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Words with architects
12 notes towards the *reconstruction* of the discipline

CARLOS FERRATER

EDUARDO SOUTO DE MOURA

FUENSANTA NIETO & ENRIQUE SOBEJANO

LLUÍS CLOTET

EMILIO TUÑÓN

KENGO KUMA

DOMINIQUE PERRAULT

PAULO MENDES DA ROCHA

MANUEL GALLEGO

ANNE LACATON

ÁLVARO SIZA

JAVIER MANTEROLA

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Words with architects

Alberto Peñín

The interview genre was born with the development of journalism towards the middle of the 19th century¹. Away from the fugacity of news, this format suits multiple objectives, such as bringing culture to society, getting to know a personality, or sending a specific message. The interviewer does not only carry the message, he also seeks to understand the interviewee, and in an effort to comprehend and learn, he sometimes ends up revealing his true nature by delving into his personality and unveiling his discourse. His primary objectives shall be to create an intimate mood, to connect with the interlocutor's inner world and get him to tell what he has never told before, to steal his soul. Instead of aiming for the self-complacent essay, the interviewer should provide an invisible template and play the role of a prestidigitator that makes the interviewee speak and infuses life into his abstract thoughts. However, the recognition of the interview as a literary genre had many opponents from the beginning. Born from techniques used at court proceedings and halfway between the questionnaire, the profile interview and the conversation, its fidelity, integrity and coherence are not always guaranteed. The necessary transcription into written form, the excessive manipulations, the deceits and distrust have resulted in surprises more than once, as a result from that sort of harmless battle fought in every interview. As a scientific genre it is undoubtedly valuable in terms of dissemination, but its ability to generate knowledge is often questioned.

The world of architecture, as one of society's expressions, has not disregarded this genre. It is no surprise that the first architect ever interviewed -that we are aware of- was Louis Sullivan in 1882, in the new

Chicago that emerged after the 1871 fire; birthplace of journalism with more than 10 newspapers and 20 weekly publications back in 1840. Nor is it surprising that one of the most well-known architect interviews was conducted by a journalist from *The Sunday Times*² to Frank Lloyd Wright, many of whose works were built in Chicago, when in 1957, at the end of his career, claimed the end of modern architecture in favor of organic architecture, after the debacle that science had led to at the end of World War II. If modern architecture was based on its spatial condition, "from within outward", new organic architecture should look for the essence in nature, away from cities, symbols of a sort of feudalism. Bold statements, slogans, straightforward messages which many modern architects got across through this genre and the new media. Wright used to say "my father was a preacher, and I am a preacher too", Gropius was called a propagandist because of his editorial activities at the Bauhaus among other reasons, and Le Corbusier, probably the most media-oriented architect in history, besides changing his birth name, was even more influential for his written works than for his buildings. Thus, the question is to discuss architecture from the inside, from the point of view of its very protagonists. Historian John Peter's book "The Oral History of Modern Architecture"³ is one of the rare historic interview compilations, conducted in this case by the same author, in the field of architecture, and it reveals that the historiography of this genre is yet to be written. While, in our opinion, the value of the original material exceeds that of the compilation, it does pave a very interesting way by surpassing the circumstantial condition of a single conversation and leading to a series of conclusions about the architecture of a specific period.

"They are really wallpaper hangers, papering facades" said Wright in the aforementioned interview in reference to modern architects, harshly questioning the depth of their ideas, the consistency of their slogans. Since it seems appropriate to distrust writings as substitutes for architecture, media as opposed to content, in the context of the traditional confrontation between theory and practice, then it might be advisable to question the word of the architect. Louis Kahn warned, "There are no architects, only architectures", is it then possible to understand his architecture through his words? Like many other publications in this field, the *Palimpsesto*⁴ magazine, which was born in 2011 at the Càtedra Blanca of the School of Architecture of Barcelona, has kept its faith nevertheless, and has sought the words of twelve architects over the course of four years as a reliable expression of their respective ideas. The compilation of these interviews, like John Peter did following the habitual empirical scientific process, seems like the best possible antidote against particularities and makes room for more generic reflections.

Our first impression, our wish perhaps, is that the individual voice is diluted in favor of a certain collective murmur; at the very best an accurate photography of a specific moment in history. Our task is then to offer some clues for deciphering it and let the reader draw the conclusions. The character disappears, and some dialogues between interviewees that do not actually take place appear, stories jump from one question to the next, sometimes the questions are recurrent, other times the answers are. Like a *nouveau roman* novel or a reenactment of Robert Altman's "*Short Cuts*"⁵, the lives and works of twelve architects are interlaced in a miscellany that deconstructs the dialogues by comparing and intertwining them so as to reconstruct a higher-order discourse.

