THE INVENTION OF PROBLEMS
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[CONTEXT]
Architecture sometimes recovers an iconic and representative function to move a message endowed with a social or cultural dimension that quickly spreads through the media. Architectural images arise that act as an expression of a state of opinion or an ideological trend that needs to be seen, identified and recognised. As a result, these images are subjected to the effort of having to cross frontiers and be internationalised, but they are also trivialised, plagiarised and constantly repeated.

The interpretation of Eduardo Souto de Moura's work —not his work as such—has often been conditioned by the consumption of its extraordinary dissemination. This has promoted two overlapping but nevertheless distant and even contradictory arguments: one operative and the other disseminatory. The latter tends towards the simplification found in media techniques and, superimposed on his work, has concealed some of his qualities from view.

To make the claim that we live in a consumer society is probably not original, but that does not make it any less true. Consumption involves unthinking, voracious expenditure; the unnecessary, excessive use of an object, an idea or a resource. In this particular case, the immediacy of consumption and publicity have turned a deaf ear to the messages broadcast by this architect who, while admittedly somewhat aloof from critical literature, has built up a fragmentary discourse that can be used as a guide to break down the threat posed by clichés of imposing an excessive 'consensus', or at least to plant a seed of doubt. For what other reason would he state that "our gaze is similar to the gaze of flies- through multiple perspectives"? 1

In contrast, Souto de Moura's operative discourse —which describes the production mechanisms and techniques of his architecture— is not open to simplification. The search for a phenomenological synthesis, the construction of perfect, crack-free images that conceal their difficulties and the severe self-limitation of the elements that enter into play in each game are same of the unequivocal signals that trace the tensions underlying the appearance of things.

For its disciplinary character and its tortuous precision —"I think, with a small dose of masochism, that my best projects arise from the ones that I stumble on most easily"—2 Souto de Moura's architecture is caught between the contradictory concepts of authenticity and simulation. Beneath the apparent naturalism of continuities, the architect voluntarily limited to the tools provided by architecture —his sole, obsessive field of interest—, has built up a complex system of ambiguities and appearances.

All Portuguese architecture has suffered to a greater or lesser extent from the consequences of this simplifying 'consensus', whose source and responsibility partly reside on the reduction of Critical Regionalism to a set of slogans, once again, for the sake of consumption. Historic reasons based on Portugal's political circumstances and economic delays helped to preserve, until quite recently, typological patterns, building traditions and trades relatively undisturbed in both urban and rural contexts. Their absorption into Álvaro Siza's characteristic pragmatism and eclectic proposals led to a snapshot image: in Portugal, miraculously, tradition and modernity did not clash.

The proponents and defenders of Critical Regionalism believed that in Portuguese architecture they had found an example of a balance between the functional, technological and material requirements of contemporary architecture and the most efficient knowledge of local tools and techniques to resolve the specific problems of each context: climatic efficiency, economy of construction and conflict-free continuity in the landscape and in scale. This resolved two conflicts at the same time: on the one hand, it offered a solid, critical operative alternative to the expanding post-modern trend while on the other, it built up a discourse which, although linked to modernism, was sufficiently independent and critical of it to justify its validity. As a consequence, the paradoxical, rhetorical statement by Fernando Tavora that, "The more local, the more universal", ceased to bewilder people.

Local protocols were raised to the status of the last bastions of resistance, not only to the homogenising internationalism that had characterized the modern project but also to the historicist eclecticism and the cynicism of those 'post-modern' years. More interestingly, these local protocols ultimately mediated in the binary discourse between homogeneity and localization that reappeared in the globalisation controversy.

However, this critical tool, so apparently akin to the specificities and the idiosyncrasies of each case, confronts us with excessively general statements and is, as a result, a collection of odds and ends. This forces us to begin from scratch, project by project, proposal by proposal.

[SIMULATION]
In the shadow of this recently discovered 'modern authenticity', under the influence of contextual regionalism, many different idiosyncrasies sheltered, like the work of Schindler, Lewerentz and Barragán. But Eduardo Souto de Moura's as well, inseparably associated with the Portuguese landscape and the manipulation of traditional building systems.

