

BUILDING THE SCHOOL

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As architects, we often think of spaces as the result of a programme previously defined by the owner of a site who generally has various ideas, thoughts and especially a budget for us to carry out a particular project.

The architect is required to provide a strategy to optimise, on the one hand, the parameters of a programme and, on the other, the defined costs and specificities of the terrain.

I think that we all do it every day, at home, at work, and so we acquire some experience in “organising spaces” in an empirical way, which is the core task of an architect’s profession. Yet the architect must not only do this job, but a number of others that should be explained in order to understand how you design a project to be global and, above all, coherent and consequent.

Vitruvius, the great classical Roman architect (1st century B.C), wrote about the eminent qualities that an architect must possess, as follows:

“An architect should be a good writer, a skilful draftsman, versed in geometry and optics, expert at figures, acquainted with history, informed on the principles of natural and moral philosophy, somewhat of a musician, not ignorant of the law and of physics, nor of the motions, laws, and relations to each other, of the heavenly bodies”. He should also be in good health and have some cooking skills, since he will spend long nights and hot days by the temple being built.

Designing a space for lifelong learning, for childhood or old age, cannot be harder than designing a space for ourselves. It is in this space for us that techniques can be developed and applied for architecture or a building with a different expression, according to its era and rules, demands and needs.

There is an increase in construction regulations, every day sees new legislation to be applied to buildings or facilities in order for them to get a permit. There are rules for a variety of purposes, objectives and for every facility that is built.

There are rules for building walls, creating windows, schools, hospitals, for the construction of homes, hotels, bed and breakfasts, restaurants...and for any and every house too.

These guidelines are defined holistically and are not contingent on age or gender, with a few exceptions that require attention to accessibility and users with mobility issues to eliminate architectural barriers in designed building.

We can now see that there are a number of restrictions on designing any building, be they legal, financial, functional or aesthetic, hence the complexity of Architecture.

To this we can add the need for a structural plan, so that building remains standing without problems; a fire safety plan; a water and sewerage plan; an acoustic plan, to maximise comfort; a ventilation plan, to guarantee air quality; an energy plan; air conditioning network; thermal calculation; active and passive security; a gas plan, among others (nowadays there are around twenty-one specialties needed to approve a project and begin building). Then we realise that it is through a good project, able to articulate all these specialties, that it is possible to make good

architecture, and that it is possible to make construction more effective and economical in Portugal.

Coordinating and controlling costs of the various areas and techniques while drafting a project is the right path to the future success of the project.

Broadly speaking, it is the architect's role to "understand" a bit of all these specific technical areas. He is thus the maestro of this orchestra and accordingly, as well as the general design of the building, he should make sure that electrical points and ventilation ducts are correctly connected, so that all the technical features of the building enable it to function correctly.

We can even say that there is no specific architecture for learning, as there is no specific architecture for old age. What exists is an architecture that can serve a particular purpose and certain demands and programmes that the law carefully outlines. And it is from this viewpoint that a project is guided towards a specific aim, in this case for people whose age determines its demands and specificities.

In this sense a project is a thought and decision process, an act of reflection that is achieved through a programme adapted to certain end goals. This reflection should have the objective of humanising spaces for living, for the evolution of the different people who will give it life and who will, within their abilities, pursue their needs and desires.

In effect, it is good programmes and good clients that make good projects.

Reflecting on the living project to build a facility for education and childhood makes one question the fundamental aspects, the priorities and the hierarchies that should be followed and developed on a conceptual level. This includes the architectural perspective and the perspective of the users that will occupy the finished space or building. There are always doubts: Will the project meet the needs and aspirations of those who will use it? Will it respect the personality, dignity and autonomy of the people who will occupy it? Will it be able to adapt to the changes that will come? Will it provoke and motivate the social and human development of its pupils?

After all the questions about the relevance of a project, we get into the details of the living project which it depends on. And in this process three fundamental and interconnected objectives should be contemplated: stability, adaptability and flexibility of the facility.

Ensuring the children's stability is to offer them security, it is to provide them with structures and equipments that foster learning and socialising skills on a daily basis, which encourage movement, interaction and above all makes them question...so that nothing is taken for granted.

Giving the project an evolutionary dimension that allows it to adapt to the demands of the process of growth and new practices, people, students, teachers and parents, its changes to ways of being and living is to provide it with quality and a bonus to evolution, which architecture, the building, the project can provide.

So the architect cannot limit himself to a technical perspective. It is not enough to make a list of useful points to fulfil, to reproduce acritical organisation charts, truths without questioning, or even to incorporate the demands of the entities and institutions that have long been out of touch with daily life and surrounded themselves with rules and diagrams that no longer affect the more dynamic reality. Financial aspects also influence the search for new solutions, regarding technical and programmatic rules that the "project" must always respect and comply with. However a true project must include a creative dimension and, for this reason, communicate human values that are rarely assessed and sought in other types of architecture.

Whether it is a brand new building, or a refurbishment or restoration, even if it is a building that comprises other programmes like the Espinho art and culture Forum – which is just revisiting the idea of a school as a place to exchange and share, with traditional classrooms, rooms for small groups, for follow-up sessions, combining museum and artistic learning spaces with areas for exhibitions, where the flexibility, experimentation and confrontation of teaching practices are possible and desirable – we often understand that it is not flexibility or adaptability, or the desire for freedom in the search for new programmes and new buildings, that are the true expression of a space devoted to teaching and learning.

Essentially we think of the school as a home, not a place you go to but a place you live in. We inhabit school as we inhabit the world, as a true place for exchanging experiences, ideas, know-how, personalities, and so it creates culture and knowledge. It is the ideal place to train new ways of seeing and constructing a society, which we long to be fairer and thus happier.

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