Like a glove worn by different hands, a single template for all twelve interviews is adjusted to each interviewee. It delves into the deep motivations of their work, but also into the comprehension of the architect's biography, into his or her stance on certain relevant questions regarding society, the profession and the teaching of the discipline. The structure of the interviews somehow replicates that of *Palimpsesto* magazine, by posing a series of questions that drift along like the sections of the magazine, which come and go within each issue without blurring its general approach or its goals. The architect will explain who he is, what he does, why and how he does it. Thus, the published text will go deep into the mechanisms that constitute the "*falsework* of their architecture"⁶, understanding the architectural project as a product of reason, but subject to action, an approach shared by the teaching philosophy of Càtedra Blanca and the *Palimpsesto* publishing house in all of its publications. American sociologist Richard Sennett states categorically that "making is thinking"⁷ and it is with this exaltation of labor that the strategy for approaching each of the chosen individuals is devised.

Having laid out the template, the range of choice of the twelve interviewees seems delimited, at least. We choose architectures, and not architects, and we say architectures because an engineer is added to the group, Javier Manterola, who speaks about architecture from the outside, but also from the perspective of the closely related engineering field. The choice necessarily reflects the professional acknowledgement of their built work, as is shown by the widely recognized group of interviewees; three Pritzker Prize winners, three National Architecture Award winners, innumerable built work awards and prizes at national or international competitions. These are all precautionary measures that keep us from falling into the intellectual speculation that some opponents to the interview genre warned against. Successful, recognized professionals seem to be an appropriate counterpoint to the excessive voices in the world of architecture, like Manuel Gallego points out in his interview for issue no. 4, "architects talk more than they build, and architecture cannot be replaced or supplanted by verbose explanations. Other times, all I see between what is said and what gets done are contradictions and disagreements. Important writings, or at least those that seem important to me, deal with architecture from the point of view of a personal need to create it".

Lluís Clotet (#1), Emilio Tuñón (#2), Paulo Mendes da Rocha (#3), Manuel Gallego (#4), Javier Manterola (#5), Anne Lacaton (#6), Kengo Kuma (#7), Alvaro Siza (#8), Nieto and Sobejano (#9), Eduardo Souto de Moura (#10), Dominique Perrault (#11) and Carlos Ferrater (#12); these are the professionals gathered in this publication. Coming from Catalonia (2), Madrid (2), Navarra and Galicia (2), Portugal (2), France (2) and Brazil and Japan (2), they talk with architects about architecture and society, about their works and their lives. Like a geographic sweep starting in Barcelona, a map of diverse origins is drawn, where the personal, including the local, is put in relation with the collective and the universal. These conditions determine the first two criteria for choosing the interviewees: geographic representativeness that, even if not exhaustive, is intended to be broad enough, and the will to generate knowledge based on their built work in order to, in turn, motivate and stimulate it. From there, it is precisely the study of these texts that will reveal whether or not the choice was the right one. The selection certainly becomes a filter for different ways of understanding and practicing our profession. Its coherence, consistency and pertinence will surface a posteriori, through the relationships interweaved among the different texts, as it happens in the summary of each issue, where the contents lay out the subjects reconstructed in each editorial.

The technique applied in each of the interviews follows one single pattern, though not in a uniform manner. After the necessary study of the built and written works, our notes are structured into a series of

recurrent sections, that is, the aforementioned template: origins and education, mentors and references, theoretical basis, relationships with other disciplines, matter and light, territory and city, housing, with an emphasis on social subjects, a particular attention to technique and to the relationship with engineers, procedures and office organization, tools, research and teaching, and from issue no. 8 on, our call for papers, encouraging readers to submit original texts in an attempt to find new and attractive formats for scientific magazines in the architecture field.

Based on the procedure, the original script gains presence or is blurred depending on the way it is carried out. The digital interview, via a series of successive e-mails (# 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7), results in a greater accuracy and depth of some answers at the expense of the spontaneity of dialogue. Face-to-face interviews (# 3, 8 and 9), in turn, reflect more intensely the atmosphere created, if only due to the presence of voice, and help sort out a hierarchy of contents. The structure is then turned into a template, and it orients the conversation toward different interests, while the interviewer decides whether or not to bring it back to the pre-established script. The telephone interview (# 10 and 11) shares some of these features, since the template is previously made available to the interviewee, and hence is followed in a more disciplined way, but at the same time spoken word takes the lead over written word.

The subsequent editorial work, the filtering, the polishing that goes into the transcription from spoken to written form, is of great importance and logically requires the interviewee's acceptance. His or her active involvement, sometimes even an exhaustive rewording, brings closer the accuracy of the resulting document to that of written interviews, thus ensuring the necessary homogeneity of the whole. The history of this genre is full of anecdotes and episodes related to the particularities of each character and situation. Groucho Marx refused to allow the use of tape recorders in interviews⁸, Faulkner loathed their obtuse short-term nature, many others, politicians particularly, disowned published interviews after-the-fact, feeling misled by the immediacy of words. There have been other less common formats like the self-interview⁹ or the interview made of successive conversations with the same interviewee. Some of these ideas are the basis of our proposal for Carlos Ferrater's interview, whose position as director of the magazine requires us to take a step back, deconstruct and re-use already existing interviews, with the approval of the original authors. What we publish is a nonexistent, almost oniric text, that reconstructs the atmosphere by recomposing other conversations and interrelating them, with the structure of the aforementioned template.

