

Gonçalo Byrne interviewed by Ana Tostões

On July 2016, Ana Tostões interviewed the architect Gonçalo Byrne who has been deeply reflecting, writing and interviewing in the city through projects of reference, in order to broadly understand the evolution of the city, with an emphasis on the modernity of the 1758 Baixa Pombalina Plan, and its contemporary and future potential, grounded in its roots.

Gonçalo Byrne was born in 1941, Alcobaça, studied architecture at the Lisbon School of Fine Art (1968) and is Doctor Honoris Causa (2005) from the Technical University of Lisbon and the University of Alghero.

He has been professor in several universities such as the University of Navarra, the University of Alghero, the *Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio*, the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*, the *École Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne*, the *Università IUAV di Venezia*, the Harvard University, the *Politecnico di Milano* and the University of Coimbra.

He is the principal of *Gonçalo Byrne Arquitectos*, in Lisbon, with an extensive work both in terms of scale, program and context, including urban planning and building design, urban renewal and project management such as the renewal of the Bank of Portugal headquarters (with João Pedro Falcão de Campos), the renewal of the Thalia Theatre in Lisbon (with Barbas Lopes Arquitectos), the renewal of the *Machado de Castro* National Museum in Coimbra, the renewal of the Trancoso Castel and the renewal of the *Santa Maria* Abbey surroundings in Alcobaça.

He has received the AICA Award (1988), the Valmor Award (2000), the Gold Medal from the France's *Académie d'architecture Française* (2000) and the Piranesi Prix de Rome (2014).

ANA TOSTÕES Bearing in mind what was planned after 1938 by the then President of the Municipal Council of Lisbon, Duarte Pacheco, in particular the Gröer's plan, please tell me about your vision from how did this city get to where it is today.

GONÇALO BYRNE In fact, between 1938 until now, a great deal has happened. Above all in the last 30 years there has been a tremendous acceleration in the transformation of Lisbon that, in my opinion, means it does not make much sense to talk about the municipal area of Lisbon in isolation. Starting in the 1960s and 70s, there was a clear metropolitanization of the city, which began to be completely transformed from the outside in. From 1938 on, the city of Duarte Pacheco and the *Estado Novo* became a Lisbon conceived and constructed as if there was a "Marquis". It was not a replacement city because, in fact, the city of the Marquis of Pombal was a new city set on a ruin that had ceased to exist.

AT Could we say that it is a modern city constructed on an existing city?

GB A modern city constructed on an existing city, but with very interesting features in relation to the existing city. One of the most interesting aspects of Pombal's new city is that it was a city inserted in a fabric which had lost its continuity, but which curiously maintains it on the east side, throughout the areas of *Alfama* and *Castelo*, and picks it up again in the *Bairro Alto* on the west side. Although it is a city with modern lines, it is very interesting how carefully the spaces connecting it with the existing were treated. Beyond that I would say that it is a Pombaline city of expansion, in other words, built on largely undeveloped land.

AT You were one of the first architects to write with a critical, historical perspective on the Pombaline city; I remember the article published in *Lotus* in 1983...

GB It was an article that, from a historical point of view, is entirely indebted to José-Augusto França, who remains the great discoverer of the modern city of Lisbon after Pombal. There was a closer appreciation by the architect, trying to understand how the processes of transformation were established.

AT For us, the young architects in the 1980s, your closer study of the plan called our attention to the process and the understanding of the system that was virtually a competition between 6 different projects being discussed to reach the best solution. This work of yours was very important, for the fact that it highlighted the project's process and for reinforcing the *Baixa's* sense of modernity and innovation.

