

Layers of Contemporary Architecture

edited by
Luigi Spinelli

FrancoAngeli

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Preface

Guillermo Aranda-Mena

Architecture plays a unique role in safeguarding our collective memory. Through architecture we can navigate human ethnographies over time and space.

In *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Pierre Nora stresses on the importance of nurturing our collective memory as a defining attribute of humankind. In his own words: «A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community».

Layers of Contemporary Architecture is a thoughtful publication series about architecture, memory and authorship. In this publication, architects and academics have contributed a collection of fourteen scholarly essays reflecting on seminal architects and their role in the making of contemporary spaces well-grounded through heritage.

Architecture must engage with human narratives at its highest potential — «*la memoria colectiva*» —, not only to record rational knowledge as a cognitive process but also as a means for subjective stimuli for perceptual sensing. We inhabit the spaces of memory as a continuum, we are immersed in our environment; we can mute music, close a book, or throw a rug over a canvas, but we cannot shut our surroundings. Thus, architecture is instrumental in bringing spatial narratives through a design language. No other art form nor medium can blend theory, memory and narrative through space to the extent that architecture can.

The present: architecture is a patient witness of human life. It can capture and display idiosyncrasies, behaviour and emotions of our daily lives. It is a reliable instrument for ethnographic recording. On the receptive side, architecture is a medium by which humans can sense and experience such narratives. Although structurally static, architecture is dynamic through time and space; it can redeem humanity from a common pressing risk of social forgetting.

The past: only through reflection we can learn and engage at a deep level with our collective memory, and architecture is a vehicle to do so. The curated essays presented here transcend historicisms, stylistic and theoretical creed often found in scholarly publications. Thus, *Layers of Contemporary Architecture* provides a universal lens that allows one to engage with the discourse of past, memory and

identity in a contemporary fashion. The work is of international relevance, connecting the past with an emerging contemporaneity in architecture.

The future: *Layers of Contemporary Architecture* leverages the acclaimed success of *MantovArchitettura*, the annual architecture festival organized within the programme of the Unesco Chair in *Architectural Preservation and Planning in World Heritage Cities*, chaired at the Mantova Campus of Politecnico di Milano. This volume provides an opportunity to learn from a curated selection of eminent architects and keynote speakers at Mantovarchitettura. The content structure transverses four themes: overlapping, overlaying, resurfacing and re-recording. In so doing it provides the intertwined strata upon which the future is forged.

I much hope that *Layers of Contemporary Architecture* becomes a seminal scholarly resource present across schools of architecture, public libraries, and personal libraries of the young and not so young.

l.

Overlapping

**Paulo David.
Dwelling on
the Land-sea
Threshold:
«Circular»
Architecture**

Barbara Bogoni

Madeira is the main of a small archipelago of tiny islands in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, nearly one thousand kilometers away from the Portuguese continental mainland coastline and from the major centres of its architectural culture, from the schools and universities and from its public, economic and political life drives. A separated life condition, solitary and distant, where Paulo David refines a method of doing architecture that I call «circular», moving away from the island and returning back to it, borrowing from the island the matter itself, its materials, its culture, its tradition, its deep-rooted feeling.

The continual presence of Paulo David — who was trained at the Faculty of Architecture of the Technical University in Lisbon and, after collaborating with João Luís Carrilho da Graça and with Gonçalo Byrne, returned to his island to work — is a narration of his radical choice of preserving and bequeathing the building culture of a land rich in history and tradition, through a professedly contemporary design practice. As a matter of fact, the insular architecture by Paulo David attests to a total adhesion to the place, not in terms of the picturesque location, as much as for the deep acknowledgement of its cultural and material value and of the memories the place itself preserves and conveys. It represents the powerful evidence of the deep bond that links the architect to his home territory and expresses the successful entanglement between the landscape, tectonic and traditional elements and the piercing subtle awareness of the designer, who has the ability of reading even the tiniest signs that tradition, rituals, acts and meaning overlaid in time. The experience of the continuous check of the place is based on a thorough activity combining research, filing and design practice, which the architect carries on and questions through the discipline of analogy and cross-reference.

