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Towards a broader horizon

John Marshall, a student I've recently taught, sits on top of a concrete wall after sketching the geometric incisions of the tidal swimming pools in the midst of rocks and battering waves, with the broad horizon of the Atlantic beyond. This is preceded by the gentle descending movement from road level, parallel to the street and coastal line, at the end of which sea view disappears in the obscurity of the changing rooms. Open view is offered, denied and unveiled again at lower level with the flatness of distant horizon defied by the roughness of rocks and waves nearby (*fig.1*). A few hours later, two thousand kilometres away, John stands on the edge of the cliff looking the same distant horizon of the Atlantic from the south coast of São Miguel Island, sketching, eager to grasp the essence of the setting, cross referencing recent architectural experiences.

Back in the studio, he produces a series of parallel sections through the cliff, cut in cardboard and assembled as a site model describing the configuration of the terrain (*fig.2*). The brief required a small facility to support economic activities related to the productive land of the island, addressing topographical edge conditions. John designed a fish restaurant and shop, on the edge of the cliff with a mooring pier for the fishing boats arriving from the sea. Slightly sunken from road level, the building remains intentionally unnoticed from streetscape. On the west side, approach, entrance and access to the dining room are stages of a descending movement that offers, denies and unveils the open view of the Atlantic. The same happens to the public journey connecting street level and pier. A concrete wall extends the sea facing façade of the restaurant downwards to the sea level (*fig.3*). From street level, a long stair descends in the obscurity of the space between the concrete wall and the cliff, denying the open view whilst announcing it with the natural light penetrating the wall at the bottom. In an ascending movement, a tension cable delivers the fish from the pier to the kitchen and fishmongers shop on the east edge of the building at street level. This simple gesture, the building's fishing line, whilst seemingly vulnerable in contrast with the robustness of the architecture; it furthers the kinship between the building and the setting.

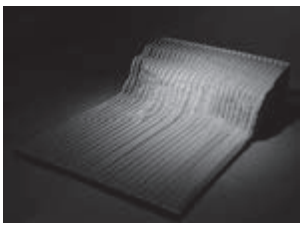
Two distinct traditions stand behind the work of John Marshall in our studio in Oxford.

The Horizon of the School

When I was a student in Coimbra in the 1990's, the wings of the cloister were the horizon of the school (*fig.4*). At that time, the sense of intellectual and spatial isolation amongst students and professors reflected the lack of engagement between a new school of Architecture and a University widely credited for its excellence in other fields of studies. The College of Arts, built in the late sixteenth century, started another cycle of life. Its topographical condition – at the top of the acropolis – as well as its typological nature – large central courtyard –, whilst evoking centrality, also nurtured segregation. But there were other horizons.

The narrow one, hardly noticed, from the vertical windows of the design studio, and the wider horizon from the bar terrace – from where

1. Unit F Study Trip November 2010, visit to Tidal Swimming Pools, Leça da Palmeira, Álvaro Siza.



2. John Marshall, Unit F student work, Azores Fish Restaurant, 2010, Site Model.

3. John Marshall, Unit F student work, Azores Fish Restaurant, 2010, Model.

4. View of the Cloister at the College of Arts, Department of Architecture, University of Coimbra.

we could see the city to the north and east, disappearing downhill towards the west where a more distant horizon of the river valley emerges. At the beginning of the progressive occupation of the College of Arts the cloister remained as a void as only the upper galleries were partly occupied.

During my studies, five years of Design Studio and five years of History of Architecture formed the essence of the curricular structure. Drawing and Construction Technology complemented the Design Studio, and a theoretical dissertation in sixth year was the counterpoint to a heavily practical course of studies.

In the design studio, sites in town, on the fringes of the city or in the surrounding rural settings were all within the familiarity of most students' cultural context. A single brief was shared by the entire group of students each year. A piece of furniture, a garden by the river, the redesign of the city market, a housing scheme for the illiterate developer or the master planning of the suburban towns – all these projects formed a comprehensive approach to the profession, involving the full range of architectural scales students would face in practice.

