

## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN

Ricardo Bak Gordon and Ricardo Carvalho

**Ricardo Carvalho** The plastic artist Robert Smithson used to say that a building in construction is like an inverted ruin. This idea suggests a relationship between time and architecture that is not quite exactly the one we usually recognise in the contemporary architecture that is more global.

**Ricardo Bak Gordon** Architecture's fundamental time is a time of non-urgency. This idea of inverted ruin is very interesting, it is similar to a remark an Italian friend of mine made, saying that our projects are looking for timelessness. There are some themes in architecture and in construction that have a long and gradual evolution in time. In domestic architecture there are a lot of aspects that haven't changed that much. Some ways and manners of living, inhabiting and building have crossed centuries and show that, today, there is still room for continuous reflexion.

The themes we are interested in investigating are not related to an urgency or an obsessive chase of the idea of contemporaneity. They are related to the way we look at the living landscape, at the way of inhabiting it and, in the end, to the human experience that, to us, is the first reason for architecture. To me the idea of continuity in time is more interesting than the idea of urgency. It's about accompanying and rewriting the way we see man's relationship with the world.

**RC** When you won the competition for the Residence of the Portuguese Embassy in Brasilia, in 1996, there were some critical interpretations showing some connexion between your generation and the modernist architecture. That project is closer to the subject "palace", which crosses centuries in various shapes, expressions and materials, than to a superficial reading of the heroic modernism. We could say that the Residence could have several functional uses and won't be captive of its type. This leads us to conclude that, in your work, the programme is not an objective but a pretext to investigate a certain subject. Is it in fact so?

**RBG** That project, which in fact are two – Brasilia I (1995) and Brasilia II (2003) – has several possible readings. In both of them there is, in fact, the idea of palace as a representation of the scale associated with the dignity of the programme. The objective of the programme was to create a building that would be at the same time a representation and a symbol, but would also maintain an intimate, cosy and domestic environment.

The first project was a box contaminated with *proto-fashion* images that informed our work during that period. This box was built as a steel structure opened to the bad weather, capable of holding a large amount of plants that would generate a microclimate, as a response to the harsh weather of the Brazilian central plateau. We didn't think at the time, and I still don't, that there were reasons not to respect

the dominant forms of pure geometry. The urban fabric of Brasilia doesn't suggest contrasting geometries.

**RC** You are interested in the expressive, building and typological elementarity that acquired great strength in Brazilian architecture. However, some architecture critics relate this interest in your work to modernism, they even use the term *neo-modern*. Do you identify yourself with this interpretation?

**RBG** I am a bit reluctant in accepting the labels used to catalogue architecture and other cultural practices.

There's a group of subjects in Brazil that really fascinate me. What seemed essential in that culture is the power of cultural freedom. By freedom I mean not being limited by any kind of dogma and, at the same time, being independent to produce with few resources. I remember some of the experiments made by the initiative "Arte Cidade", of São Paulo, where artists and architects worked with the local populations. Brazilian architecture really possesses a building and material essentiality, which is able to show the strength of a gesture – a conceptual attitude. The charm is in the joining of multiculturalism with the internationally modern and not in copying the modernist reasoning. There is still a lot of room in architecture to reflect about this elementarity, present in Brazilian culture. This architecture is opposed to another one, extremely elaborate, from Central Europe, which influences the contemporary Portuguese context, probably producing some distress caused by the differences in the methods used.

**RC** Between your first work, the House in Cabo da Roca (1993), and a most recent project, the Twin Houses, in Algarve's leeward side (2003), there is a clarification process of what is really essential in a work of architecture. In the House in Cabo da Roca, a solid standing on a platform, you used wood on the outside, an epidermal element. While in the project for the Twin Houses, in Algarve, everything is subjected to the logic of the mass that builds the volume.