GB Precisely. The question was to understand how they managed to create a dynamic with extremely simple instruments from a design point of view: a layout, the typical façades and their detailed design, and the section of a single city block. This revealed two things: on the one hand, a very interesting vision of the Enlightenment, which was that of conceiving the city beginning with public space — the city as representation, as scenery for the citizens' shared space, embodying all the imagery of the time (particularly in the *Comércio* square, a plaza representing absolute power, a typical *place royale*); and on the other hand, the fact that there was practically no trace of what went on behind the façades. Notwithstanding all the engineering machinery, which dealt with questions of earthquake resistance, fire resistance and



01 Baixa, Lisbon, Portugal. © Filipe Jorge, Aerial image bank Argumentum, October 2013.

fireproofing, something else fundamental was revealed: Lisbon's resilience. Whenever there is a disaster, it rises again from the disaster, and learns from it. This happened with the 1755 earthquake [and with the reconstruction project for the *Chiado* by Álvaro Siza after the fire of 1988. However, despite their great pragmatism – we're talking about architects who were essentially military engineers – the discussion of the language of the *Baixa*, which was considered a continuation of the *Chão* style, became less appreciated and valued in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century; it was considered austere. But I actually think that it is incredibly modern, because it was a response to an emergency program. I wish post-WWII reconstruction had had the same quality — the pragmatism it had, I'm thinking of the *grand ensembles* —, but the Pombaline vision of reconstruction was far greater... I don't know if it was just intuitive, but, for example, the question of the control of public space and its capacity for repetition was a strategy that was transported wholesale to *Vila Real de Santo António*, which is another extremely interesting example from that time. Why do I say that it is very interesting and modern beyond all the technological part of infrastructure, and earthquake and fire resistance? Because it created a remarkably enduring kind of interface between the public and private, permitting great flexibility of use in the private sphere, which is positive until the moment it begins to be misused. It is well worth looking at the *Baixa* from the top of the *Santa Justa* Elevator to understand where this flexibility was misused; for example, in the blatantly speculative building of additional floors, because they could not be seen from the street: add one more floor, two more floors, and the regularity of the grid, when observed at an angle from below, cannot be seen, but nonetheless, it is still there. This misuse was partially responsible for the great fire of 1988, the firewalls had become ineffective because they had been breached, the fireproof partitions between buildings no longer existed because they had been absorbed by the floors added above, etc.

What happened after the period of great modernity of the Pombaline enlightenment was, above all, that of Lisbon becoming an industrial port. A Lisbon in which the artisans gave way to medium and large industries that no longer created a continuous city: the *Alcântara* valley, the *Chelas* valley and the northeast expansion, began with the railway. The model of the city began to transform itself with industrialization, above all with the imposition of the railway lines (the lines of *Carregado*, of *Estoril*, and soon after, the *Sintra* line). It was the infrastructure of industrialization that began to disperse the city.

The history of the radial roads is relatively recent. The first radial roads were Pombaline: the *Estrada Militar* and the *Maria Pia*, which leads to *Campo de Ourique*, and today corresponds to the *Segunda Circular* road. The post-Pombaline expansion was very radial; it was the *Restauradores*, the *Liberdade* Avenue, and the *Avenidas Novas*. The post-Pombaline logic is far more that of radial axes than of rings.

AT We are talking of the great axes that extend from the center...

GB Exactly: *Liberdade* Avenue, the *Parque Eduardo VII*, the *República* Avenue, the opening of the *Almirante Reis*, which

is taken up again in Duarte Pacheco's planning. The plan for *Alto do Lumiar* by Eduardo Leira, which envisages a major artery that leaves the *Segunda Circular* and continues around the airport, is a macro-plan for contemporary expansion...

AT ...which will be the size of *Alvalade*, in the sense that *Alvalade* was absorbed by the city