This exercise, as simple in its enunciation as it is complex and thorough in its implementation, finds in Paulo David's work some very peculiar implications, because it is subordinated (as almost every activity in Madeira) to the inevitable and extreme confrontation with the destructive forces of nature the island territory is recurrently and wildly overwhelmed by; and because it is subdue to the acceptance of scarcity and of the existence of unavoidable boundaries, which acquire, in that place, a character of absoluteness, completeness, timelessness; because it is subjugated to the acknowledgement of the several anti-

nomies the island contains — the foregone fluidity of its lavic core now solidified in harsh basaltic surfaces, the liquidness of the ocean waves breaking on the hard coastal rocks, the impassability of the fierce inland which the inhabitants oppose through their tireless and determined work, aimed, in the past as nowadays, to the conquest of the tiniest land plot to be converted in sustainable agricultural fields, the only assurance of the man survival on the island.

Tensions

Madeira is therefore a complex territory, where the force of elements — water and fire, earthquakes and volcanoes — did not really find a shore to rest on yet. There is no real beach in Madeira island, indeed. The North coast is unusable: the wind is strong, the sea is rough, the coastline uneven; on the South, the steep land spits (the so-called *lombas*) climbing from the island centre down to the coast outline a sequence of bays and inlets where the urban centres (towns and villages) were settled, harbored between high mountainsides in the valleys crossed by dangerous creeks that periodically grow and overflow. In those coves somewhere it is possible for the men and the houses to timidly overlook the water and to take sustainable advantage of the available natural resources: fish, landscape, climate.

Funchal, the capital city of the island, is a town which grew from the coastline to the inland, following the natural mainlines of the surrounding valleys. An historical centre made out of stone and basalt; of white and black; of military, cultural, religious, administrative stories; roads and motorways; luxuriant parks blooming with secular trees and flowers to be exported all around the world; a periferal development of small rural houses scattered at mid-hillside, in the middle of small plots of farmed land.

Four creeks characterized by a torrential regime — the so-called *ribeiras* —, flowing from the mountainous island center to their respective mouths, converge from three different directions right in the heart of the city. Water into water, the land in the middle.

The water is the greatest danger. Surrounded, sometimes besieged by the sea water, this territory longs for sweet water in the summer months, when it is threatened by the bushfires and the drought,

while bridle it in the winter time, when the flood menaces constantly remind of the past tragedies, the memory of which remains vivid.

The water is an ally. Beloved, it supplies food, landscapes, tourism; collected, driven and distributed, it allows the life of men, animals and vegetation, and it ensures the balanced cycle of agricultural production: more than two thousand and five hundred kilometers of canals and irrigation ditches — the *levadas* — have been built since the 15th century with a titanic work along the mountainsides, the slopes, the valleys, down to the coastal towns.

The water is an ample landscape. The whole town lays down as lava, spreading to the sea, appearing at its liquid horizon. The ocean is mobile, flat, languid, silent sometimes, more often impetuous. To the ocean, the inhabitants devote themselves and their strength, their expectations, their daily work: «This people have the determined pride of the ones who know the power of things, the feeling of the supreme uselessness of life, which there is nothing else to oppose against but the force of a momentary, strictly necessary, order ...»¹.

The water is a line, two lines indeed: the distant motionless inscrutable and eternally unattainable line of the horizon, and the ever-changing tormented line of the coast, dividing the water from the land, the very boundary between the concreteness of the material reality and the infinite mass of the oceanic uncertainty.

Paulo David's architecture, deeply rooted into the rocks, into the tradition, into the material and immaterial signs of the *locus*, dwells into the land, clings to it, and from the land overlooks, watches and embraces the water, allows for a difficult way of inhabiting in a kind of artificial landscape, both spectacular and serene, where the antinomies are broken and the tensions softened. The look aimed to the horizon, on this boundary the architect grounds and raises his work, gathering in his action the extent of the visible sea and the experience of the land.

On this limit, along this limit, through this limit the architect builds.

On

Firmly anchored to a rocky spur, overhanging the Atlantic Ocean, the arts centre in Calheta (*Centro das Artes de Casa das Mudanças*, 2001-

04), reinterprets the primitive spatiality of the island, blended into the geologic matter, the existing buildings and the landscape, and re-designs it, hence merging it permanently with the place, suspended between the sea in front and the mountains behind, turning itself into a new place.