**RBG** The house in Cabo da Roca, made with Carlos Vilela Lúcio, is the first work we built, which shows some anxiety and some lack of knowledge of what it is to clog a specific architectural thought. Maybe that is the reason why our fundamental worries weren't made completely clear. The subject still present from this first project is the relationship with the place. I haven't been able to make architecture yet without relating the closest place with the place seen as the vaster territory.

The Twin Houses, in the Algarve's mountains, were drawn by an artist with a very strong personality, which helped in creating a discussion atmosphere about what it is to build a house. The result is a project that can be interpreted as elementary. Compared to the House in Cabo da Roca, the reading of the territory is more affirmative now. These two houses are built against nature, as two observation pillars of human affirmation.

**RC** They're more *primitive*.

**RBG** Yes, *primitive*. They want to reinterpret, in an anthropological way, why some people build their houses on high spots, on the top of hills, to create a relationship, apparently endless, with the territory (domain and protection at the same time).

**RC** There has been a lot of investigation about the mixing of the vernacular architecture's legacy and the legacy of the historical vanguards. The initial work of Álvaro Siza was profoundly moulded by this dialectic reading to such an extent that there still exists in Portugal a confrontation between vernacular and modern. I mentioned this because of the House in Boliqueime (2002), a project that has two possible readings. The first one is assuming you would be interested in this vernacular legacy when you drew it. The second one is the denial of the first. A comment.

**RBG** Due to the inefficient urban management in Algarve there were several mistakes that were turned into some kind of truth. This house is not intended as a revival of the values of traditional architecture, but as an alert cry due to the complete dysfunction of this territory. By its display in the landscape, and because it stands between the most ill-treated Algarve and the mountains, we tried to investigate how to achieved an architecture that would be sensitive to the landscape. We didn't limit this investigation to the Algarve, we tried to include the Mediterranean basin. I am interested in these southern architectures that work as a contrast to nature. It's what I think it's worth bringing into the contemporary discussion.

**RC** You mentioned the idea of "going against nature", which reminded me of a book by a contemporary historian, Jacques Barzum, who said that *primitivism* was one of the most important subjects in the history of western culture in the last five hundred years. In moments of crisis, of questioning of civilization values, this *primitivism* shows itself, usually linked to the search for truth, without any influence, using very elementary formalizations in the field of cultural and artistic practices.

**RBG** If we ask ourselves which are the final objectives of our work as architects, we will probably conclude that we want to increase the reading of places. The changing of a place through architecture is very old. No matter how different the subject tendencies are, there is always a will to increase the meaning of a certain place. The idea of working "against nature" has to do with the will to add, in an artificial way, certain meanings to certain places. I am particularly interested in the living experience of architecture. Architecture should not be used only as a means of producing philosophical experiments and reflections.

**RC** Basically you're speaking of including daily life in architecture, avoiding the complete conditioning of the way of inhabiting. Jacques Herzog said in an interview, about the work of the artist Donald Judd, that he was not interested in

the bauhausian view of reality. The modernist ambition, full of cultural determinism, of scale control, from the city to the doorknob, doesn't seem to be an aspect of your work.

**RBG** I'm sure that the detail is an essential aspect of architecture. But, in any case, I'm more interested in the evolutionary ability of the relationship between the user and architecture itself.

What fascinates me in the work of Herzog & de Meuron is their ability to choose investigation subjects for every case, for every project. When we look at the whole of the work of these architects there is no language, no expression nor style, but a group of reflection subjects, philosophical thoughts about architecture. We can say that they show a complete freedom, they're not held hostage of modernism or any other cultural legacy. I can very much relate to this attitude.

**RC** Despite the fact that architects don't like to talk about form, I would like you to consider your most recent projects where you used non-Euclidean forms. I'm thinking about the project for the Municipal Archive of Palmela (2004) where you laboured on a kind of volume distortion.