The editing of the interview attempts, as does this compilation, to establish a variety of cross-dialogues where the importance lies in the words of the architect. In any case, the interviewer's intention is to take a step back to the point of disappearing from the text, acting as a catalyst rather than an erudite when the questions,

sometimes nearly essays, expose the interviewer rather than the interviewee. The questions asked are generally accurate rather than ambiguous, and their degree of complexity or specialization depends on the subject addressed. Sometimes, even in digital interviews, a certain degree of controversy is not completely rejected. Anne Lacaton answers the question of whether or not everything is worth preserving as follows: "When the question is asked in terms of 'worth', one is implying that there is a set of values that establish a distinction between those buildings that are valuable, and those that are not, based on specific architectural criteria", a remark that beyond making a fair point, seeks to explain, by denial, the motivations of the architecture that her office develops.

II

The mere act of compiling all twelve texts encourages us to talk and reflect on architecture. Despite the diversity of works and origins of some of the interviewees, we sense a certain resemblance in their words, a similar tone, which suggests comparable approaches toward the discipline. Architecture is understood through its integrating condition in regards to reality, the architect, and the surrounding world, as its exponent, but also as its motivation. This holistic take on the discipline is accompanied by a generalist view on the architect's role, which is far from the specialization claimed by some academic and economic trends.

Alvaro Siza insisted on this model, and regretted the current lack of "the idea of comprehensive work, and the same happens with life. Work is perceived as a punishment, a form of slavery, a sacrifice, not as a way of life. [...] This terrible concept of division, division, division, that in the end affects life itself". Generalist views imply non-specialization and, debatable as it may be, this leads us to reject the fact of "making the architect responsible of everything, of every technical aspect, with the justification that if we avoid that responsibility we lose control over the project", as Enrique Sobejano put it. Mendes da Rocha concludes: "Architects cannot master every field".

This almost hazy position relates to the architects' constant need to question themselves¹⁰. Anne Lacaton highlights the necessity to "reconsider the meaning of architecture, and try to understand what society expects from architects". This is probably caused by the somewhat hesitant or at least mixed origin of their vocation; many of them became architects by elimination, like Siza and Perrault, who could not become artists, Mendes da Rocha, who did not become an engineer, or Ferrater, who did not become a doctor; Clotet and Nieto and Sobejano, architects by immersion, Tuñón, influenced by John Berger's "Ways of seeing", Kuma by enlightenment, when his father made him discover the cenital light at the Yoyogi Gymnasium in Tokyo, by Tange.

On the other hand, the choice of references during

their learning periods lets us grasp the awakening of their architectural conscience. Sometimes the masters behind each biography appear without an actual contact. Like “an invisible friend who unknowingly gives you an unexpected present”¹¹. That is what Coderch was for Ferrater, Mies for Perrault, Utzon for Nieto and Sobejano, Wright and Taut for Kuma. Other times, there is a much more direct, professional and personal relationship; Moneo with Tuñón, De la Sota with Gallego, Fernández Casado with Manterola, it almost becomes a genealogy in the case of Távora, Siza and Souto de Moura, where, moreover, the best of transformations happens, from mentor to colleague and from colleague to friend. In any of those cases, the conscious search of a mentor seems decisive, like an inexorable need for any architect during their learning period.

Sometimes the conversations point towards the subject -usually questioned by the interviewee- of their belonging to specific collectivities or approaches. One would be the School of Oporto that Souto de Moura defines as “a particular environment -the School building itself- where one can feel the importance of design and drawing [...] and the certainty of being a marginal country”. Other, the school of Barcelona, with a more complex genealogy, would include Clotet, who defends interventions on existing buildings -which is only logic in a dense city-, and Ferrater, who describes it more precisely, when asked by Kees Kaan, as “the attention to topography, environment, and party walls”. Equivalently, the school of Madrid, mentioned by Nieto as Sobejano as a place for learning, with a heavier conceptual and operative load, as well as a commitment towards solid construction, as is the case with Tuñón and Mansilla’s works in concrete; “a self-imposed constraint that entails a constructive framework which results in the continuity [...] and coexistence of industrial and traditional mechanisms”. On the opposite side, there is the recurrent use of lightweight and metal construction, anticipated by Viollet Le Duc, Labrouste, Eiffel or Prouvé, present in the conversations with Perrault and Lacaton despite their works being so seemingly distant, and the fact that Lacaton points out; “this is really not very important. The questions an architect has to face nowadays are very broad and complex. They clearly surpass the fact of coming from here or there.”

Questionable as it may be, the affiliation to a collective way of doing and thinking specific to a particular culture leads us to reflect on the environment, the territory. Its influence, not only in the projects, but also in the construction of architectural thinking, is noteworthy in all cases. The particular features of each of the architects’ place of origin are not incompatible with universality, but rather a gateway towards it. Gallego talks about life being compatible with architecture and how “the whole world fits anyplace”. The powerful Port of Vitória (Brazil), which reminds us of the heroic features of Brazilian architecture, and specifically the activity of the “ships, ports, shipyards,

cranes, machines, commerce”, or the busy Douro river banks, with “ships that delivered the grapes for the elaboration of port wine, and from the opposite direction black boats with women carrying large baskets on their heads filled with coal”, shape Mendes da Rocha and Siza’s respective ways of looking at the world, without necessarily diminishing their universality and timelessness. Similarly, the influence of metropolis such as Paris or Tokyo and cities like Barcelona, the latter halfway between the sea and the mountains, is behind many of the reflections of Kuma, Perrault, Clotet and Ferrater, who elaborates on the concept of “intellectual relationship with a place”, which he discovered during the competition for the Confluence Museum of Lyon, a city characterized by the duality of the two rivers that run through it and the topography they generate.

