

## From the recent past to a future memory

NUNO LACERDA LOPES

In Portugal, we are rarely monitored, we are rarely sympathetic with our neighbour and we rarely help or associate with our competitors next door.

The clique, closing in on ourselves and navel-gazing is always an option and therefore a bad counsellor.

What we need is to collaborate and refresh our ideas, to introduce new methods, new “ignorances”, new attempts, new people, new companies, to close the “industries with the boss’s house in front”, to educate, to reformulate procedures, to be demanding in terms of results and desire to do good, to do what we do best and also properly evaluate what we do or propose to do... breaking away from the Innovation checklist that some agencies insist on producing.

Therefore, it is also necessary for the government’s programmes to support many top quality programmes, to completely restructure the economics and finances of the results. Evaluate the objectives too and re-do the analyses and conduct opinion polls, change the institutions and institutionalised knowledge and its attitudes, in order to make it possible to work with the fluid ideas and extreme alterations and constant changes that characterise contemporary life.

The goal of desired innovation is to try to bridge the gap between people’s needs and wants and the products, the organisations and the services that companies and institutions offer. If we narrow this gap, this hiatus, then we will meet some ideal of innovation and, therefore, we can say that we have innovated in some way, we brought people together, we resolved some need of theirs.

Today we need to validate and integrate the approaches and the different procedures that people, the users of spaces and objects, adopt with respect to the products that our companies launch and the architects design. The relationship works both ways between these ever-intersecting groups, of those who produce and those who use, and it is thus necessary to reassess the systems, the methods, the products and their uses. It is necessary to be open to new potentials and observe the behaviours of those who interact with them.

The standard today is still to sell and increase sales. In the future it will be to create a community that interacts directly with the company. The ideal of the big company (the multinational that many companies aspire to become) may not be the desired security or the guarantee of anything. Without communication, without the integration and understanding of its consumers, its partners, there will be no market, there will be no future for companies, only for the product which will run out in due course.

Today the individual can overcome the collective in argumentation, by working as part of a network. Society needs all (the) “us” so it does not become weak. As an example, there are airlines where sometimes the scale of a simple rejection of a single customer’s complaint reaches unimaginable proportions and consequences yet to be determined, given the

widespread dissemination that cyberspace permits, and that would almost always have been inconsequential in the past.

The vision of a man who is part of this network offers a differentiating awareness for the creation of objects for a market that is no longer of consumption, but of choice and interaction; where Man and the environment are linked; where, in light of the prosperity of technique and productivity, there is a demand for more quality in the provision of something innovative, whether it is products, services, or the spaces that are created. If we look at the recent past of the innovation processes which have been debated or incorporated in this free World we understand how much past, tradition and preservation we inscribe in the so called innovation that we are always struggling to produce.

What brand, what company can communicate its ideology, its positioning, its status through its space? What concerns are expressed through its “void” and the elements it comprises? Can anyone remember the reception area of the largest Portuguese electrical provider? And can anyone remember the spaces that large commercial and industrial companies re-built after the 80s in this European Portugal? Even the banks that spent so much of their budget to communicate ideas of unity, solidity and security, their market strategy, took the surface to be the substance and the container to be the content.

What we can see is that there is an overall tendency to take the easy route, where ideas simply try to attest to a conviction, they are no longer fertile ground for the analysis of a programme, for the reflection of a need, a place to intervene, a culture to discover. Of a sterile shape, in the virtuoso graphics, the colour of the season and the false creativity or innovation, the proposal is constructed under the guise of a “brand”, which in reality it is not.

Today, we are aware of the value of the brand, the value of the brand as a whole. An identity that reaches further than visual identity, it is said. More than a logo, a name, a personality, today the company has an architectural sense – in Architecture there is mention of the Brand. The concept and its expression are pleasant, but the application we have witnessed in the creation and construction of manuals with norms and exhaustive repetitions is not valid.

Today, when thinking of a commercial space, a corporate space, a “brand” or “brand architecture”, we think of a family of objects. There is a quest for an ideal of a “Dalton” family that is immediately recognisable and only varies in size. And the more it looks like “mummy”, the more success there seems to be among brand professionals and administrative boards.

Regrettably, this is not architecture, it is not innovation and I also do not know what it could be. It is uninteresting, absence, convenience, uniform. Consequently, there is a whole lot of innovation to be done! It is not to make something different, it is not a matter of a new design, of style, of adapting models, of repressing ideas in order to make them “new”, but a process of getting close to people, to their dynamics, to their physical, mental and social structure, to their state of crossing and intellectual mobility.

