

Re-Creating Reality: Paulo Merlini Arquitectura

This past year has seen the rise of a talented team of architects reunited under the name of gifted architect, Paulo Merlini. The team came together after establishing a platform of creativity, function and design through their acclaimed project, Bakery Gondomar. Deciding to see the world through a different lens, the Portugal-based architecture studio is on a continuous journey to transform spaces.

Placed among the best designs of 2013, Paulo Merlini Arquitecto talks with MiND Magazine about a new approach to architecture in the ever-evolving world and society.



Your work with Bakery in Oporto has been “breaking the sound” not only in your project design, but also in your reputation facing a reflector on your work. But how did the story of Paulo Merlini, the architect, the firm, the dream, start?

PAULO MERLINI: Actually, very naturally. I’ve attended my last graduation year at Italy. I’ve chosen Florence because of this city incredible cultural legacy. After a month or so I’ve went into a bookstore with two other friends, and we found a pocket book with an interesting selection of architecture works around the world. That book would become our excuse to start our journey.

So we’ve got our backpacks and hit the road. We’ve visited hundreds of architecture pieces spread by dozens of countries. We saw a little bit of everything, all sorts of building typologies and scales. This was by far the most important year of my architectural formation.

In 2007, returned to Portugal, I worked as an intern in an architecture office. During that same year, I’ve started gathering some clients and made my first projects in my free time. When I finally finished my internship, I already had assembled a space to start my work until today.



In a world oversaturated by information and architecture, what does “more” mean for Paulo Merlino Arquitetura, since your slogan advocates for “us is more”?

PAULO MERLINI: I think we tend to forget that we didn’t just pop up from nowhere 6,000 years ago.

Life is a kind of response mechanism to an external world ruled by laws of physics and chemistry. It emerged 4.5 billion years ago, and through this immense amount of time it perfected itself and found new ways of relating, capturing and responding to the surroundings. It experimented with millions of connections combined in thousands of forms and scales.

You see, evolution happens by natural selection. During the last 10,000 years, the alterations on our biology were merely zero. Ten thousand years is nothing for natural selection. 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. So now we must recall it.

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. Our history started long before nations became nations, before the Chinese became Chinese or Portuguese became 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 identical, we are biologically the same. So this is why we say US IS MORE!

“CREATE SPACES THAT MAKE PEOPLE FEEL HAPPIER.”

How exactly does the “positive manipulation of the human brain” that you put in your work describe your designs?

PAULO MERLINI: That manipulation is the foundation of any project of ours.

I think you will agree with me if I say that the main objective of any architect is to create spaces that make people feel happier. So, I believe that the only way of getting it done is to understand the basis of happiness.

To better understand it, you may think of homeostasis as a linear graphic. In one side, you have the sector that defines the ideal condition levels for the organism survival, linked to the pleasurable emotion. Spread through the rest of the graphic, you would find a gradual representation of the parameters of the internal tissues that deviate us from the ideal levels. These are linked into a series of other sensations that will gradually lead to pain.

Each time the brain detects some positive external input he will make you search for it, and the same happens on the opposite direction. This system sets the basis for what we call happiness. But how did life managed to find out which external inputs were favorable and which ones weren't? Quite simple actually, it was able to do it because it had lots of time to "learn" it. Then natural selection and genetic heritage did the rest.

So here at the office, when creating new spaces we focus on positively stimulating the homeostatic plan. And how do we do it? We base in the conscious that our sensory organs are the only channels for capturing information from the outside into the brain, and by constantly revisiting our own history, we try to acknowledge every single stimulus that the brain assumed as positive and why has he done it. And we try to insert the positive ones and cut off the others in order to induce happiness.

"CITIES ARE LIVING ORGANISMS."

Buildings are rigid structures, yet you want to make "the external space adapt to our bodies". Is that possible in a never ending process of societal change?

PAULO MERLINI: You're right, the external world is constantly changing. But as we've seen before society has we know it is quite recent.

If before industrial revolution human population as never surpassed 1 billion people, today, 150 years later, it has expanded to 7 billion and continues growing. Previsions point to a population of 9 billion in 2020. And now we need to control it, but how can we do it if buildings are rigid structures?

The thing is that cities are like living organisms, they are the summation of trillions of single cells and they are in constant regeneration. That same process: it's happening right in dozens of spots in this same city.

And it's this constant and endless transformation of the small constituent parts that we're able to control, the ones that allows us to adapt cities to our own needs.

