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Interview PAULO MERLINI by Tiago Krusse

The architect Paulo Merlini talks about his practice, sharing perceptions and values.

What is the essence of your architecture?

Our architecture is sustained in this main idea that we have a biological past and that we didn´t just pop up from nowhere 10.000 years ago, alongside with the appearance of the first civilizations and subsequent cultural legacy. Our history starts long before nations have become nations, long before Chinese have become Chinese or Portuguese have become Portuguese. If we look a little further we´ll be able to see clearly that we all have a unique identity and we aren´t so different after all, we are biologically the same. We define this ideology throw our personal motto US IS MORE.

We acknowledge that life is a response mechanism to the external world that´s been around for 4.5 billion years, adapting and responding to the evolving environment, and we homo sapiens are the most evolved example of this synergetic system. It was through this process that life sketched the basis of such incredible features as the brain or the sensitive organs.

This brain is equipped with the ability to observe and comprehend nature in such a way that makes us able to transform it. Maybe the most relevant example of this feature is the invention of agriculture, which initiated a radical transformation of the face of the earth. For starters, this transformation made us sedentary, which in a long term gave birth to the first civilizations and the arising of the cultural system as we know it.

With the massification of architectural and urban artifacts, cities started sending us apart from our previous reality and apparently it made us forget our own roots, but we have this biological past that made us as we are. I mean, for more than 99% of our time man lived in savannahs and nature molded us to react to that kind of environment, now we live in a totally different reality and we are living trapped in bodies that are not prepared for this new ever growing reality.

Natural selection hasn´t got the ability to make this adaptation. Although it´s an incredible system, it needs time to function properly. Ten thousand years aren´t nothing for natural selection.

What I defend is that architects, and every other creative in that sense, have the obligation to adapt the external world to our bodies and not the other way around. The most assertive way to do it is to integrate into our creative process the perception of the incredible relevance of our biological legacy in our evolution, the one that created us as we are. I mean, have you ever wondered why we are able to perceive light instead of microwaves? Or why do we have a sense of smell or even why do we feel pleasure or pain? All of these are features molded by life and her correlation to the environment. Metaphorically I feel that the perception of our past legacy is being perceived as an iceberg. As you know, the visible part of the iceberg corresponds to a very small percentage of his total dimension, because it´s not immediately perceivable we tend to forget about the submerged part even though it composes more than 75% of the whole. Our biological legacy corresponds to 99% of our existence in counterpoint to the 1% of cultural legacy, and even so we insist on ignoring it.

I know that the present architectural formation doesn´t put us in contact with this kind of knowledge, but there are studies being made every day in other fields of thought that give us incredible and brand new information about our biological functioning, and on how our body and brain reacts to the external world. We must absorb these notions and integrate it in our creative processes.

I believe that as creators if we want to produce an assertive design we must be aware that we cannot continue to base ourselves in the cultural system only considering it only represents 1% of our time as specie.

How do you approach a project? Which elements you take in consideration?

For us designing a project is the same as solving a problem. We found that the best way to solve any problem is to use the Cartesian method, It was idealized by Descartes and it consists into four mains steps:

First, never accept something as real without deeply analyzing it.

Second, divide a problem in such constituent parts as you can so that you can easily solve it.

Third, start solving those same problems starting from the most simple to the most complex.

And finally, always make such general revisions that you're certain that nothing has been omitted.

And that's what we do, independently on the project dimension we always use the same strategy. We analyze identical types deconstruct them and reconstruct them again in our own way.

We use this method in prejudice of another because we found that its basic structure is similar to how reasoning process works in our brain.

Every single idea that you´re able to imagine is structured by a number of other ideas or concepts. Each of them is composed by other concepts which in turn are composed by a series of others.

Think of a tree for example, If I ask you to describe it, you will start defining is form and is constituent parts, like leaves, trunk, roots, etc. Those are the concepts with which your mind assembles the general concept/ idea of a tree.

Now, if then I asked you to define a leaf, one of the constituent parts of your concept of tree, you´ll use the same strategy again, and this could continue indefinitely.

So, when using the Cartesian method you´re disassembling a global concept into small parts. Because we´re cultural beings, we have pre-defined concepts of everything. Every idea that you have is structured by the ideas of others before you. So, if you think in a bakery for example, the image that will pop up in your mind will be defined by any other that you´ve ever saw or went. So, the only way to create new concepts is to deconstruct the old ones, use the composing pieces that you find of value and discard the ones that you don´t, link them with your one logic et viola you´ve just created a new concept, and if lucky enough and if it´s well assembled it will be appreciated by others and it may one day become a cultural pre-concept of his own.

When did you start making architecture as fulltime job?

Nowadays architecture draws our landscape, everywhere you look you see architecture. So being architecture a process of reasoning, I´ve started "doing "architecture since I've understood I wanted to be an architect. You see that´s the thing about architecture, once you got in, you´re always organizing your own architecture ideologies throw the critical observation of everything that surrounds you. You go to the cinema and you learn with the Movie Theater, you drive your car you learn with the landscape, you go to dinner somewhere and you observe the distance between the tables and how is it influencing people behavior. Architecture is a very jealous girlfriend, it wants all the attention she can have.

But I understand that your question is in a more pragmatic sense. I effectively make architecture since my first year as a professional architect, in fact, I was finishing my internship and I was already assembling my office. So, I finished my internship and one week later I was at my office drawing my first building.

In fact there´s a funny story about that, the very first day I went into my office was September 15, it was a Monday, I don´t ever forget that because it was the day Lehman brothers went bankrupted, the "official" day of the beginning of the subprime crisis. Nothing bad for starters.

How it was to establish and start your own studio?

