

Eduardo Souto de Moura 2011 Laureate

Essay

Modern Project and Ancient Architecture

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"The Modern Movement is a project and not a language. As yet, nothing has appeared to replace it. It is only the means that have changed. I think that Aldo Rossi was one of those who recovered components that had apparently been forgotten: History, which was implied, but never evoked."
Eduardo Souto de Moura

In considering the Modern Movement as a project, Eduardo Souto de Moura sets out to evaluate the coherence and applicability of its principles, seeking to identify those elements that are enduring. He then compares these principles with the history of architecture. In no way is he attempting a nostalgic return to the early 20th century, nor is he defending any supposedly heroic avant-garde theory based on the idea of permanent ruptures with the past. Rather, he is looking for correlation between building forms and techniques (their appropriateness or their necessity) and between responding to a program brief and demonstrating functional versatility. In each case, Souto de Moura is seeking to understand how formal structures endure over time, discovering their role in the transformation of territory and the reasons for their continued persistence throughout the history of cities.

Eduardo Souto de Moura and six other architects from Porto refused to participate in the exhibition *After Modernism* (Lisbon, 1983). Nevertheless, they wrote a joint text for the catalogue. Following a brief description of the characteristics of 20th-century Portuguese architecture, they reached the conclusion that there was nothing to be gained by discussing the future of Portuguese architecture from the perspective of contrasting the modern and post-modern, as the promoters of this later movement proposed. And yet, if there was a fundamental problem underlying all projects that Souto de Moura had undertaken until then, it was precisely the relationship of modern architecture with the past, or the "presence of the past"—the theme of the 1980 Venice Biennale that probably lay at the foundation for the *After Modernism* exhibition undertaken in Portugal.

"I have always understood the Modern Movement as a continuation of Classicism." Souto de Moura said in 1994. "Basically, it is a discourse of continuity with different techniques and intentions, but with common underpinnings: proportions, the relationship between structure and form, a refined language."

New means include industrialized construction systems, concrete and iron, the skeleton structure, etc., as well as abstraction, which is considered necessary for a non-figurative formalization of architecture, as a way of overcoming historic eclecticism. Hence, the acceptance of the hypothesis of a (modern) *Architecture for Museums*—the title of a text by Aldo Rossi that returns to Cézanne's announcement of the need for an art whose meaning is derived from the confrontation with its past that only the organized temporal succession of museums enables us to understand.

Souto de Moura is only interested in a modern architecture that, just like the painting that Cézanne set out to produce, is "something solid and lasting, like the art of museums". Consequently, he immediately understood from the very beginning, when working with Álvaro Siza, that for architecture, cities are in fact like museums, since they are places where different periods are all present at the same time. They accompany one another, overlap with one another, establishing crossovers and giving rise to the city as we know it. Our fascination with cities lies in the infinite variety of its possible correspondences, in both near and distant allusions, in the limitless possibilities for imports and intertwining. They confront us with the different and even with the exotic. But it is a fascination that also lies in those similarities that seem fatal and necessary, arising from the universal human condition that, in a surprising demonstration of empathy, absorbs everything that is apparently strange or alien. It returns us to ourselves as the heirs of a way of living and giving shape to the things of life that is born with us, recognized as such through different times and places.

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For Souto de Moura, this city/museum must be upturned and examined in all of its stratifications—produced by permanent confrontation and overlapping layers—to reveal a past that is also a presence. These successive accumulations carry, if not the material presence of forms and spaces, at least evidence or memories that are also an important part of the city as we know it today.

It is a clinging to the past that necessarily involves abstraction as a way of thinking, both as a way of seeing and as a formal result. “We must treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone,” said Cézanne to his disciple Emile Bernard—an aim that Le Corbusier returned to some years later in the first issue of *L’Esprit Nouveau* (1920) “All is but spheres and cylinders. There are simple forms that provoke constant sensations.” The same simple or elementary forms are found in Aldo Rossi’s first architectural designs, simultaneously abstract and evocative of the architecture of the past.

“Abstraction” and “the city as a museum” are therefore the two complementary terms that enable us to understand Eduardo Souto de Moura’s first works, in which he outlines some of the premises that will later remain with him as firm convictions and will be successively revisited and questioned throughout his career.

For him, abstraction is understood, just as it is by Cézanne, as something that is deduced through observation of the real. That, in turn, leads to a simplification of forms, enabling us to see, for example, cylinders beneath columns, just as Le Corbusier did when visiting Roman houses at Pompeii. Figuration in architecture of the past is replaced by proportion and geometry. It is an attempt to get at the essence of historic forms reducing architecture to its most elementary components, to its volumetric and basic construction principles: “The spirit manifests itself in geometry, proportions are the language of architecture” Le Corbusier also said (leaving in abeyance—as if it has been momentarily ignored—the problem of decoration that will find a variety of solutions in Souto de Moura’s work.) Proportion can be seen as a language, and geometry as a means of organizing space, a tool for rationalizing formal and spatial relations, encapsulating, as Álvaro Siza states in *Imaginar a Evidência (Imagining Evidence)*, the project’s essential core—“Architecture is geometry.”