On the limit, some one hundred meters above the sea level, the building digs into the rock, finding itself some space into it, adapting to the coastal topography, redrawing its cross-section, melting into the ground like volcanic lava, and acquiring its definitive shape like lava meeting the water. The building is configured as a «stony concretion», and enhances the material and the geological layering through a continuous and homogeneous thin-slatted horizontally-arranged basalt cladding.

The building is inhabited by the sunlight and by the constant presence of the ocean, peeking out in the exterior spaces, in the stairs and in the open air corridors, in the central entrance patio, before seeking into the well-proportioned, multiple and differentiated interior spaces, carved into the rocks, divided and separated on the basis of function and vocation: the library and reading room, the auditorium, the exhibition rooms, the service spaces and storage rooms, the archives. The primitive model of the *furnas*² guided the distribution of the partially or totally hypogeal interior spaces, defining in section the distinctive organization of voids: subtracted from, super-imposed, linked by stairs and corridors.

To dwell on the limit becomes here the glorification of the surrounding landscapes – the mountain and the sea, as it was in the initial architect's purpose: «The building exists at the threshold between the ocean and the land – and is informed by the condition»³.

A new «oceanic and volcanic space» is hence born, a synthesis of several materic and figurative readings the architect carries on about his island (about the rough and jagged rocks, the cliffs and the spurs, the pebbles and gravel eroded by both water and time passing by); a synthesis of the patient study of the building tradition, of the supporting walls made out of stone; a synthesis of the desire to set the absolute marine light bursting in from the South and to gather and drive it into the interior of the gometric, abstract, intensely contemporary space containing life.

Along

The Salinas Maritime Boardwalk (2002-06) is a landscape design intervention developed along a short coastline section near *Câmara de Lobos*, on the Southern island shore. This work expresses and enhances the direct relation between the inland territory and the oceanic vastness, born out of necessity and vocation, as well as the attempt of improving the accessibility and giving a new vitality to the very location where water and lava dramatically met in the past, in a clash suddenly frozen in a rough and magnificent telluric landscape.

The intervention redesigns the rocky island coastline in order to make it walkable, redevelopping some common structures in the Madeira territory and assimilating in the narrow coastal spaces several existing traditional elements (such as retaining walls, terracing and platforms), it enhances the character and the textures of volcanic stone, and it turns even the tiniest sculptural element or spatial hint into visitable and inhabitable attachments. The natural unfolding of the path on the existing topography, along the coastline, appears as the result of the erosive action of the sea on the rocky cliff, a kind of an alliance between the desire of men to dwell on the coast limit and the vigour of sea water rhythmically breaking and carving new spaces in it, where previously unknown conflicting relations arise. The project seems to appease those conflicts and gently soften them through the domestication of stone, the control of the tide, and the gathering of the water in the pacific swimming pools plunged into the ocean.

In

The promenade in *Câmara de Lobos* ends in a powerful basaltic wall and spreads into a concrete terracing, which harbours the complex of *Piscinas do Atlântico* swimming pools, an architectural domestication of the spontaneous and primitive arising of the water — so unreachable and unusable in this rough location —, where it can be offered to the needs and use of men.

An extended slab, horizontal and abstract, spreads into the ocean, in a narrow inlet almost completely filled with harsh basaltic rocks, coming from the eruptive core of the island and settled in this place

since long ago. Similar to the rocks, people's gaze seems to linger onto this bay, which is topographically shaped into tiny accidental details, scattered and differentiated, showing multiple orientations and interactions between natural elements (water and rocks) and artificial ones (stonework and concrete), allowing the geometric design of the project to understand the nature of place, to transform it, and to re-interpret it while operating a transformation.

A few elements are composed and brought together, in order to provide the support and equipment for the touristic and leisure activities to happen in the solarium and in the swimming pools, along the path and in the panoramic viewpoint, with a concrete elevator shaft resolving the vertical accessibility problem, the coffee shop — transparent and light, laid on a cliff — and the dressing rooms — hidden in the massive thickness of the wall — both overlooking the platform. Higher, on the promontory, in a dominant position, the restaurant stands.