The culture of the design studio was the culture of the atelier. Techniques and methods were those explored in practice – the sketch and the physical model as the fundamental instruments of the design process, materialised in the rigorous composition of the plan, the section and the elevation. Design briefs likewise, were realistically prescribed, leaving no room for intellectual speculation on the programmatic aspects of Architecture. Exceptions and challenges to this regimented form of architectural education were sporadic and perhaps their value underestimated.

For its consistency of method and technique this school could not be seen as lacking an agenda or a vision for architectural education. Its primary aim has always been utterly clear: to educate the students to act competently as professionals and to be capable to tackle the topographical constrains of the site, the complexities of the city, and to establish relationships with the wider territory. This was the manifestation of an architectural education based on the shared values of our culture and on what was considered to be the fundamental aspects of Architecture, as a discipline and as profession believed to play a cultural role in the society. The premises of the Modern Movement were still the primary reference, the Post Modernism ignored, study travelling unaffordable, and the new generation of digital instruments was becoming an increasingly inevitable issue to be addressed, prompting some to wonder "what extraordinary things would Piranesi do with a computer" (Ferreira, 2000, p.71).

The wings of the cloister were the horizon of the school; the profession was the horizon of architectural education in Coimbra.

In our design studio in Oxford, we are at the opposite end of the spectrum of architectural education. In our school, as in many schools in United Kingdom, diversity in design studio subjects, techniques and approaches is the overriding principle that prevails over an agenda that sets the school's position in relation to the fundamental aspects of the discipline and the profession. This is largely due to the educational model implemented at the Architectural Association School in London during the 1970's.

The Horizon of the Discipline

In 1971, with the outbreak of post-modern architecture imminent, Alvin Boyarsky (*fig.5*) is elected chairman of the Architectural Association School in London. Acknowledging the demise of the modernist paradigm and refusing to associate the school with any *single trend*, Boyarsky recognised the pressing need to reopen the debate and review the fundamental subjects of the discipline, beyond the practicalities of the profession. In his view, a meaningful debate would have to be inclusive of all approaches and visions, in pursue of the unknown alternative. By distancing the school from the brutalist, historicist or high tech expressions of the architectural production of the time, by separating profession and education, Boyarsky "inaugurated a new form of pedagogy, the objective of which was not to educate the student architect in the profession (Boyarsky thought that this was something that could be learned in architectural offices) but to immerse the student in a global conversation" (Colomina, 2011, p.43). The idea of Architecture as building loses relevance in favour of a wider and more theoretical architectural discourse formed by a body of ideas from a diversity of sources and fields of thought. Alvin Boyarsky once asserted that students were encouraged to "rise above their situation...to look at the scene around them, the situation in which architecture was made, and introduce a political note to their work." (Boyarsky, 2010, p.51). At a time of uncertainly, the cultural role of professional practice was questioned and a broader debate in pursue for a new horizon of the discipline was promoted. The educational model implemented at the Architectural Association forced each individual to adopt their own intellectual position and elaborate an architectural discourse within each design studio. *Each* unit master had to 'sell' his or her programme to the student body at the beginning of the year. At the end of the year, both staff and students faced another public test as each unit puts its work on show in an exhibition installation and the pages of an accompanying *Projects Review* publication" (Higgot, 2007, p.161). The educational model implemented by Boyarsky has been adopted by many architectural schools in Britain. *It also became* the foundation of post-modern architectural education that superseded the rigidity of the Bauhaus and the Beaux Arts models. Perhaps it can be said that Boyarsky's legacy of the individual responsibility at the expense of the institutional discourse partly contributed to the development of individual expression so evident in the architectural production in our days.

Dalibor Vesely, who took part in Boyarsky's AA project, more recently stated that "architects are more aware of the differences that separate them, giving their work an aura of novelty and originality" (Vesely, 2004, p.12). This, he continues "leaves behind the common references and goals that contribute to the long term cultural relevance of their work" (Vesely, 2004, p.12). On this account, having adopted the AA model for a few decades, some schools of Architecture are now becoming increasingly interested in retrieving a collective discourse, recognising that Architecture, to stand as a form of cultural expression, it must materialise the expression of cultural norms that we collectively inherit and share. Therefore, an educational model should not be mistaken for the content it offers to the students.

5. Alvin Boyarsky riding an elephant in Bedford Square, London, c1975, Credit: Feri Sanjar, Source: Architectural Association School of Architecture.