**RBG** The form is not the main purpose, although in the last projects it acquired a relevant role. But, in fact, you are right. We are working with pure forms that are being distorted, by the use of light tensions. In the project for Palmela the "tensioned" form is connected to the vaster context of the territory. And I think it is the best way to answer the questions posed by the territory. Some forms are also a consequence of subjects I have been interested in over the years, from plastic arts to landscape art. They are the motive to extend a certain speech.

**RC** Are you interested in the *sublime* as a subject?

**RBG** That question is almost perverse. The sublime is a kind of light related to perfection or, even better still, to a consequence of righteousness. Obviously we ambition to reach that stage which, ideally, would be the complete summary of our efforts. On the other hand, when we are close to that stage we tend to imagine that it contains a certain amount of artificiality.

Our work as architects should improve the way of everyday living, both in the private and in the public spheres. It doesn't seem wrong to keep making a continuous effort, as life demands. A *connection to the land* is important. The works we make are not a final word, they are one more step to keep discussing our route.

**RC** We are talking in a building designed by your atelier (residence building in Lapa, Lisbon (2002)). Although the project is made based on rigour and on the extreme precision in drawing, it is still possible that unpredictable things might happen. Not everything is decided as far as inhabiting is concerned. Do you agree?

**RBG** Yes, I do. Architecture cannot restrain the spontaneity of the people who live in or inhabit the spaces. When you live the true architectural experience you know it's complex and subjective. There's a big difference between the built place and the architectonic place. I believe in extending our live experience through architecture. There is, basically, a similarity to art. The readings each person makes of the artistic object, as well as of the space between what we are and what's ahead of us, allow each person to live a different experience.

**RC** For the house of Quelfes (2003), in Algarve, you suggest a way of inhabiting that is an alternative to the dominant stereotypes in the programme *holiday house*. Do you share the conceptual legacy of each project with the clients?

**RBG** I've received a phone call from a client, who had bought some land in the Algarve to build a house, and who was a little frightened with the unusual image of most houses in Algarve.

I was faced, for the first time, with a piece of ground to build a house, which didn't have an accentuated topography. It was an introspective piece of ground with a lot of native plants (bordered by cactuses) and with no visual relationship to anything else but its own borders. The house is born as a marker of an abstract centrality, a response to the climate and the programme. The roofing was distorted, creating sloping surfaces, in order to intensify the idea of embracing the limits of the parcel itself. It is a shell turned upside down, a *Cabanon*.

**RC** The most recent projects seem to want to emphasize a certain *unfinishedness*, with its surfaces in tinned plaster or raw materials, especially if we compare them to the *platonic* aspects of the works of the end of the 1990s.

**RBG** More than *unfinishedness* I would say it is a suitable *material* for the unity of the buildings. It is an answer to a building system that keeps, however, the intentions and wishes that have given origin to this system. In certain cases I like to imagine the material with which we build architecture, more than choosing and selecting different covering materials. It is not an innocent option, because I am interested in a certain roughness/harshness in the way the building shows itself to the place around it.

**RC** The House in Leiria (2000) is conceptually distant from these principles. There you worked with the adding of volumes, giving a space purpose to each one of them, as if you were building a city with domestic architecture. In the Houses in Moncarrapacho and in the Twin Houses you worked on the unity dimension of the form, of the volume, that contains the full and empty.

**RBG** In Leiria the answer was to fragment the extension of the programme, which is composed of 800m<sup>2</sup> of construction in an uninteresting parcel, in order to create a suitable volume. Through the relationship with the far away landscape we

believed we could reach an invented place, a belvedere. The spaces between the volumes are as important as the interior spaces.

**RC** The subjects around collective housing, like the *European* competitions, don't seem to have been of great interest to you. Your atelier's work is more focused on houses for the high middle class or on competitions for public buildings. Is there a reason for that?

**RBG** In our generation of architects it is very difficult to choose the path to follow and the kind of projects to accept. There are everyday less public competitions and, at the same time, we are driven away from the big real estate promotion where the housing has its maximum expression. I am not, deliberately, removed from those subjects.

