

DIGGING THE AIR

About the Architecture of Manuel and Francisco Aires Mateus

PUBLISHED IN

10X10. Ed. Phaidon. Londres, 2005

Pensar con las manos. Ed. Nobuko. Buenos Aires, 2009

DIGGING THE AIR

About the Architecture of Manuel and Francisco Aires Mateus

I quoted a Nasrid proverb when I first wrote about the architecture of the Aires Mateus brothers: "To build a house you take a handful of air and hold it with walls". Well, it is nothing more and nothing less than that, holding the air, what these architects do in all their works.

His latest, very brilliant work in construction, the Park Hyatt hotel in Dublin, is nothing more and nothing less than a ramp to fill the air, and with the air of light, each and every one of its rooms. Like a puzzle of light and shadow. Or rather, like a solid that is excavated piece by piece, hole by hole.

Because that is the line in which our architects find themselves in their latest projects. It seems as if they were always excavating a solid capable of looking for interstices to introduce the light in a mysterious way.

If in the marvelous house in Alenquer all the air and light flooded its spaces, in the last works it seems that they wanted to compress it, as if tightening even more the light with the darkness, with the shadow.

The last houses are all a collection of boxes full of boxes. As if it were a game of Russian matriuskas. And although the figure is rhetorically valid, it is not valid here because what is fundamental in the spatial operations of the Aires Mateus is precisely the air "between" the contained boxes and the container box. In the same spirit with which Bernini placed the baldachin of St. Peter's to resolve that too large and faded space. And so it was gloriously stretched.

The house in Alvalade, a box full of little boxes, of full and empty pieces; the house in Alentejo, simpler; or the house in Setúbal, where the game becomes more sophisticated by hanging the pieces up high in a quasi-sculptural dance. And then the houses in Sesimbra, Arrabida and Alcacer, like a cataract of Goldberg-like Bachian variations on the same theme.

Two major projects, the Sines Cultural Center and the headquarters of the Lisbon Metropolitan Orchestra, raise, this time with a major tone, the theme of boxes. In both, the precision and the suggestion of concatenated spaces.

Still very young, Manuel 40 and Francisco 39, are in their prime, ready to take on the world. Their enthusiasm when they showed me the Alenquer box was matched by the enthusiasm they breathed into their architecture with a desire for permanence.

I was on the jury of the European award Luigi Cosenza in its first general call after the disappearance of the Palladio. The opinion was unanimous when we awarded the Aires Mateus University Residence in Lisbon.

There is a great degree of abstraction in all their architectures. As if there was no need for details. Then live they are full of "silent" details that only enhance the main operation.

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

They are sharper. They do not take the place as a reference to adapt to it, but as an ingredient (project material, they say) for that new product.

In a magnificent analytical text that João Belo Rodeia writes about them, he points out with certainty: "The most interesting thing about their work is that the object of experimentation and what they aspire to, are clearly disciplinary in defiance of the current of national normality and international effervescence". I think the position is so clear, so well described by Belo Rodeia that we could almost apply it to all the valuable young architects that appear in this publication.

That same international effervescence and national normality from which Mies and Le Corbusier escaped so well at the time. A Mies who makes a small pavilion that is the only thing that has remained of that Universal Exposition of Barcelona almost a century ago, compared to so many tremendous pavilions of the "effervescent" of that time. Or the small pavilion of "L'Esprit Nouveau" by Le Corbusier for the "Art Decorativ" Exhibition in Paris in 1925 where something similar happened.

Our young Portuguese architects do not adopt, again in the words of Belo Rodeia, "superfluous contemporary clothing". They are, they soak up, of our time but do not allow themselves to be dragged along by fashions. They try, and they succeed, to retain time, to remain, and with them, to make their architecture remain.