As I was telling you I started my office when I was still doing my internship, and it was during this period that I established the basis of this new adventure. Brand, software's, hardware's, internal organization, etc.

You see, when you're creating a company from scratch you're putting a new character into the world and you're the one who defines his identity. This is very important because once the company grows, identity is what grants the integrity of the whole. The company culture must be very well defined so that you can pass it to others as they join into the organism. Establishing your company is a continuum process of adaptation to the external and internal inputs of the reality it is integrated in, so in that sense I am still establishing it.

What were the reasons that lead you into architecture?

As a kid I´ve always wanted to be a cartoon artist, when I was 8 years old I even had my own cartoon characters with ohm I would create stories. At school, I would grab my lunch money to buy dozens of chewing gums and offer them to my classmates, with the commitment of them giving me the sticker that came with it. When I arrived home, I would stick them into a block of white paper sheet I had, and would draw all the characters over and over again. There´s something about my personality that doesn´t let me conceive the idea of passing throw this life without leaving a mark, a good one, one that can positively influence others. This said, I saw in architecture the perfect channel to express myself creatively and to influence others positively. And that´s why I've decided to dedicate my imagination into architecture.

How do you balance the rational aspects of your work with the emotional side of it?

See, that's the thing. I try to reach emotion throw reasoning. Emotions are physical processes wired in your brain. We are born with universal emotions like happiness, sadness, fear surprise, etc, these processes are felt as sensations and they are triggered by internal and external inputs. I'm worried about controlling this triggers rationally. There is a tendency to think that sensations are not rationalizable, by the mere fact that they seem to us as ethereal and not physical, which is not true. This happens because only now we have the technology that permits us to see a living brain functioning in real time, giving us a much more accurate understanding on how it really works. For example, there is a study from the 70´s that proves that people feel more relaxed in the presence of natural elements like plants and trees. So, when I´ve drawn a dental clinic some years ago I´ve integrated plants in my project, mainly on the waiting room, in order to trigger a process of relaxation on the user, minimizing the natural anxiety felt when we go to the dentist.

Which kind of tasks are normally the most demanding?

As incredible as it may seem we discovered that one of the most demanding tasks are the small ones. We´ve once drawn a gums kiosk and we understood the complexity of drawing such a small piece. On the one hand you have the space limitation, every function has to be set in the right place so that it won't conflict with the other functions. On the other hand, the rigor of this kind of work is measured in millimeters instead of the usual

centimeters we are used to work with. In such a small piece everything has to fit in perfectly, by only a question of one millimeter you can have problems in the assembly of the whole. It was a real challenge but we loved to do it.

Projecting is imposing a vision or is adapting to specific circumstances?

I believe that good architecture is a balance between both.

On one hand you have the individual creative process of your studio based on your own beliefs and ideologies, so when you place a building anywhere in the landscape you are naturally and inevitably imposing your ideology over the environment. On the other hand you're always creating over a preexisting reality, so inevitably you're adapting your building to the specific circumstances of the place, things like topography, characteristics of the local architecture, sun exposure, etc. In our case this dichotomy are two sides of the same coin since we believe that buildings are, or should be almost like plasticine molded by the respect over the surroundings. So, good architecture is molded by these two main concerns, the respect for your own ideologies and for the surroundings.

Recognition and receiving awards makes any difference?

I believe that the main characteristics any architect must have, wanting to succeed, are patience, resistance and resilience. Architecture is a very hard and slow process. By the time you idealize a building it can go from three to ten years, during that time your exposed to innumerable variants, some that you can control and others that by their own nature you aren´t able to. So, when you finally are able to see the project you´ve idealized standing in front of you is very gratifying. That gratification is even greater when it´s appreciated not only by you and your client but also by your colleagues. So, in that sense recognition and awards are important, because they help you to have strength to get you going forward and reinforcing the idea that you're in the right path. It´s that tap on the shoulder that tells you "it´s worth it, keep going".

Architecture is facing a critical phase worldwide not only due to the economic crisis but also related to bad planning and most concerning environment effects from all these last years of savage profiting under the lunatic visions of plutocrats. What is your perception of the role of the architects under the new challenges coming ahead?

I truly believe that architecture has the power to influence people quality of life, but this perception isn´t new, anyone a little more instructed about the real function of architecture understands it and can easily see that this is not a utopian egocentric vision architects have about themselves and their importance in society, this is an absolute true. Everywhere you look nowadays you see architecture, it defines the frame in which you live, and architects, because they dedicate their lives on studying this area of thought are, or should be the conductors on this construction.

The problem isn´t about architect's perception on this notion, the problem is about the lack of perception of the general public. People still have this idea that architecture is all about making a beautiful piece. Aesthetics is very important of course, but it definitively isn´t the essence of architecture, maybe it represent 20% of our concerns but no more than that. Architecture has a real social function.

Media play a very important role on this matter, in the era of democratization of education they must instruct people about the true importance of architecture on their quality of lives, until then architecture will continue to be subjugate to this false idea of only being able to make buildings look cool. Politician also play a great role on this matter, especially on the obligation to correctly legislate questions has ecological concerns but the case is that, such as the general public, politicians aren´t educated to the importance of architecture real role.

Until then architects may continue to evolve, but without the proper dissemination these ideologies will continue to be enclosure on the architectural circle, and proliferating this idea of architects as intellectual lunatics closed on their own bubble.

How do you imagine your work will be in ten years?

I cannot answer you in an assertive way. You see, any perception that I have about architecture right now is sustained in the experience and knowledge I was able to absorb until this day. Any answer I would give you on how my architecture could be in 10 years would be fallacious because it´s sustained in my actual brain structure. I believe that, or at least I wish, it will be a much more assertive design, highly sustained on my personal motto US IS MORE.

For you, architecture stands for …?

Making people happier.