In his case, authenticity is shaped as a complex discourse that branches successively only to return and question its own self. There is a disciplinary authenticity, built on the defence of congruence as the procedure most akin to architecture. There is a material authenticity, employed as an idea and as image, which characterizes the patio houses

that he built from the outset of his career. There is also an environmental authenticity, linked to the techniques of blending with the surroundings but only when they are 'natural like a ruin'. (Is this not a paradox?)

"I am interested in ruins- that is what I like most about architecture, because they are the natural state of a work…" 3

A ruin is a footprint from the past, a vestige, and the trace of foregone action that ensures continuity with the new. However, as the 18th century English picturesque tradition suggested, it also announces a desire to add and not erase, to maintain control, albeit imperceptibly. Ultimately, it introduces the use of a more complex operative system, which is sometimes seen as order and form but other times is camouflaged as pre-existence or context.

Naturalization, like authenticity, cannot be the result of a search. However, its strategic simulation permits a balance between the disciplinary techniques of connection and fragmentation or between continuity and difference, while fully understanding that the architecture and its surroundings are approached as a single entity, at least in disciplinary terms. Both architecture and environs are built using the same techniques for the same purpose: to build up a single balance. They are only differentiated in their degree of visibility, in their desire to make their presence felt or imperceptible, formal or environmental.

Souto de Moura's architecture thus develops a strategy with a congruence that is not explicit, whose naturality is constructed and whose authenticity is simulated. Could it possibly be any other way?

The house in Moledo do Minho is a paradigm of the way that these techniques are implemented, although many of his other works could also be used as an example. In this case the repetitive, anonymous plan seems immediate: a kitchen, a sitting/living room, three bedrooms and two bathrooms along a straight corridor. On top, a concrete slab "as if it had fallen from the sky ".4 Around it, a landscape built using embankments and ruins of an anonymous agricultural past. Up to this point, what is in view? And what about the things that are not in view but are nevertheless present? Let's identify the structure, for example. What holds up the slab? With the pillars gone, both glass frontages freed of the need to mediate with the supports, the space becomes more isotropic, it loses frontality and the house is trapped, symmetric, as an intermediate state between the valley and the rock. Claiming as of right an independent, longitudinal condition, transparency increases in proportion to the lightness gained by the slab. The glass box model imposes on the room architecture: the plan is not literally free, but the idea of a continuous open space roams around and is finally stated efficiently.

Take the entrance for example. Its carefully camouflaged situation is hard to guess. This permits continuous, uniform longitudinal glass walls with sliding frames that accentuate their perception as autonomous

planes. It also strengthens its nature as an envelope that tends to disappear, to go unnoticed. Detached from the idea of enclosure or facade, it avoids any frontality and imposes tangency- a foreshortened perception.

Another example is the multiple confusions between things and the images of things. Some are known, like the confusion propitiated between walls and furniture, between what is fixed and what is mobile, in order to promote the idea of the free plan. Others are evasive, like the difference between the two glass planes: the one overlooking the valley is more solid and material, built in wood, interested in marking a psychological boundary; the other is lighter, metallic and in the colour of the stone, able to dematerialise and disappear or reflect the exterior and interiorise the carved rock. Equal yet different, they state and deny the longitudinal symmetry introduced by the architecture between the valley and the rock.

Finally, there is the confusion between its open, transparent vocation on the one hand and its intensified palette of comfortable, sheltering materials on the other. Is it a lookout or a refuge? Our suspicion is confirmed. All the components at the scene are liable to suffer transformation from architecture. The house wants to interiorise the landscape, it depends on the landscape, it spreads through it, it wants to be part of it. So the landscape, the surroundings, should be rebuilt, or perhaps we should say simply construed. Benched walls, horizontal platforms, voids in the bare rock, tree plantations, graded hillsides, etc. They are all part of the same problem, and everything should be given the appropriate shape to construe the appearance of balance- the image of naturality. Yet for the same reason, not everything should be seen to be the same or have the same presence.

The architecture ensures control through a particular internal congruence for each occasion, legible as a figure, as geometry and as repetition, apparently making each work an independent entity striving for an aesthetic self-sufficiency that draws it towards modernity and away from us. This is not, however, the only form of control. It actually goes further to also build up a context with the same precision as the building, even with the same tools. Naturalising architecture and artificializing the surroundings are the same thing; two simulation operations to construct reality.