The influence of what we might call biographic geography in the works of these architects is a key condition in the case of an engineer, specifically one who designs and builds bridges. Javier Manterola tells us about the relationship between bridge and landscape. “Bridges or dams are not just placed somewhere, like buildings are, their foundation requirements make it necessary for them to fit in, not just be built on top. And that fitting is just like being connected to the ground [...] A bridge is something artificial, foreign, and that is why it can configure a place.” The relationship between nature and artifice is at the center of his discourse, an integration that architects achieve in a more metaphorical way. Like Souto de Moura when he explains that material continuity does not imply a lack of individuality¹², Ferrater in his AA house when he talks about phenomenology rather than space, or Lacaton, and Souto as well, when they completely rid materials of any moral value. As for Kuma, he aspires to “redefine architecture as part of a garden [...] from which one can feel the Universe”, contrarily to the *objet trouvé* contrast of a bridge in a landscape. He talks, with some technical remarks that we will go back to later on, about his double appreciation of the materials of a place, how they should provide “the warmth and softness of natural materials”, unlike steel, concrete and glass in modern architecture; while at the same time appreciating the narrative qualities of new materials. He mentions the architecture of Zumthor, where materials “seem to speak in an excessively polite manner. I would rather contribute with some unexpected aspects”. In a position halfway between contrast and integration we find Siza, Mendes da Rocha and Gallego, when they question the distinction between artifice and nature. “Nature is almost completely controlled, modified and, to a large extent, built. The concept of nature changes over time. [...] I am interested in the variable boundaries between nature and artificial construction, and in the relationship between them [...] I think that the interest lies in that tension.”

The social service a bridge provides is unquestionable. Engineering as construction and infrastructure is involved in land management and

politics. In architecture, housing, specifically social housing, seems to have the most direct relationship with social needs beyond the instrumental condition of public facility policies. Despite often mentioning the 60s in their interviews (Siza, Souto de Moura, Lacaton, Tuñón), not many of the interviewees actually work on social housing. Is it possible that contemporary architectural talent might be misoriented? Lacaton and Vassal are perhaps the most comforting answer to this question, since many of their objectives focus on improving the conditions of contemporary housing from the inside. By resorting to strategies like doubling the spaces or accepting what already exist without the need for inefficient demolitions, they attempt to “create spacious, comfortable houses, which is necessary for high quality life conditions. This is for us an elementary, indispensable quality”. Ferrater, from a different point of view, approaches the subject of housing, also single-family houses, as a sequence of arguments which are not only architectural, but also have a social component. “A housing project is the best exercise [...] to live, to open a door and lay down to sleep, to enter the kitchen, to use a bathroom sink, to go to the living-room and talk with your children, the drama, the joy [...] In a hotel composure is kept, in a home anything can happen, and that is extraordinary. It is a fantastic place for experimentation.”

Lacaton's strategies deal with recycling, reusing, and renovating life as opposed to preserving. “The question is to work with what already exists; it is not about preserving, but about using, supplementing, assuming, adding. In the grands ensembles [...] even the most banal buildings had a certain capability for being modified and transformed into high quality constructions”. From the same architectural stance, Clotet is in favor of “resurrecting the dead” before creating something new. He defends the work of architects on empty spaces, gaps, where there is no program, where there is room for a change in use. He claims, as Gallego does, an open and ambiguous architecture as opposed to that which may be circumstantial or temporary.

These considerations go beyond formal strategies on the subject of working on existing buildings, which Nieto and Sobejano have defined very accurately, positioning themselves halfway between “a modern architect that establishes an opposition between the new and the old”, and the “historicist architect who simply rebuilds”, by defending “a more contemporary approach that is based on working with what existed there in the first place”. Thus, there is a real conscience about the importance of programs from a nearly political strategy.

The social commitment of some of our interviewees in the current socioeconomic conditions, both local and global, is undeniable. With an argument that starts with the availability of techniques, Siza directly accuses Europe of the current lack of balance and solidarity. “Where is convergence?” Mendes da Rocha, equally nonconformist but from a more historical perspective, criticizes the shortsighted attitude of the western world

“we speak of the Mediterranean Sea as the cradle of civilization, and all over Africa people flee their countries by swimming across the sea [...] What are we saying? How much longer are we going to keep robbing them of their wealth? [...] Nature does not accept this; it is much more complex than that.”

These reflections on the collective make us question the solitude of the architect, which also applies to the internal mechanisms and organization of architecture offices. The dialogues presented in this publication address this question and recurrently bring up conversation as a way to generate knowledge. Tuñón is the clearest case; he systematizes this process at his office, together with the late, irreplaceable Luis Mansilla, where the most important thing is that “two very different people that speak the same language can have an interesting conversation”. This way of approaching projects and life itself is also shared by Kuma, Lacaton and Vassal, and Nieto and Sobejano.