Abstraction and industrialized construction form part of a bipolarity that is always found in Souto de Moura’s work. It results from a permanent (case by case, work by work) evaluation of what is gained and what is lost with modern means, through a refined language, a skeleton structure, etc. In some cases Souto de Moura experiments with a return to old systems, such as the stone bearing walls of traditional architecture. In other cases, albeit in the form of an allusion or citation, he returns to the architectural orders and their decorative elements of mouldings, cornices and capitals. These were used, for example, as part of the competition project for the Office of the Secretary of State for Culture in Porto (1981-88) where the capitals by the lake were proposed as a support for a stage at the center of the garden, that was never built. Decorative elements were assembled as fragments in a collage, in the house in Boavista (1987-94). Stones from the old demolished house, with its mouldings and cornices, were inlaid in the long wall leading to the entrance to the new house. We might also consider his design for the competition “A House for Karl Friedrich Schinkel” (1979), divided into two sectors, one abstract and the other figurative. The latter was designed as a false ruin, with the invented remains of former decorative elements. Hence the permanent allusion to an absent, irrecoverable figuration, to those architectural orders that for so long had provided us with distinctly characteristic buildings. Hence the presence in all his works of a sense of loss, of incompleteness—a permanent allusion to the classical world in which structure and form came together to create a complete system, in which decoration played its own role in defining the form and character of buildings.

For all these reasons, or as a logical sequence of these same ideas, we witness Souto de Moura’s great attention to the entire context—to all of its existing features, ranging from what has already been built to the natural environment. He considers everything, from the garden to agriculture,

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from the natural relief of the terrain to the clumps of trees, to the watercourses and the supporting walls—everything testifying to the way in which the territory has been modified or built by human hands. Attention is paid to the singularity of places and landscapes, to the different scales of reality, to everything that, when seen in the reality of its form, is already the project. “The Louvre is a good book to consult,” Cézanne also said, “but it must only be an intermediary. The real and immense study that must be taken up is the manifold picture of nature.”

Souto de Moura considers topography to be one of his design materials. It is a conjunction of lines of force, suspensions and concordances, balances and imbalances, treated as the sustenance or starting point for an architecture in which figuration is unnecessary—or no longer possible. Plans and volumes are in relation to the surroundings and give rise to form—see for example, the Braga Stadium (2000-03), that clearly has parallels from this point of view with Álvaro Siza’s swimming pool in Leça da Palmeira (1961-66). Both designs begin with the great lines of the landscape (with very close and complementary relationships between what is natural and what is built). Both of them are simultaneously abstract and topographical, or territorial in nature.

Souto de Moura’s architecture is also intended to grow out of the construction, tending to make form and structure coincide with one another. “Identity of construction and form,” Ludwig Hilberseimer wrote in *Großstadt Architektur* (although this could also have been said by Mies van der Rohe) “is the indispensable prerequisite of all architecture. At first sight, both appear to be opposites. But, it is precisely in their close conjunction, in their unity, that architecture exists.” So, it is an architecture in which one is always confronted with the need to forestall the rift between architects and engineers. Take, for instance, the great circular openings in the Braga Stadium that optimize the role of the concrete slabs supporting the northeast stands. This idea was suggested by the engineers during the design phase in order to arrive at the most efficient structural solution, and later incorporated into the final version. Objective criteria are therefore sought to reduce arbitrariness. By working with constraints, Souto de Moura’s avoids being left with arbitrariness, form for form’s sake and whimsy as the only possible responses. Hence, the great attention he pays to the program—to the “functions”, as modern architects liked to call them—to solar orientation, and all the factors that make it possible to design a project without thinking about form. Souto de Moura is always seeking to get to the practical problem, and this is what precisely happens in his best projects.

In this context, the ruin takes on a special meaning as an artifact stripped of its most superficial figuration. It is a reduction of architecture to its formal principles, enabling the buildings to reveal their secrets more readily. It is as if ruins testified to the temporal and spatial unity of architecture.

All of this also has an intellectual or theoretical meaning, derived from Michelangelo’s famous test. When rolling a statue downhill, a good sculpture should lose none of its essential qualities. In order to confirm its formal consistency, the absence of everything that is accessory or superficial should reveal the guiding principle that runs through the whole piece.