If that is so, we should begin to speak of context and localization in a different, less linear and innocent way. It is not for nothing that we now know that, today, the universal is the simulation of the local and that authenticity is a taste.

So we should not be surprised to find that when Souto de Moura´s projects are moved to consolidated urban contexts —the Housing and Office building in Maia, the Apartments on Rua do Teatro or the Three dwellings on Liege Square— his architecture is left bare, its independence becomes obvious and its uniform, ruled order is exposed. In the absence of an enveloping environment that can be manipulated and built ad hoc or a phenomenological and environmental framework that can establish a symbiotic mirror relationship with the buildings, the abstract volumes

arise powerfully, now evidencing their trust in the congruence of the structure and forms identified by precise boundaries, with figures that reveal a closed geometry quite removed from ambiguity and contradiction.

"One of the advantages of the Dom-ino structure is that it can be completed on the outside in accordance with the figurative intentions of each architect" 5

  In the city, architecture is faced with a fragmentary, incomplete context that is manifested as a conflict, an unequivocal expression of modernity. And with that same contemporaneous character, the conflict regurgitates in the form of operative pragmatism, paradoxically making simulation unnecessary precisely where it was conceived and reproduced: in the city. In its place, we are offered representative images of an articulated, assembled order.

[CONSTRUCTING PROBLEMS]
"When everything seems to develop untroubled, Álvaro Siza invents difficulties, he creates a degree of drama; if not, the dust-covered models turn grey ". 6

These words by Souto de Moura are obviously intended to help us understand Álvaro Siza's work process. In Siza's work, however, we can detect an ability to coincide with an untroubled world. We could call it naturality, pragmatism or talent. The fact is that his architecture moves away from the concepts of resistance to become part of disparate environments without any apparent difficulty, or at least able to redeem and absorb such difficulty, hiding it from view.

In spite of his architecture's white abstract imagery, it avoids conflict as a principle: it converses with local traditions through invention, with institutions through a civic monumentality, with the landscape through the modern techniques of figuration and fragmentation, and with the production system in general, profitably accepting the available conventional systems (structural, technical and building).

"The apparent simplicity of images always forces tortuous solutions, massacres of vegetation and alterations to materials. How can it be that the same internal wall reaches the exterior with the same appearance?" 7

In contrast, Souto de Moura's architecture can only be regarded as a meditation on our discipline; as a discourse on architecture. That is why it is interesting to ask how and why such opaque, precise work, —so tortuous, as he calls it— is capable of producing such accessible, balanced images that are so apt for dissemination amongst a much wider audience.

The practice of architecture is not just concerned with the solving of specific, functional, construction, financial and technical problems, and also with the need to test the tools that are specifically his, proving their effectiveness, operativity and flexibility. Souto de Moura's working technique is thus accompanied by constructed difficulties and self-imposed limitations.

The exercise of architecture is the exercise of its ideas, the proof that it is a system of knowledge and analysis of the parcel of human activity devoted to the production of material reality and the human habitat. This exercise, this practice, should have feedback and reflect on itself as a discipline and a method, as a technique and as a tool.

How else can we explain so many exercises of virtuosity and planimetric control? For Souto de Moura, the plan is like a chessboard in which regulated movements happen one after another to display different regulating strategies, to defeat the problem, to resolve it. Also like chess, however, once each problem or each game is proposed, it can be resolved in myriad ways- in as many ways as one can imagine within the framework of the chessboard and its rules.

A good example can be found in the Apartments on Liege Square, with three overlapping floors that are adapted and modified to the sequence of positions of the apartment entrance doors: to the right on the first floor, to the left on the second floor and in front on the third floor. Like a chessboard, each floor manifests a potential strategy for a single game, and the same problem is resolved several times, on each floor, as variations in a virtuoso technique, a complex, standardised method. This disciplinary vocation, this interest in resolving specifically architectural problems —an area of knowledge that, while not the only one, belongs to architects— is obviously not sufficient. Although it is not nice to say this, architecture resolves problems to the same extent as it creates them. That is why it is a form of world knowledge, one of many ways of approaching it.