One century ago Coderch, a great Catalan architect, said that “it is not geniuses that we need now” and today we can say to this that what we need are authentic solutions for the companies that we create and their identities that are lost between the smile of a market leader company and the scowl of a modest panel-beater, between the optimisation of an idea and concept and the choice or decision made based on a plain Excel spreadsheet.

In these parts, in this country (perhaps more in the north than in the south) there is a shameful difference! With regard to true innovation... paradoxically there has never been more mention of innovation in the media, in companies, in schools, in education programmes. So much training has been given for everything to remain the same, in the “bain-marie” of the present.

Eduardo Lourenço says that our space, our present, reality “knocks on our door”. In this sense, it formats our future without surprises. This means that in a way the future is presented to us as something where no one need worry, in the sense of having to invent it, of trying to change it, even imagining or resolving the problems or limitations that the present creates for us. “The future seems increasingly more like a destiny with the name of another person, or persons, imperial above it. (...) What we need is a present that is new, that is truly born from our work, our invention, our unforeseen and unpredictable imagination.”

Therefore, we understand that a lot of the innovation that is striven for is the preservation of the innovation that already exists! It is the confirmation that what is being done has been done properly, it is the desire to find “new” solutions but keeping the same methods. In essence, it is the utter inability to deal with mistakes, with a lack of success, with the attempt, with the novelty. At its extreme, to deal with ourselves and the (in)ability to reinvent ourselves every day. Thus, it is the future that is knocking on the door.

Einstein said “*There is no greater evidence of insanity than doing the same thing day after day and expecting different results*” adding that “in moments of crisis, only imagination is more important than knowledge.”

We have adhered to this idea for many years, for it seems to be one of the purest truths. How can we expect a different result from 27 if we do not change the 3, the 9 or the operation of multiplication? It seems obvious and it seems strange. Many people have insisted on maintaining procedures but expect different results. In a hope for novelty, for innovation, without taking action to change processes, ways of seeing, of doing, of feeling, of thinking,... the products, the spaces, the needs, the desires and the understandings, especially this that is constantly changing and re-adapting itself in successive metamorphoses, it does not seem possible, it does not seem possible to dare to innovate.

Today, the market is not a stable paradigm (nor do we know if it ever was), yet there used to be other standards. The family was an analytical base and a safe base for any study on consumption and taste. And the colours, the audacity, the false innovations came from afar. There was no safe work on spaces for the companies, spaces as a brand, spaces as comfort, spaces as communication or, to put it another way, space as the company's activity. Works of creation would often only clothe the spaces and homogenise the solutions. Dangerously, these practices were taught as the value of the space and the brands. How many architects, designers and creative people castrated themselves with these scientific criteria imported from who knows where?

They are sporadic, isolated and partial, the strategies for conceiving an affirmative and qualitative identity of commercial spaces and shops that the end of the Portuguese century produced and is yet to be done, History. Nevertheless, we considered some interesting examples, and some prospective and experimental works which the 90s brought about and introduced into our grey national panorama. They are more of an installation and more of an artistic interest than a commercial branding strategy and the focus that this subject requires. From this process one perceives the impoverishing separation of the different areas of knowing and consequently of the ways of doing, thinking and developing. This is as important a topic as interior spaces which, besides comfort and their functional qualities, have a component of communication and fundamental identification.

From architects they demanded rigour, functional efficacy and the meeting of deadlines. From designers, plastic artists and other architects the “wow effect”, the singular and the different. From branders a solution that respects the brand's identity and as a result the delivery of a manual, a normalisation of a false idea of ownership that is lost in the overworked ideal of “one size fits all” which has trivialised and failed so many companies.

Well, we can say and perhaps deduce that we were not prepared for the market growth, for the construction of so many shopping centres, so many neighbourhoods, so many chain stores of so many hypermarkets, so many desires to create brands, to innovate, to respond to this market that wanted “visuals”, that asked for new models, that asked for differentiation, that asked for speed and preservation, with no time and with no wish to pay for that time. Here innovation has always been rigged at this end of century and the resort to international agencies and universal solutions heightened the misunderstanding. They offered us uniforms, we thought Europe and grew up Africa, losing the ability to act, to grow... to make mistakes, to interact with people and their needs and desires, better yet, to innovate!

Samuel Beckett said “*fail, fail again, and fail better.*” So be it, in order to leave behind the ideal of innovation that leads us to “innovate, innovate more and more, to keep everything the same.”

N. Lacerda Lopes, “*On Ideas: From the Recent Past to a Future Memory*” in P. Botelho e R. Afonseca (coord.) “Architecture” ed. Transnética, Porto, 2012, p. 155-160. ISBN 978-989-97480-4-0.