The rehabilitation of the remains of a farmhouse in Gerês (1980-82) must be understood through this simultaneously abstract and analytical view of the ruin. The insertion of new elements into the ruin of the old farmhouse does not amount to a clash or confrontation between old and new, but corresponds instead to the unveiling of a continuity that lives by making suitable adaptations to the remains of a former farm building in order to fit in with the slab, pillar and glass panes that complete them.

The ruin, stripped of its figurative dimension by the ravages of time, accepts and incorporates modern architecture as a condition of a new equilibrium. It is as if reason and nature had coincided in the simultaneous unveiling of its formal structure and of its uniqueness as a specific place in the land.

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The ruin, however, is also a fragment, a part of a whole that it is sometimes difficult to capture in its entirety. The same happens with the multiple and complex dimensions of the contemporary city. It is the result of a layered accumulation over time that we can (or must) study and project in separate parts, moving from the particular to the general seeking to encompass the whole dimension of its reality. A city studied and projected “by parts,” as Aldo Rossi said, for he always defended the scientific dimension of architecture, its analytical study, and, simultaneously, as its counterpart, the fascinating and subjective dimension of the fragment.

This analytical or scientific study of architecture also lies at the origin of Souto de Moura’s interest in neoplasticism. He approaches it, above all, as an abstract procedure, which dismantles and reassembles the diverse elements of architecture, seeking its intelligibility. Souto de Moura studied this process not only in the work of Mies van der Rohe, but also in the work of Fernando Távora, especially in his tennis pavilion at Quinta da Conceição (1956-60). In this project Távora analytically selects elements of modern architecture and Portuguese traditions, combining them to achieve an equilibrium that is not only logical, but also surprising in the way that it displays fresh aspects in familiar or ordinary architectures. It is also perhaps the most remarkable quality of Souto de Moura’s best projects, ranging from the Braga market (1980-84) to the Paula Rego Museum in Cascais (2005-09).

The use of traditional elements and techniques result in a way of doing things that is always realistic, showing an awareness of the different possibilities offered by the available resources. The latest techniques as well as the most traditional or common ones, frequently regional and integrated as if they formed part of the place, show how the work is also born from the hands of others, bearing testimony to long technical and cultural continuities. Ceramic tiles, still currently manufactured and in keeping with ancestral processes, are used. The last stonemasons are called upon to build extensive walls of extraordinary beauty that, in turn, support roof slabs which have been waterproofed according to the latest methods. On the rooftops one can also see the sophisticated machinery that ventilates and controls the temperature of the building.

Modern architecture—especially that branch that has become identified with rationalism—looked for the “basic” and “transversal” phenomena of architecture in time from different perspectives. The “House of Man,” as Le Corbusier called it, simultaneously encompasses both the erudite and vernacular traditions, testifying to the different forms of dwellings collectively built over time.

“I believe that an architect’s greatest aspiration,” says Souto de Moura, “is to be anonymous; being anonymous is not being falsely modest, but managing to construct, at one particular time, a space that incorporates the knowledge accumulated over thousands of years; succeeding in using his intelligence to bring together all that has been done over thousands of years. When nature and artifact coexist in perfect equilibrium, the supreme state of the art is reached—the silence of things.”

This equilibrium directs our attention to the unity between architecture and geography that vernacular architecture has always been able to express in an evident way. “Buildings and spaces have to be firmly established and comfortably set in their place”—Fernando Távora used to say; “that quality of a good setting gives them a certain air of eternity. This is the true meaning of popular architecture.” This unity extends far beyond a supposedly logical or rational solution derived from the climatic and geographical conditions.

This is also a reality that, to a certain extent, lies beyond architecture—which contains it, but which is certainly broader than the actual knowledge of architects themselves. This reality summons and involves what is common to all men and, in a certain sense, to all times. Above all, it is a question of the knowledge and interpretation of places: singularities that make it possible to reveal, through architecture, “those millennial but still present ideas” that Fernando Távora also used to talk about.

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It is possible to understand the idea of a “modern project as a continuation of the architecture from the past,” based on the particular genealogy of many of Souto de Moura’s works. In the countless variants of patio houses, we can recognize a direct reference not only to the modern movement, but also to extremely old forms of housing. It can be thought of as a consequence of a research moving “from the particular to the general” (from the house to the city). It is an aim that he has pursued with great coherence, precisely because he approached the theme of urban cohesion as a “plural unity” and as a way of deepening the modern city’s relationship with its history and its territory. Lafayette Park neighborhood in Detroit (1955-56) planned by Mies and Hillberseimer is a reference that Souto de Moura constantly returns to, due to its use of different building types, with its patio houses and towers projected as alternative and complementary responses.