On the other hand, Perrault affirms categorically: “I think that the creative act is not democratic. It is a solitary act, an act of decision”. This clearly opposite position is however balanced out by the creation of research platforms linked to his office and to University, while still independent from them. Thus, Perrault's DPA Lab or OAB Ferrater's Gallery, similarly to Koolhaas' AMO, are set up as laboratories for architectural research, dedicated to providing these professional offices with ideas, processes and new areas for reflection. In this scenario, the collaboration of different disciplines brought in by new partners makes the creative process a collective act. The question of authorship related to the figure of the architect comes up repeatedly in the conversations. Tuñón quotes Lorca to define his thought exchange cooperative, which, just like the poems of *cante jondo* “do not belong to anyone, they float on the air like golden bristles and each generation dresses them in different colors, to abandon them to future ones”. Kuma, highly conditioned by his constant travels and not disregarding other people's experience, opts for an unrestricted, hierarchy-free organization, to the extent possible, where “the atmosphere encourages those with the most experience to speak up”.

The evolution of production techniques has influenced the organization of architecture offices. Tools and projects not only have an instrumental, linear and hierarchic relation, there is also a constant interaction. The tools not only determine and make possible the development of an approach, or in more orthodox terms, an idea, they also establish the conditions for the emergence and stimulation of these ideas. These interviews contain some very emphatic opinions regarding this subject.

Lacaton says “we do not trust models [...] they involve a reduction of scale that forces us to look at the project as if it was an object [...]”. Architecture must be thought and defined through reflection, analysis, discussion, intelligence, knowledge, rigor, the correct

choice of constructive solutions, invention, sensitivity, a certain whimsicality or randomness... from the inside, at real-world scale, from the smallest to the largest". Gallego, Mendes da Rocha and Kuma, from different perspectives, consider the cross-section an essential design tool due to its ability to establish a dialogue between the ground plane and the sky. As for Souto, he considers it a tool for "checking" and defends the importance of detail "because it is just like punctuation; any text is made of words, but it is punctuation, periods and commas, what grants it other qualities -rhythm, meaning-. And detail, like punctuation, is what makes a large work consistent".

The relevance of digital tools and their weight in the design process are at the center of some of the debates. Despite the mostly negative answers when asked about their ability to use CAD software, all of them acknowledge the potential of this tool, and some even suspect its condition as "an extension of the architect's hand", like the combinatory systems used by Nieto and Sobejano or the combination of physical and digital models used by Ferrater and Xavier Martí for the Benidorm seafront promenade. Only Kuma claims the use of complex-geometry software such as Rhino at the origin of the project. Tuñón, on the other hand, expresses his distrust and states: "we are deeply bored by that kind of architecture generated by the direct application of a script. We still have confidence in the type of architecture that is a result of personal decisions, in the direct relationship between our head and our hands, in collective intelligence".

We would highlight Siza's synthetic, conciliatory view; "tools must complement each other. If your work with models only, you are bound to make terrible mistakes. If you only use drawings, it will be a disaster. If you start working with too much rigor before having approached the project with an open mind, the result will be very limited. That is when the computer becomes a valuable tool."

The technical dimension of digital tools is only a small sample of a general conception about construction. It takes us straight to one of the pillars of not only each conversation published, but also of the approach of the magazine itself, as well as of its publishing house. The importance of technological reasoning in architecture is undeniable, and each of the interviews will clarify and qualify this point evaluating its impact on the final work. In the case of Manterola, this is obviously a key condition. In fact, he regrets that architects disregard technology, and claims, probably in a provocative way, the exclusive role of technique in the origin of space "the origin of space is not the imagination, the origin is the vault, the dome and a grid of beams [...] It is not the idea of space what creates the dome, it is the dome that creates the idea of space". In addition, just like computer software, it is to be used as a tool and not as a resource. Its operative dimension is completed with what Manterola calls extrapolation, an experienced journey into the unknown as creative strategy. "When one extrapolates instead of interpolating, fear appears, you do not know whether you can control everything,

and that is when you must dare. You always have to dare, but not be a fool, and this is something that everyone who faces difficult problems should know."