6. The AA School Bar, London, c1980, Credit: Valerie Bennett, Source: Architectural Association School of Architecture.

Coimbra offsets its apparent localism by keeping a selective range of distant references in play – Loos, Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies, and Aalto were recurring themes in the studio. On the other hand, the everyday life of the explicit internationalism of the AA largely took place in the very secluded English atmosphere of the school bar, like a London local pub or a member's club (*fig.6*), perhaps not surprisingly called Architectural *Association*. Coimbra in the 1990's and Boyarsky's AA have in common a position of resistance towards the world outside – post-modern debates in the first case and the profession in the second. Somewhat anachronistically, they enjoy singular relationships with their own time, simultaneously adhering to and distancing themselves from it (Agamben, 2009, p.41). Whilst the first enjoys its contemporaneity as *slow school for a fast architecture*[1], the second engaged in an urgent pursue for the alternative, as a *fast school for a stagnant architectural culture*. If the horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a vantage point (Gadamer, 1975, p.302), it can be argued that Coimbra narrowed its view of the world, focusing its agenda on commonality, as defined by the collective belief in the established permanent values of our culture as well as in the cultural role of the profession. In the opposite direction, Boyarsky's AA opened up the horizon of the discipline to its full 360 degrees, raising awareness of the difference in each individual's intellectual position in order to comprehensively question the values of the established culture. Between the focus in commonality and the awareness of difference, both models have revealed their weaknesses and proved their merits. In the pages that follow I will present an account of the work of our studio and how it operates in the context of these two traditions.

The Horizon of the World

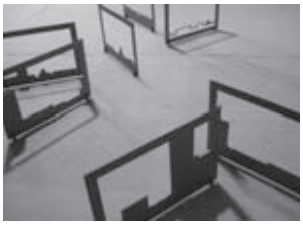
In architectural education, the design studio is the place where students articulate their pre academic experience – of the patterns of their life as members of the society – with the knowledge acquired through their architectural studies. However obvious this statement may seem, it must be defined how the project *provides* the students with a critical view of the current architectural culture in order to understand the horizon of the world in which we live. Accepting that this world is the context where our work finds its place, but also the result of our architectural work, students must be encouraged to embrace the responsibility of fully understanding the specificities of the given condition as the only one approach to materialize a meaningful architectural response that can contribute to the cultural dimension of the horizons of our cities.

We start our projects by taking the site in the city as the subject of a precedent study. Le Corbusier once advised young architects to "not believe anything until" they "have seen, measured and touched everything with"[2] their own fingers. Students are prompted to undertake the *topographical essay* of an intensely urban setting (*fig.7*). This consists of a series of sections, *drawn from the student's own surveys that* encourage structured thought and form the student's narrative of the place before the arrival of a new architectural work. They describe the physical character of the place, revealing latent qualities and potentials, otherwise unnoticed in plan drawing or photography. Measure and dimensionality will give the student a meticulous understanding of the context where is or her architectural work will develop. The *topographical essay* develops and records students' knowledge of the site. Once identified common ground between students individual *essays*, smalls groups of students produce a short film where the sectional narrative becomes the structure of the film, as it were sections in motion.

Traveling as well as *learning the way back home* are fundamental aspects of the learning journey in our studio. Abroad we visit not only works of architecture, places and landscapes in an unfamiliar geographical and cultural setting, but most importantly, architects practices and local schools of Architecture. Students are hosted visitors rather than passing-by tourists. Lectures, debates and workshops with local students and professors provide a deep insight about a different architectural culture. Ultimately, studio travelling, as Mark Wigley (2011, p.152) once suggested is intended as "a passionate embrace of leaving the familiar world behind and having all one's assumptions challenged by the strangeness of the encounter with things that are thoroughly other, palpably alien". As a counterpoint to the intensely urban setting in London, a site in the midst of a natural landscape – humanised and transformed over time for common practical purposes just like our cities – is elected to develop a project, back in the studio, that expresses students' *challenged assumptions* and reveals the *strangeness of the encounters* but also students' involvement with the *other* culture. Hosting professors travel to Oxford as visiting critics to offer their views on the work produced. Here, different approaches are confronted, architectural cultures are cross referenced and students' horizon is widened. Returning to the site in the city near us, students develop the main architectural project, to which interests have already been identified and an approach initiated through the earlier *topographical essay*. Latent or more direct connections and analogies with the project abroad are revealed, remote architectural cultures remembered and translated. However, the topographical horizon that is near is insufficient as it reduces architecture to contextualism confined to the limits of its locality. Jorge Figueira refers to Alvaro Siza's obsessively rigorous understanding of the site as "means not to be contextualist but to be convincingly universal" (Figueira, 2008). On this account, learning from travelling and designing in an unfamiliar cultural and geographical setting dissolves the border between local values and universal quests, positioning the work of the student in a wider frame of reference.