We, as architects are the conductors of this repair mechanism. But in order to do it we must acknowledge how we've got to this point, and that cities are a very recent phenomena. We need to adapt the external world to our bodies, and we must do it by inserting in our creative process the notion that we were created long before cities or even culture, as we know it, existed.

How do you analyse the potential of a new project and how do you evaluate its needs?

PAULO MERLINI: For us, designing a project is the same as solving a problem and we've found that the best way to do it is using the Cartesian method by Descartes, which consists in four mains steps.

First, you must never accept something as real without deeply analyzing it. Second, you must 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 simplest to the most complex one. And finally, always make such general revisions that you're certain that nothing has been omitted.

So, depending on the project dimension we always use the same strategy. We analyze identical types, deconstruct them and reconstruct them again in our own way.

Every idea that you're able to imagine is structured by other ideas or concepts. Each of them is composed by other concepts and so on. So, when using the Cartesian method, what we're really doing is 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 bakery that you've ever seen or went.

Can all 5 senses be stimulated in every project, just like the Bakery project?

PAULO MERLINI: No, not really. In the bakery project, that stimulus was possible because it is a food facility. Smell and taste were granted by the business itself, architecture was only able to stimulate vision, tact and audition. But I don't think it's possible for architecture to stimulate taste, in that sense. It is an incomplete art, and I cannot think of any other human art that's able to do that except for cookery.

“PEOPLE ARE NATURAL CONSUMERS OF BEAUTY.”

What are the right proportions of functionality and art in what you do?

PAULO MERLINI: Art, in the aesthetic sense, and functionality are actually two sides of the same coin.

For me there can only be a functional side under every creative decision, even when the conversation is around aesthetic. When you try to make a beautiful space you do it to please the user. Isn't that fulfilling a function?

But anyway, aesthetic is of extreme importance when designing a space, because we're designing for people and people are natural consumers of beauty, it's in our nature. For me, what really matters is the intelligence beyond the creation. As Einstein once said “creativity is intelligence having fun” and it really is, creativity is nothing but a process of reasoning, and as every reasoning it must be glued with good logic, if not it just isn't good.

But every thought, intelligent or not, has to have a formal representation in order to be understood by others. In writing it comes in the form of letters and words, in music it comes in the form of sounds, in architecture it is instantly perceived by forms and space.

What are you seeking to find in the fixtures that you use?

PAULO MERLINI: I need to find them very appealing. I liked ALU's attitude on reinventing, transforming and re-imagining things is based in what I believe to be the only way to innovate. And when looking at ALU portfolio we cannot help but feel that freshness. Nice clean geometry that result in very sober and emphatic designs, great ambiance and light handling with no extra information to confuse the consumer.

In every single design we see spaces with an attitude, which is extremely important for brand recognition and to attract the consumer inside but yet, every space has that interesting ability of letting the displayed products speak for themselves. You really can feel the intelligence beyond the designs.

Which of your projects required most of your attention and enjoyed the results wanted?

PAULO MERLINI: We truly try to dedicate the same degree of attention to every project, because every each one of them is a possibility the client is giving us to show our thoughts to the world.

Of course, we nurture a special joy for every project that gets constructed. In architecture, creative abilities are just a small part of being an architect. Between the idealisation of the project and its execution, and because of architectural complexity, the all process is dependent on dozens or even hundreds of technicians, decision boards and other associated social phenomena. This turns it into a very slow process during which many things can happen.

So when your able to see that idea that you've sketched at that coffee table, physically assembled in front of you, it is quite a magical moment.

What would be your message to the contemporary architecture trends and the retail design world?

PAULO MERLINI: I would tell them not to forget their own roots and to create based in the notion that we're the product of an evolution with millions of years, and to aim their main concerns on giving people the right stimuli in order to positively influencing their homeostatic levels.

The speed imposed by the last hundred and fifty years has sent us apart of our natural evolving speed, and as such we can no longer ignore the fact that we're living trapped in bodies that aren't prepared for the new ever growing reality dominated by architecture. As creators of this new reality, we, as architects have the obligation to adapt external space to our bodies and not the other way around.

We have been creating over a base of incomplete information supporting ourselves on the last 10.000 years of evolution. That's only 5% of our story, so it is mandatory to integrate the other 95% of primordial information. Just think of this, if someone gave you a book do you think it would be reasonable to only read the last chapter?