All twelve interviewees take a precise and relevant stance on the subject of technique and its impact on their works, something that has to do with this selection of architects who base their theoretical corpus on practice. Clotet chooses the honest expression of constructive language. Tuñón expresses his skepticism towards great technological displays, which reveals that none of the architects interviewed is on the cutting edge of structural design or technology. Mendes da Rocha similarly warns against the risk of exacerbating technological resources, and he adds that they should not be used without an ability for critical thinking. Gallego, as well as Lacaton, uses what the industry offers, and defends that building "is the most genuine expression of the act of creation", attributing to constructive reasoning a poetic quality that deals with the process of arranging and assembling matter. Lacaton adds a critical value to lightweight construction; the ability to "make complex solutions simple" and to "build getting rid of the limitations". Kuma is more specific and calls for a new material revolution, and even the end of the distinction between structure and cladding. Siza, besides having taught construction and not architectural design, distances himself from specialization and, as well as Gallego, defends working side by side with engineers and contractors. Nieto and Sobejano make use of prefabrication and customization to develop their combinatory systems, with a commitment to material and conceptual economy. Souto says, almost regrets, that in his work "the only objective aspect is construction, which I am more and more interested in". Perrault does not avoid technical thinking; he actually claims it for himself, and after praising industrialized construction -not industrialization-, waits for digital tools to take over production. Ferrater defends the role of the engineer-designer¹³ -in the case of OAB, Juan Calvo-, in the origin and development of the project, and suggests a direct relation between complex geometries and constructive mechanisms, prioritizing construction as a means of developing an idea.

¿Controversy or collaboration? Manterola's accusation, "it would be really good if architects would deal with their technology, a field that, in my opinion, they have abandoned", contrasts with that pretended attention towards technique and reminds us of Reyner Banham when he too accused modern architects in his book *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*: "The architecture that laid the foundations of the so-called international style, revealed its failure to grip the fundamental problems of building technology. In opting for types and understanding technique as an operational tool, not a creative discipline, the result was an incompatibility between architecture and technology"¹⁴, an accusation that in the case of Le Corbusier in relation to building systems leaves no doubt, "the most notable criminal of his generation in the field of environmental management"¹⁵.

Mendes da Rocha offers a way out if this dilemma when he talks about "technical pragmatism" and about a certain ability to adapt to technological means. Tuñón regrets how "technological advances cannot be easily applied to architecture [...] they happen more slowly than it seems". Siza speaks about negotiation, rather than synthesis, Ferrater considers the integration of technology in the architecture field and the architect's capability as a mediator.

These assertions and remarks bring into question the idea of conflict, probably attributed by Manterola only to those "exhibitionist" architects, and lead us to conclude that it is not so much about the depth of the architect's technological knowledge, but about how well they use it. It is not about technique per se, it is about their ability to stimulate and integrate it into the project and about the resulting demand for interdisciplinary collaboration that extends the boundaries of the project beyond administrative aspects. Site management is mentioned as one more of the stages, a key stage for it is the last one, of the non-linear design process whose continuity, so many times threatened, is vindicated. Manterola concurs: "construction management cannot be the final stage. When you lead a work site, you live the process [...] and the process is in the essence of construction."

Learning these design processes is a complex subject in itself, and teaching them at schools has undoubtedly contributed to the fragility of the programs of studies at Spanish architecture schools. The often questioned European convergence and the supposedly necessary integration of Universities into the market have come to determine today's highly complex scenario. It is perhaps for that reason, or maybe out of conviction, that the group of architects presented here, despite considering school a fundamental pillar of their work, do not emphasize their academic ranks in their discourse. This possible distance from the academic world, similar to the famous quote by Prouvé that Ferrater mentions, "let me die ignorant", does not keep some of them from developing an academic career, much less from firmly committing to teaching and research, which is particularly relevant for a magazine like *Palimpsesto*, born at the School of Architecture. University as a place for knowledge generation and organization, and not so much for its dissemination, comes up repeatedly at the end of each interview, when they answer a recurring question: what would you do if you were the director of the School of Architecture? "Accompany students throughout their studies" (Clotet), "Learn from students" and establish the city as one the primary objectives of architecture (Tuñón), focus on "critical rigor and the education of sensitivity" (Gallego), "broaden the conditions of their own freedom" (Lacaton), bring up the dimension of "materials and combine them with computer-aided design" (Kuma), stimulate the relationship between "architecture and politics" once present in the school of Barcelona (Siza), keep a balance between "designing and building", between "optimism and realism" in order to avoid the

problem that came over Italian schools (Nieto and Sobejano), "establish the conditions for learning" and specifically encourage vertical workshops (Perrault), "learn to look", turn the school into a souk with a new roadmap. (Ferrater)¹⁶.

Lastly, Souto de Moura insists on the need to open up the School in order to avoid turning it into a closed microcosm and states his hope for a more experimental school where there is a dialectic relationship between "dream and reality".

III

The simultaneous re-reading of all twelve texts has led to some conclusions, and, at best, to sketch out a portrayal of the architecture of our times. The individual look at each of the architectures examined here will be, without a doubt, altered once the transversal reading is completed. It is then appropriate to end the introduction to this compilation by taking a look back, albeit briefly, at each one of our interviewees. We will evaluate the comprehension of their works and lives, like at the ending of a novel, specifically *nouveau roman* novels, through the reconstruction of the story that the reader makes in his memory. This is an exercise for interpretation and proposal, rather than analysis, and it attempts to meet the qualities of in-depth essays that *Palimpsesto* intends for each of its editorial activities. Therefore, we give up the safety of quotes and first-person narrative to reflect briefly on each of the texts presented, and to include some more generic notes on the state of things in the world of architecture in 2015, hoping for the reader to complete or refute them.

