

## **EXCAVATING AIR**

**On Manuel y Francisco Aires Mateus**

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## EXCAVATING AIR

I quoted a Nazarene proverb when I first wrote about the architecture of the Aires Mateus brothers (1): "To make a house, you grab a handful of air and you hold it together with a few walls". That is nothing more and nothing less than what these architects do in all their works: hold the air together.

Their latest work in construction, the very brilliant Park Hyatt in Dublin, is no more and no less than a ramp to fill each and every one of its rooms with air and with the air, light. Like a puzzle of light and shade. Or better said, like a solid that has been excavated piece by piece, hole by hole.

Because that is the line our architects have followed in their latest projects. It would seem as though they always excavated a solid seeking interstices to inject light in a mysterious way.

If all the air and light inundated the spaces of their marvelous house in Alenquer, in their latest works, it seems as if they wanted to compress it, to tense the light even more with darkness, with shadow.

The latest houses are all a collection of boxes full of boxes, as if they were a set of Russian *matriuskas* (wooden dolls within dolls). Although the comparison is valid rhetorically, it doesn't work here because the fundamental thing about the spatial operations the Aires Mateus brothers create is precisely the air "between" the contained boxes and the containing box. In the same spirit as that with which Bernini placed the baldachin of San Pedro in order to resolve that excessively large and vague space, so that it remained gloriously tensed.

The house in Alvalade, a box full of little boxes, of full and empty spaces; the house in Alentejo, simpler; or the house in Setúbal, where the play becomes more sophisticated, hanging the pieces from high in an almost sculptural dance. And then, the houses of Sesimbra, of Arrabida and of Alcacer, like a waterfall of Bach's Goldberg Variations on a theme.

Two larger projects, the Sines Cultural Center and the headquarters of the Metropolitan Orchestra of Lisbon also pose the issue of the boxes, this time in a major tone. In both, we find the precision and suggestiveness of concatenated spaces.

Still very young, Manuel 40 and Francisco 39, in full maturity, are ready to take on the world. Their enthusiasm when they showed me the box in Alenquer was parallel to that which imbues their architecture with a will to stay.

I was a member of the jury for the Luigi Cosenza European award in its first year in a general nature after the disappearance of the Palladio award. The decision was unanimous when we awarded the University Residence in Lisbon, designed by the Aires Mateus brothers.

There is a high degree of abstraction in all of their architecture, as if they didn't need details. Then, seen in person, these works are full of "silent" details that only strengthen the principal operation.

They always define the limits very well. It is a precise architecture. It is not that of a spider's web, more mysterious and cautious, as Siza imagined. These Portuguese architects are younger, more daring, and more radical. They move in another area of that wide sea of good contemporary Portuguese architecture, marking their own territory.

They are clearer. They do not take place as reference in order to adapt to it; rather they take it as an ingredient of this new product (as they say, a material of the project).

In João Belo Rodeia's magnificent analytical text about them, he points out rightly: "The most interesting thing about their work is that the object of experimentation and what they seek are clearly disciplinary, thus challenging the current of national normality and international effervescence". I believe the position is so clear, so well described by Belo Rodeia that we could almost apply it to all of the worthy young architects that are presented in this publication.

It is the same international effervescence and national normality from which Mies and Le Corbusier escaped so effectively in their time. A Mies who made a small pavilion that is all that has remained of that Universal Exposition in Barcelona almost a century ago, as opposed to all the tremendous pavilions of the "effervescent" internationalism of that period. Or the small pavilion of "L'Esprit Nouveau" by Le Corbusier for the "Art Decoratif" Exposition in Paris in 1925 where something simple took place.

Our young Portuguese architects do not take on, again in Belo Rodeia's words, "the superfluous robes of the contemporary". They are of our time and are imbued in our time, but they are not slaves to fashion. They try and they succeed in holding time, in remaining, and with them, in making their architecture remain.

Alberto Campo Baeza