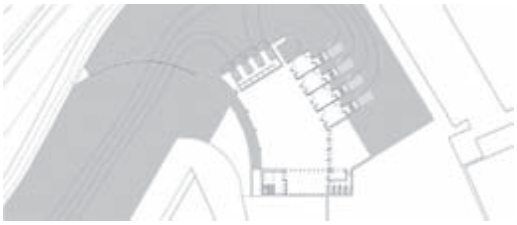
I briefly return to the work of John Marshall and his semester 2 project on the west bank of the River Lea in east London (*fig.8*). The scrap store is a public facility that receives unwanted materials from multiple sources in the city and recycles them into prosaic objects of everyday life, accommodating spaces for temporary work and residence.

The four wings enclosing the courtyard address the urban topography – by providing the building with multiple orientations. The typology also deals with the nature of the programme – materials arrive from multiple sources and are processed in a central space.



7. John Marshall, Unit F student work, Stratford Topographical Study, 2010.

8. John Marshall, Unit F student work, Stratford Scrap Store, Axonometric View, 2011.



9. John Marshall, Unit F student work, Stratford Scrap Store, Ground Floor plan, 2011.

Two wings are bounded by a reconfigured water edge of docking spaces welcoming arrival from the river. On the opposite side, the west facing portico marks the arrival from the city, and together with the departure of the bridge, forms a new urban space that frames the presence of the new building (*fig.9*). The bridge connects east and west, its high walls control and delay views, intensifying expectations. Its geometry channels floating unwanted objects towards the north edge of the courtyard. Like the Azores project, the project recasts the given conditions in a new light, igniting latent potentials and establishing new connections. It expresses and synthesises the student's learning journey. It partly results from that *strangeness of the encounter with things that* were *thoroughly other*, now becoming strangely familiar. It reveals unanticipated connections with previous projects and crystallises earlier experiences in the studio, positioning the work of the student in a wider frame of reference. The courtyard is the typological device that opens the building towards the city, the surrounding landscape and the world.

Towards a broader Horizon

The receptivity of the school to engage with a broader horizon of thought – expressed in the organisation of international events such as this, lectures by invited speakers from abroad, or professors from this school being invited to lecture around the world – must be reflected in the practice of the design studio. The intrinsic aspects of our architectural culture – relationship with our history, passionate affiliation with modernism, the affinity with the land, the place and the territory – are put at risk if taken for granted. But if these are reproduced and remembered in a design studio engaged with the world outside our geographical and cultural borders, they will contribute to advance our architectural thinking. In the encounter with other climates, architectural cultures, schools of architecture, architects and students, we will learn where we sit in the broader horizon of the world.

Assuming Architecture is the best analogy to its own education, to conclude I return to the home of the school, the College of Arts in Coimbra. The wings and the cloister they enclose have been surpassed as the horizon of the school. Whilst its typological nature evokes centrality, it also suggests the existence of multiple horizons, simultaneously allowing different views, relating to several rings of distance.

Opposing the idea of a building open to its own interior, its topographical condition enables affinities and establishes connections to things nearby, within reach and afar, orienting the school towards the broader horizon of the world.

1 → Slow School / Fast Architecture is the tile of a video installation by Jorge Figueira and António Olaio produced in 1998 about the Department of Architecture, University of Coimbra.

2 → Le Corbusier, cited by Spyros Papapetros in "Le Corbusier and Freud on the Acropolis: notes on a parallel itinerary" published in "Architects' Journeys, Building, Travelling, Thinking" edited by Craig Buckley and Pollyanna Rhee (New York, GSAPP Books, 2011), page 152.

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