If we do not accept this hypothesis, it is harder to understand the production process in the Braga Municipal Soccer Stadium, for example. Built against the stone wall of the Monte Castro quarry, its architecture accumulates a sequence of decisions that are worth listing and analysing. Its forty metre height mediates between the level of town and the northward-spreading natural esplanade forged by the Cávado River flats. The main public access is from the north, through a car park esplanade whose dimensions are controlled by a grid plantation of birch trees. The Stadium is approached diagonally from the esplanade, up a gentle rise, accompanied by a foreshortened lateral view. The Stadium can be understood from this perspective as a concave recipient, like an open vessel, revealing the interior space and the shell around it at the same time.

As we go up the gentle rise, the foreshortening turns into a frontal view of the north grandstand's concrete structure. When we look at the concrete screens, they lose their structural nature for the benefit of the monumental composition of a facade whose form balances between classical order and modern repetition.

However, this initial impression is soon questioned by a number of nuances that obliquely suggest new interpretations: the existence of fictitious stairs at the ends; the instability of the support platform, substantially inclined as if it were 'natural land'; the presence of multiple ramps on variable, contradictory angles that question the presence of a base and prevent us from getting closer to the 'portico';

or its disturbing forward slant as a consequence of its function as a counterweight for the tensed roof- proving that we are not looking at the frontal plane of a facade but at a structural artefact.

The ramps, arranged like piano keys, finally materialise the instrumental filter character given to this frontage. Some, the even numbers, rise gently to lead us to the north grandstand that rises before our eyes. Others (the odd numbers) descend just as gently to take us to the south grandstand beneath the playing field, through a hypostyle hall with the same dimensions as the field situated immediately above.

Incrusted in the rock, deliberately inaccessible on account of the lateral piers, the spectators arriving through the main entrance have to bypass the football field, going under it to reach the south grandstand. This route leads us to the excavated wall of rock which, like a labyrinthine cave, rises upwards, pierced by pillars, stairs, lifts and independent washroom cores; a cave that is bounded indiscriminately by the rock wall and the concrete slab of the south grandstand, now behind our backs. We thought we had entered but once again we find ourselves outside, or possibly below.

The artificial green playing field is displayed powerfully, rectangular and flat when seen from the steep slopes of both grandstands. Now surprisingly symmetrical and facing each other like mirror images, they powerfully dominate the pitch, extending their limits along the taut cantilevered roof. This makes the presence of the two open lateral wings all the more present as empty spaces and as natural land —although in fact it is not natural at all—, exaggerating, contrasting with the precise, repetitive geometry of the concrete grandstands.

This visual conflict between the formal and geometric rotundity of the Stadium and the shapeless natural walls finally discovers a point of synthesis in the taut roof. Its cables, sagging under the weight, are able to camouflage their repetitive sequence in the changing texture of the surrounding landscape.

Finally, we discover that the Stadium also has a top access, from the city, and that the frontal symmetry of the grandstands is supplemented with the horizontal symmetry of the entrances: in spite of its nature as an obstacle imposed against the slope, the gap between the concrete and the rock lets us take an upward or downward path that dodges the Stadium and shows it to us from behind and from in front. In the manner of an architectural promenade, this *bypass* makes the suite of techniques and mechanisms that permit the construction of the artefact visible.

Once again, his architecture is construed as a system of overlapping discourses that are intertwined but nevertheless independent from each other. Some are aimed at instrumentalising solutions to specific problems; others just ask questions.

But what would happen if we were to infect soccer with theatre scenography?

1 "We view things like flies- through multiple perspectives. It is like that, and we have to adapt to this factual atomisation of cultural messages. It is so irresistible and devouring of our own time, the one in which we think, in which we receive, that it is a message without a subject- pure flow of everybody and nobody at the same time. Halting that flow, recovering our ability to judge it, is not only a way to resist our dissolution in it, but also of being free. That is going to be increasingly difficult, and so being an architect is going to be increasingly enthralling ". Eduardo Souto de Moura. Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 2004. P. 365.

2 Eduardo Souto de Moura. Op. cit., P. 214

3 Mónica Daniele. Bibliographic interview with Eduardo Souto de Moura, December 2002. Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 2004. Pg. 436

4 Project description.

5 Eduardo Souto de Moura. Op. cit., p. 215.

6 Eduardo Souto de Moura. Op. cit., p. 61.

7 Eduardo Souto de Moura. Op. cit., p. 93.