We are in the middle of a twelve-voice conversation, a usual way of approaching architecture for Emilio Tuñón, who we will start this exercise with. During his last period working together with his colleague and friend Luis Moreno Mansilla he offered us an intense and deep dialogue that revealed his great intellectual capacity. His defense of procedure and operational strategies, rooted in the current social and disciplinary reality, is not incompatible with the integration of life and reality, which are basic ingredients of his architecture.

Kengo Kuma, throughout a clearer, more direct, and sometimes cryptic dialogue, shares with us a certain theoretical approach to architecture through his readings and writings, claiming the integration of nature through the use of material.

Dominique Perrault's interview was conducted at different times; with an extraordinary precision, he defends the importance of the concept as the origin of architecture and the germ of complexity. In order to preserve it throughout the design process, he establishes internal mechanisms to secure it, which he also extends to his teaching activity at the school.

Artistic dimension emerges powerfully during the conversation at the office of Fuensanta Nieto and Enrique Sobejano (who teaches at the Berlin University

of Arts) in Madrid. In the context of the presentation of their book "Memory and Invention"¹⁷, subject of the corresponding *call for papers*, we were surprised by their lucid commitment to the quality of the final result, even if it is a series of partial results, as opposed to the currently overrated processes in architectural discourse, processes which are always personal.

Javier Manterola Published "Engineering as a work of art"¹⁸ in 2010, with an explicit desire to extend the work of the engineer to a much wider social and cultural framework. He defends some of the social and humanistic values of technique, and not so much its scientific and positivist condition, as his preference for honesty over rigor reveals.

We feel like we are reaching the theoretical core of the architecture of the 50s and 60s, where the expressive curtness of De la Sota or the Smithsons influenced Manuel Gallego in his approach to architecture. The addition of his sensitivity and critical judgment, as well as his proximity with the industry, express the ability of the architect's profession for transforming reality and his distance from pretendedly austere trends.

The same lucid critique appears in Lluís Clotet's answers who, just around the time he was awarded the National Architecture Prize, defended what we may call "exhibitionist architecture" as an appropriate answer to certain situations, however rejecting and establishing a distinction between this type of architecture and fashion. The timelessness of his architecture emerges from the honest expression of his constructive language.

The work of Anne Lacaton and his partner Philippe Vassal, with that same honesty tends toward material and conceptual lightness, and stimulates the search for freedom as a basic condition of the architectural project. The value of personal approaches seems intrinsic to the architect's condition, a professional who is constantly forced to question his role in regards to society.

Among the three Pritzker Prize winners we have had the chance to interview, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, from the vastness of his country of origin, is the one that expresses a greater conscience of the power of the territory and its link with society, which is expressed by his genuinely Brazilian approach to architecture. His concern for infrastructures and mobility widens once again the strictly disciplinary framework that this architect deliberately avoids.

Alvaro Siza shows that same social commitment throughout his works, and he shared it with us at his office in Porto with a captivating voice, emphasizing the importance of his origins and influences. Work and talent, but also artistic curiosity, mix with a passion for life and for his increasingly internationalized work.

Eduardo Souto de Moura answered our questions from his office in that same building, although this time from afar. He strongly defended construction and the integration of matter through the attention to detail. The indiscriminate crisis strikes close the interview with an

ironic mention to the necessary internalization of work and life, particularly in the case of young architects.

The capacity for evolution -including internationalization-, comes up clearly in the multiple dialogue with Carlos Ferrater during his last regulated year at the University. The discourse builds up in parallel to his work as to support it and submit it to a process of successive filtering through intellectual audacity and open-mindedness, where complex geometries and their constructive foundation are second-to-last.

In most cases the ability for adaptation to the new professional scenarios imposed by society stands out. Far from the preaching architecture of the first modern architects, we can confirm a confident reformulation of the basic principles of modern movement without necessarily yielding to allegedly social or austere discourses, or exhibitionist architecture some years ago.

Thinking is probably overstating, but, could we consider the idea of a generation with shared features? None of the interviewees were star-architects, although they are widely recognized today. With some exceptions, they belong to a nearly equivalent generation, they have reclaimed a commitment to social service without losing their independence. They share an interest toward 60s architecture and cannot conceive architectural projects without the active participation of not only engineers and specialists, but also of all social actors, clients, contractors and society as necessary ingredients for its development and expression of its collective dimension. They do not reject political involvement, and through the recycling and reflection on the subject of programs, they approach history as a working tool for building the present. Contextualization and dialogue with the site are not an option, they are facts that branch out to technical and material approaches in their architectures, and adapt to industrial fabric and to the material memory of the place. Technical reasoning, through a certain industrialization of craftsmanship, is at the center of their design process but it is applied in a critical manner, and with certain values beyond those strictly scientific. Freedom, honesty and ambition in regard to the use of new materials, the creative potential of structural design... those are some of the vertices of this new way of approaching architectural construction that is also brought into schools, with a non-excluding defense of the integration of professional experience. They firmly and decidedly integrate engineers and specialists into the architecture field, bringing back the *Homo Faber* who is supposed to have the necessary soft and negotiating skills for the management of unquestionably collective projects.