Souto de Moura’s patio houses in Porto (1982-85), Miramar (1987-1991), Matosinhos (1993-98) and Maia (1990-93) (1996-2007), are introverted houses. They can be called forms “without figure,” at best reduced to the placement and design of the entrance door. Some of them have a totally enclosed patio. Others have an open patio, resulting in an incomplete or interrupted seclusion, allowing for views to the outside, both near and far. In contrast, in the houses in Alcanena (1987-92) or Serra da Arrábida (1994-2002), close to Lisbon, the patio has been treated as if it were an open-air reception area with the compartments facing outwards, looking over the landscape. These latter two houses are more akin to Roman suburban or rural villas, expanding outward, unlike those with enclosed patios, similar in their seclusion and introversion to the urban domus of the ancient city.

The use of stone in the outer walls of some of these houses (in Miramar, Alcanena, Maia and Matosinhos) is an allusion to those archetypal forms in which the rural and the urban intersect. Here architecture and geography seem to coincide. For evidence of this, we need only recall the walled enclosure of the pasture, still existing in many areas in the north of Portugal as a characteristic way of enclosing great tracts of land.

Walls have turned into what is almost an obsession, for Souto de Moura. Patio walls, and supporting walls, all of them apparently neutral surfaces, vibrate in the intense relationship that they establish with orography and vegetation. It is as if the walls seemingly wished to establish themselves as the only possible architectural element, giving continuity to forms and spaces, in their multiple dimensions and scales, in their uniformities and fractures, as if they prevailed over all the rest.

In this context, Souto de Moura’s criticism of the study of vernacular architecture as an alternative language to the abstract rationality of modern architecture makes perfect sense. Hence, his scanty interest in militant nationalism, which he considers artificial. “Just as the Renaissance architects built in the Roman style and thus created the style of their own nation,” to use the words of Adolf Loos in *Trotzdem* (“Heimat Kunst”, 1912), we can similarly see in Souto de Moura the continuity of Classicism in the modern movement—constructing national architectures from common principles. And in relation to the question of how architects should build in a country that is not their own, one should also recall the observation, also made by Loos in the same text (and particularly suited to the projects Souto de Moura built outside Portugal) “simply trusting in the air that they breathe.”

The “city as a museum” requires close attention to minimal topographical accidents, to the reality of things (as Cézanne said). It seeks out a good setting, not in imitation of what already exists, whether natural or built, but as a balance between the natural and the artificial. It is the result of a response deduced or constructed from the needs that lie at its origin. A response that, as in the case of all rationalists, also contains a fascination for the contrast between geometry and nature that Souto de Moura finds or recognizes in classical architecture and in the work of Mies van der Rohe.

On the other hand, as an antithesis to all of this, the idea of nature is sometimes formulated as if it contained everything that existed:

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“I speak of nature as a set of natural things, our surrounding environment, ranging from the animal, vegetable or mineral kingdom to the actual artifacts themselves, which have become affective features of our everyday world. When these artifacts are natural, they belong to or form part of the geographical heritage that surrounds us. It is in this sense that I speak of nature: in the case of the Incas, the intervention made upon nature was diluted; in the case of Berlin, it is the very architecture of the city.”

“Once it has been created,” said Goethe, “every work of art, good or bad, belongs to nature. Antiquity belongs to nature, and, when it moves us, it belongs to the most natural nature.”

A good setting, as a response to a site and a program, always reveals itself to us as something evident, as a necessary form. Referring to Fernando Távora once more, for instance: “What is most beautiful about a work is that it can be like a flower. A flower is not something that you discuss; it is something that is given to us with absolute decisiveness, something whose solution has a certain degree of fatality.” And here nature is transformed into a model of architecture (not as “natura naturata” but as “natura naturans”). “Naturality” is synonymous with suitability. As if the artificiality of architecture found its answer in the expectation of seeing itself reflected in the order of nature.

Hence going back to the beginning, the idea of the past emerges as something that is beyond time, as a circular dimension that always returns and is understood, just like nature, as a model (it is in this sense that we interpret the aphorism of Goethe quoted earlier.) A past that is present in the city as it exists today, considered in its broadest sense as including all humanized territory.

In a certain way, the study of the past is equivalent to observing nature, being aware of the reality of things, noting the simultaneous unity and infinite variety of forms over time and place. Therefore, the fascination with the ruin, where nature and history come together, where the truth of the form is revealed in the passage of time.

It is a fascination with the ruin that is in no way modern, that doubts the possibility of a new architecture as such. Fragment and abstraction correspond to one another, they mutually illuminate one another, unfolding multiple possibilities of summoning up the past as present. The cylindrical pillar of the house in Gerês is a column; the market in Braga is a stoa. Is it possible that the fascination with ruins is also the recognition of the primacy of the ancient?

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