In a recent edition of the magazine *El Croquis* there are a group of Spanish architects (Abalos & Herreros, Cero.9, NO.MAD, *et al.*) presenting projects of architectonic reflection, supported by public and private promoters, who are interested in taking part in these discussions. We cannot compare this kind of work to the work of the Portuguese promoters.

**RC** On the one hand, nowadays architects are more exposed to the media and therefore to society. On the other, to practice your profession based on cultural grounds is getting more difficult due to the growing power of technocracy.

**RBG** Architects are becoming more important in society because of what they make society and the big promoters gain. In that sense, society is growing apart from those architects whose work, as you said, is based on cultural grounds and investigations.

**RC** And one of the approaches is through university. Would you care to comment the relationship between your profession and teaching, as a result of your experience of several years as a teacher of *Project*?

**RBG** Teaching became a self-discovery. It's a sharing process, conscious and intense, with students and other teachers, which allows us to keep alert, free. There is also, implicitly, a contribution to the cultural education through that sharing, which will manifest itself in the universe to which architecture belongs.

**RC** In class you often mention the question of *desire* in architecture.

**RBG** In presence of a territory that presents countless difficulties of operation we always find inside us the will to continue doing it, a will that is always renewed. It is important that future architects feel that the only antidote to overcome all these difficulties in the work is liking it, having pleasure in doing it and ultimately desire.

**RC** What kind of architecture do you investigate today?

**RBG** I believe that the projects ask for certain subjects of investigation. However, I think there is a poetic component that crosses all the steps of the work of certain authors. In that sense, there are works that I revisit and where I detain myself. I think that will be clear in the works of Luis Barragan, of Álvaro Siza and of Herzog & de Meuron.

**RC** What seems admirable in the method of the office Herzog & de Meuron is their complete availability to choose subjects of conceptual experimentation, running all the necessary disciplinary risks to obtain a rigorous result. On the other hand, in Portuguese contemporary architecture, the formal manipulation around the legacy of Álvaro Siza seems to make the availability for the risk in investigation relative, which is exactly the opposite of what happens with Álvaro Siza himself (as we can see in the building of the Iberê Camaro Foundation in Porto Alegre, Brazil). The Bak Gordon office seems available to experiment and, in that sense, apart from the stylistic questions observed in the work of architects of the same generation.

**RBG** I really like to talk about the legacy of Álvaro Siza. Early on I realised that what his work has to convey to us is not the formal result, because that is unique. His work comprises the most profound subjects of contemporary art. Although I believe I've learnt a lot from Álvaro Siza, I could never think about trying to pursue formally his work. The style mistakes around his work cause a great deal of distress to those who try to follow that path. The question of language, as you said, is a consequence and not the starting point.

**RC** Some days ago I was telling you, as a joke, about a house you are designing for Estoril, that you have walked back so much you're already at the Adolf Loos *stop*.

**RBG** I like the idea of going back to Monte Estoril. It is a place influenced by a glamorous time, filled with references to a certain modern aristocracy, who ordered projects for houses, in a very affirmative territorial situation, many of them characterised by vertical elements, able to comprise a vast reading of the territory. Our project is built with marked verticality against the topography and in search of a sure timelessness. Its design is concluded in a very stable way, I think that's the source of the reference to Adolf Loos. It is a vertical volume with small openings where there are changes of direction. In this sketch, there's some tension between the building material and its logic, which contradicts the house's stability. It will be finished with apparent concrete that will be painted afterwards. It is a micro-thick film that covers the toughness of the material. The concrete's sensory texture drives it away from time and from the characteristics of the *loosiane* architecture. There's a subversion by joining different times from crossed meanings.

**RC** You are then working on an *expressionism* of tactile material and of volumetric material?

**RBG** Yes. It is as if it was possible to reach a final synthesis of the object and its form, where every reflection joins together, some sort of final echo.