We might then talk about the recovery of an attitude that, if not new, was scarce among the most celebrated types of architecture, and today, among those that seem to be only justified by the certainly alarming situation that we are living. In spite of the limitations of the journalistic genre, and also precisely because of them, by allowing a non-dogmatic approach to

architecture, we have the feeling of being in possession of a highly valuable material. We were responsible for putting it forward in a round-table discussion, and we dared to interpret it. It will undoubtedly be the reader who rebuilds the story.

Reconstruction after deconstruction? The reconstruction of architectural discipline that we have envisaged in these after-the-fact notes reassure us because of their conciliatory nature in regards to fragmentation and deconstruction. The mere intuition of this idea encourages us to orient our work in this direction in the next issues of the magazine. We picture twelve future interviewees during the next four years, who will share some of these features, and who will provide different results due to the necessary evolution and adaptation that occurs in every human activity related to the social scope. Thus, we present herein twelve conversations that will hopefully help get an overall idea of the architectural discourse and the figure of the architect at the beginning of the 21st century, complementary but not a replacement for the study of their works. Architects and engineers discussing architecture, individual spoken words that mix and blend with collective tradition in order to help understand the state of things, and the world that we live in.

NOTES

¹ Silvester, C. *The Penguin book of interviews*. Westminster, Penguin Books Ltd., 1994. According to Silvester, the first interview in history dates back to 1839 when the owner of *The New York Herald* James G. Bennet interviewed President Martin van Buren.

² Henry Brandon, *The Sunday Times*, London, 1957.

³ Peter, J., *The Oral History of Modern Architecture. Interviews with the Greatest Architects of the XXth century*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1994.

⁴ The Palimpsesto publishing house was created in 2013 after the appearance of the magazine in 2011. Directed by Carlos Ferrater and Alberto Peñín it is based in ETSAB-UPC and comes under the Cátedra Blanca of Barcelona, a Chair sponsored by CEMEX España whose main motivation is to bring experience closer to the intellectual education of students.

⁵ "Short Cuts", Robert Altman 1993. The film is inspired by nine short stories and a poem by Raymond Carver, father of American dirty realism and closely related to the French *Nouveau Roman*.

⁶ Martí, C., *La cimbra y el arco*, Madrid, Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, 2005.

⁷ Sennett, R., *The Craftsman*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008.

⁸ "Even for ten thousand dollars, I wouldn't let *Life* magazine use a tape recorder. You'll have to write everything down on cards". Silvester, C., op. cit., p. 56.

⁹ Most notably, those by Oscar Wilde, Truman Capote or Nabokov, who would never grant an interview without having previously answered the questionnaire.

¹⁰ Not to be confused with "the architect's regrets", much less interesting than their proposals.

¹¹ Ferrater, C., "El amigo invisible", Barcelona, OAB, 2014.

¹² However, it is worth noting the condition of infrastructure of the Braga Stadium, closer to civil engineer than to architecture, where the manipulation of matter reaches its peak by being moved from the mountain to the building itself.

¹³ Ferrater, C. with Peñín, A., "Arquitectura e Ingeniería", UPC Opening Lecture, 2013.

¹⁴ Banham, R., *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, New York, Praeger, 1960.

¹⁵ Banham, R., op.cit., p. 155.

¹⁶ Ferrater, C., "50 años en 50 minutos", ETSAB Opening Lecture, 2014.

¹⁷ Nieto, F. & Sobejano, E., *Memory and Invention*, Oftildern, Germany, Hatje Cantz Verlag 2013.

¹⁸ Manterola, J., *La ingeniería como obra de arte*, Pamplona, Laetoli-Fundación Arquitectura y Sociedad, 2010.

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01. Lluís Clotet

<http://upcommons.upc.edu/revistes/bitstream/2099/13058/1/Palimpsesto%2001%201%20Entrevista%20Llu%C3%81s%20Clotet.pdf>

02. Emilio Tuñón

<http://upcommons.upc.edu/revistes/bitstream/2099/13068/1/Palimpsesto%2002%202%20Entrevista%20Emilio%20Tu%C3%B1%C3%B3n.pdf>

03. Paulo Mendes da Rocha

<http://upcommons.upc.edu/revistes/bitstream/2099/13189/1/Palimpsesto%2003%201%20Paulo%20Mendes%20da%20Rocha.pdf>

04. Manuel Gallego

<http://upcommons.upc.edu/revistes/bitstream/2099/13209/1/Palimpsesto%2004%201%20Manuel%20Gallego.pdf>

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07. Kengo Kuma

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CONTRIBUTORS

Alberto Peñín Llobell (Gandía, 1970)

Architect, PhD, Design Professor at ETSAB since 1999 where he is currently vice dean. Codirector of Barcelona White Chair and of the Palimpsesto magazine and publishing house and lecturer at different schools. Practice at Peñín Architects and regular partner at OAB. His work has been published and awarded several times.

Cecília Obiol (Barcelona, 1981)

Architect. Assistant professor of Architectural Design at ETSAB from 2007 to 2010. Editor-in-chief of the magazine and publisher house Palimpsesto. Former assistant professor at BIArch and ETH-Zurich. Over 10 years of experience as a freelance architect, editor and curator.

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