces on a number of levels, be it physical, emotional, cognitive or social. Understanding what they feel, what affects them and what moves them is more than understanding what they think and what they want. To understand what a pupil feels in a school became a project method which supersedes what the pupil, the teacher and the programmer think of the school.

The way in which people interact, how relationships are forged, how networks are created, how people communicate and learn outside the classrooms, enabled us to commence research about the space of the school and the spaces for learning that the Modular Schools Project (CEM - Centro de Escolas Modulares) achieved and systematised.

Visits to countless schools and comparing countless projects led us to build assessment grids. We found innovative solutions, without preconceptions and based on what we had seen, what we had heard and especially on what children experienced and taught us.

More than training or the functional distribution into clear plans, it is space, the void that is the fundamental element for creation, for the development of new uses, different appropriations; in other words, space is the prime motivator for action and, therefore, the element that provokes better learning. A space that raises issues, makes us question, ask why (?), a spaces that shows us differences in textures, colours, times, ages, beauty, light and shadow, that provides us with an open or segmented vision, that provokes us...these are the spaces we try to create, spaces that long for people's interaction with life.

The CEM project was a research project we began within the CNLL, as we were concerned with the way in which architects perceived schools: as buildings that fulfilled a programme, a framework of areas and occupation ratios, where the only differentiating element was the concept.

For three years we created the innovation and technological development nucleus, and we studied schools, production processes, areas and costs, we experimented with processes, we heard stories, we created environments and prototypes, and above all we interacted with users, the people, observing them and listening to them, learning about their cultures, their feelings, their motivations and their fears.

Without a commission, without land and without a specific client, we created an innovation and research line, a nucleus which grew and recently led us to accreditation, according to norm NP 4457:2007 - Research, Development and Innovation. A long, lengthy and lonely process to change habits and pre-conceived ideas about what a project is, what research is and what it means to innovate in Portugal at the beginning of the 21st century, particularly in Architecture and Innovation ateliers.

During the course of this research, a modular constructive system was developed. It incorporated the various cycles, creating more than just schools, learning centres, which further guaranteed the autonomy of each school stage. This solution that comprises programme and constructive system is still being implemented, attesting to the adaptability of the application this system to different social, physical and geographic realities. This line of research brought an economy of time and resources to projects, by reusing previously investigated shapes, i.e. modules, which can be linked differently according to the school, adapted and scaled to suit its specific needs.

This research is based on an awareness of the social responsibility that a project of this nature incurs. Moreover it has the conviction that, rather than a place for the transmission of

knowledge comprising technical data imposed by current culture, the school should become a place where it is possible to experience true learning, through a constant exchange of knowledge between students and teachers that generates creativity, thought and intelligence.

To achieve this, architecture must play a key role as an integral part of education: teaching behaviours; educating about art; ranking uses and users; representing methodologies and social, political and religious beliefs; freeing or restricting; encouraging creativity and intelligence, all within a multiplicity of roles and possibilities. So we feel that the School should accompany the evolution of society, every community and each individual, and thus should be something new and contemporary that responds globally to society's wishes and individually to the anxieties and needs of each child.

It was the municipality of Paredes, led by its president Dr Celso Ferreira and vice-president Dr Pedro Mendes, that was quick to recognise and support all this research work to modernise the process of designing and constructing new schools and new ways of inhabiting and perceiving the School. Through sustained collaborative work and continued active participation in designing projects, it was possible to develop new solutions and build a new set of schools which this book must showcase and especially pay due homage to.

A vision of the future, a strong investment in education as an economic force, combined with the practical side of implementing new projects, the compliance and search for implementing new ideas, associated with a strong ability and motivation to work, with the clear goal of transforming the social fabric of a population with alarming dropout rates, led the Paredes Municipality to develop various studies with a view to solving core problems that could jeopardise the future and, consequently, the development of new schools that could become the agents that change the normal course of History.

Accordingly, the schools designed and built in Paredes, and presented here, are of clear relevance to this work. They are not merely expressions of an architectural project. They are an example of the process of shared and participatory work that was performed in tandem with the municipality, with a view to improve resources and adapt solutions for the ideal future that these projects seek to illustrate.

Rebordosa is my hometown. It is where I spent my childhood and, until the age of 10, lived in front of the S. Marcos school. From there I moved to Espinho, which became my other umbilical town. I have good memories of Rebordosa, my roots are there, my first lessons and I especially remember that active environment that taught me to see, to do and to act in order to build a new world. I have good references of these strong and strong-willed people, the best friends and the best discoveries which, beyond childhood, made me a happy being. This is why the Rebordosa school followed a certain plan, around a central courtyard, perhaps different in shape or materialisation but not in the conviction that a school is much more than the organised sum of classrooms. It is the true expression of a longing for interaction and experimentation that a school should provide.

The Gandra school was also designed as small modules that are contorted around a central courtyard, adapting themselves to the site, and so generates a novel solution aimed at action and continuous discovery. The Mouriz school has become a true icon for this project, as well as the Vilela and Baltar ones, or even the Marco School. They are more than innovative solutions, they seek to show the different visions and the different responses that design, construction and architecture can give to specific problems, for specific people and situations, which is in essence what we most want to understand and investigate. Throughout all the projects herein presented, this is the theme, a theme of humanity and experimentation.

Today's school prepares the future and the men of tomorrow and, we once wrote, it is for them that the school should be designed. A child's world is one of imagination and play, but also of knowledge and persistent questioning. For this reason we believe that characteristics like encouraging creativity and increasing people's endless ability to learn should be nurtured and fostered through the space of the school, by probing and raising questions.

The projects presented here purely seek to be a graphic expression of our way of seeing and being in the world, and thus merely seek to be the materialisation of these questions which have no concrete or definitive answer. In our view, it is up to architecture to stimulate and develop abilities, provoke feelings...volitions and, if it does, we think that it has done its job.

This is our objective - there is no other - when we go from Project to Construction.

N. Lacerda Lopes, "*Learning as Usual*" in P. Botelho e R. Afonseca (coord.) "Learning" ed. Transnética, Porto, 2012, p. 7-14. ISBN 978-989-97480-5-7.