**RC** Has the project for a house inside a block in Campo de Ourique, Lisbon (2004), any relation to an investigation about Islamic architecture?

**RBG** If, in a first reading, this architecture seems to be absent from our daily life, in a closer reading we can see its legacy. The way of relating the public and private sphere, the several layers between the supreme intimacy and sharing, is present in our memory. This house also raises the question of the interior spaces of a block (a public space), that are not lived by the people who have access to them nor by the inhabitants of the city. One of the possible places to build the house was in one of those abandoned pieces of land. The first thing we wanted to do was to use immediately all the area available. When we realise that the outside space is much bigger than the one that will be the enclosed space of the house, it's clear that the outside is the main character of the entire operation. Therefore we create a series of empty spaces with relatively pure geometries, leaving the enclosed space as a channel occupying several borders between empty spaces.

**RC** Like a thick mass that spreads itself across the available land.

**RBG** Exactly. Like a fluid that generates geometries, spaces and sub-spaces.

**RC** Can we speak of an inverted ruin, surrounded by unfit backyards?

**RBG** It has mainly to do with reflecting on the work around the empty spaces. It is a thickness that rises from the floor, as a contrast to the verticality around it. Maybe we can create a certain order in what's around, using this project without apparent design as a starting point.

**RC** In the competition's project for the University of Évora (2000), made with Carlos Vilela Lúcio, Inês Lobo and Pedro Domingos, you were working on repetition and systematisation of elements, almost the opposite of what we are discussing now.

**RBG** The University building in Évora (a school of arts and a school of human sciences) was the result of an intense reading of the programme and of the place. We realised that both buildings were composed of very big spaces (more public) and smaller places (more private). We analysed the convent spaces in Alentejo and their implicit relationships between full and empty (intimacy and urbanity). The result was the design of sharing/public spaces surrounded/closed by small spaces. In the interstitial space between both of them the paths unfold in a cloister environment with a covered exterior. The whole formed by the two buildings, despite its dimension, plays an ambitious role in the design of the urban landscape outside.

In partnership with Carlos Vilela Lúcio we produced a group of very important works for our investigation, later followed by sharing the space with Inês Lobo and with Pedro Domingos. Today, each one of them has their own office. And we strengthen the sharing within the office, which is our daily family of seven people!

**RC** There is yet another presence in your office, which is the installation of the artist Pedro Cabrita Reis.

**RBG** Our office is a pombaline house, later turned into a shop with a direct entrance through the street. When we bought it we tried to recover its original space and order, changing only the pavement where the infrastructures are placed. Every room has the same proportion and the same scale. When we noticed that, it seemed that the house was too stabilised. Pedro Cabrita created an installation, a lighting system, which is a group of lamps placed all over the ceiling. This dynamic structure brings some subversion into the space rhythm, contrasting with the stability of the pombaline house. I no longer imagine the space of the office without those elements.

**RC** The work of the artist Pedro Cabrita Reis is in the centre of your reflexions about cultural practices. What are the connexions to architecture?

**RBG** One of the most interesting aspects is the use of rudimentary, trivial and recycled materials, which are originated in the logic of building processes, very close to those processes implicit in architecture itself. The discovery of the space by someone else's way of looking at the materials allows us, in Pedro's work, to reflect and revisit the experience of memory, producing consecutive rejections. To rediscover our life by individually experimenting each of these elements seems to be very fascinating. When architecture reaches levels of reflexion that are beyond the most immediate answers to the equation suggested by the programme and the place, *art* is revisited. Art can help in freely building an architectonic thought.

The connexion of Pedro Cabrita Reis' work to the architecture we produce has to do with the will to build from the essential. This means not letting any kind of material sophistication be subject to the will to reach the highest possible meaning when it comes to the final result. It is in a kind of desornamentation, with a strong kindness and *imperfection* component that we see in the world we live in, that I am interested in, more than in what is perfect and finished.