Between

The project of the panoramic restaurant (*Restaurante Miradouro*) and the urban gardens of *Jardins das Salinas* (2004-06), overlooking the swimming pools in an elevated position, retrieves harmoniously the topography of the ocean coastline and evokes both the long lost presence of the ancient salt ponds carved into the rocky spurs and the layout of farmed land plots.

Hanging out onto the ocean, the restaurant is housed in a delicate volume made of cor-ten steel, defined geometrically and plastically, partially clad in thin wooden slats allowing a warm and embracing light into the interior rooms overlooking the sea.

A sequence of stairs and small terraces allows the passers-by to detect small changes in the maritime promenade, in the height of small segments, in the pauses to look at the landscape, in the seating points before regaining the stroll and experiencing the pleasure of dwelling in tiny open-air rooms or in the wider garden closing the path, located in a more open and dominating position. The gardens show again the same scheme and layout of the local rural plots, including their arbors for the vineyards (the so-called *latadas*), their stepped terraces, their split stones supporting walls (*poios*), their narrow paths between the

furrows, hence recalling the agricultural vocation of the island and celebrating the strenuous action of men who have been wrenching during the centuries tiny plots of land from the primitive natural territory and from the slopes swept by strong winds and flooded by torrential rains, in the struggle to farm some banana trees, some mangoes, some avocados.

«Thus the whole complex is built as if rewriting what exists. Geography, history, society, construction and time are valued and, in this case, used as building blocks»⁴.

Synthesis

Paulo David has an intimate and deep knowledge of his homeland, enhanced by the constant exercise of looking at it and of developing a theoretical insight and a design practice on it (and his unbuilt projects are the evidence of his commitment to knowledge and deep analysis, the necessary preconditions of every possible transformative operation on the territory). He transmits his awareness through an architecture blended with the landscape and the materials of the island – an architecture deeply rooted into the territory, into the tradition, into the signs of memory, both built or hidden below the layers of time and matter.

The projects presented here – all built *on*, *along*, *in* and *between* the Southern coastline of the island, on the land-water borderline, in a suspension between the rock and the sea, built out of both materials – enact the representation of several landscapes of Madeira and stage different and specific strategies of inhabiting the insular territory. Through these projects it is possible to have a glimpse to that atavic, almost archetypical correspondence between matter and landscape, which is able to convert architecture into a necessary and irremovable presence in the natural landscape. Although recognizable in its shape as the result of the intervention of man into the nature – the very tool of tranformation and artificialization of the existing territory –, Paulo David's architecture is able to enhance its continuity and identity, reconciling its tensions into an harmonic balance.

This is the «circular» architecture by Paulo David, with its unique and distinguished strategy of designing in section – a skill that is

a constant trait in both two-dimensional graphic signs and three-dimensional model-making —, a way to interpret the telluric-originated material layering visible in both the geological sections and in the architectural construction.

The research in the continuity in cross-sections drives Paulo David's work in an attempt of dissolving the boundary between architecture and topography and to achieve a synthesis between architecture and landscape. The ultimate aim of the architectural intervention is thus to be grafted into the landscape, to become landscape, to be landscape.

«To be landscape» represents the desire to unveil a way of living the space of the island through the architecture, the will of claiming back, or simply enhancing, a way of inhabiting the architectural space which is quintessentially from Madeira, thus designing an architecture which is itself Madeira⁵.

The building process of this «contemporary regional architecture» takes place as a progressive and paced sublimation of thought first, then of the sign and of the drawing, rigorously in black and white, apparently abstract and essential, which gradually lays down on paper the multiple peculiarities, stories, materials, thoughts, techniques, traditions, as well as it translates into a contemporary alphabet the rich language of the regional forms, thus describing the drama of the limits and of the antinomies, the fluid and the solid, the inside and the outside, the near and the distant. The infinity of the Ocean and the finite of the island, so closed, finished, solitary. In the meanwhile, Paulo David's design strategy generates an architecture dense of local spirit, able to unveil the overcoming of all opposition.