GB Precisely. When Eduardo Leira, who appeared in Lisbon after Nuno Portas, explained the plan, he explained it based on the logic of radial axes. He said, and it's true, that starting from the public promenade, Lisbon expanded along the rays that reached the *hinterland*. The great problem of growth was the impenetrable medieval fabric that was replaced by the porous grid of the Marquis of Pombal, and I think that took incredible vision. Everything arriving by sea had an emblematic plaza, the customs houses, the arsenal and the port, and what arrived by land had the market square that is the *Restauradores*. For the first time, there was complete porosity between one and the other. Up until then the city had grown within its walls, compactly, and when it burst out of its walls, it favored the riverfront, first alongside the *Jerónimos* and afterwards towards *Xabregas*, since it was the royally founded monasteries that led the way. Two interesting phenomena from the start of the 18th century were: the monasteries and farms of the aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie with their healthy air, given that whenever a plague struck the medieval city, everyone died. This particularly happened in the *Baixa*, the old Roman port, mainstay of the *Tejo*, into which two tributaries ran down, which subsequently became silted up. People began to construct over the marshes, on top of the mud and sand: the pre-Pombaline medieval *Baixa* was practically uninhabitable — just imagine the unhealthy conditions whenever there was a small rise in the level of the *Tejo*. The drain in a medieval house was the window, and there are reports of 4 and 5 storey buildings. I came across a book in a museum shop in Cambridge — *The Global City: On the Streets of Renaissance Lisbon* — based on the discovery of the famous painting of the *Rua Nova dos Mercadores*, which is 2.5m long and is cut in half. Discovered by chance by an antique dealer in England, it is now part of an English collection. The book says that, in the 16th century, Lisbon was the capital of the European Renaissance.

AT It is very interesting to think of Lisbon as the capital of the European Renaissance, as in the mid-seventeen-hundreds it was also the capital of modernity — this city that was between Saint Petersburg and Washington at the time.

GB Like other examples in Europe. Namely one that appears to be a carbon copy: Trieste. Empress Theresa's plan of Trieste was an expansion plan, and therefore has little in common with the plan for the *Baixa*, which was a plan of reinstatement. However, it has a topography and a relationship between the old castle hill and the Adriatic, and city blocks with dimensions very similar to those of Lisbon, and was also developed perpendicular to the river.

AT Manuel da Maia mentions Turin in his dissertation.

GB This also has a *Comércio* Square, smaller than that of Lisbon and somewhat lateral, but so similar to the one in Lisbon. The difference is that the city blocks, which in Lisbon are for general housing — buildings that are rented and therefore very fragmented — in Trieste, as it involved the Austrian court and the aristocracy were there, each block is a gigantic palace with incredible interior courtyards.

AT As happened in the *Bairro Alto* but on a smaller scale.

GB In my opinion this is one of the most interesting things in the case of Lisbon — how was this done with only a small investment.

AT And how do you view the Lisbon riverfront, flanked on the one side by what resulted from the 1940 exhibition in *Belém*, and on the other by *Expo 98*, an operation that was a great success?

GB A tremendous success. Despite having many aspects that one could criticize, the operation of 1998 created a gigantic centrality at the northeast corner. A critical centrality, because of the problems that continue to exist... one of Lisbon's major current problems is the fact that there is still no administrative body for Greater Lisbon: the problems of continuity for the compact city and the historic city, should be managed at a metropolitan city level.

AT Returning to *Expo 98*... there was a very interesting response in Lisbon to the question of *grands ensembles*, if we are talking about the great modern neighborhoods such as *Alvalade*, *Olivais Norte*, *Olivais Sul*, *Expo* and even *Telheiras*, which are expropriated areas... *Chelas* is an area that could be included in this group but is still incomplete.

GB And it will be hard to consolidate... or will take a long time. But this is related to the choice made in Silva Dias' plan. It was a plan that the 7 designers of the N2 zone strongly contested, but the fact is that they were unable to generate a credible alternative, besides which, it was only possible within N2. It is composed of 5 tough neighborhoods, with a park in the middle that was never created because there was no money.

AT And so we return to the question of public space. It was an Anglo-Saxon approximation to public space, but could not be properly sustained afterwards for lack of means.

GB Precisely. With this type of central node that was a re-interpretation of 3 generations of the English New Town, and Nuno Portas still fought to put housing there.

AT Your project for the N2 zone was very interesting precisely because it created public space, it created a plaza. The plan consisted of 7 individual architectural projects and yours was a project for public space.

GB Clearly. And afterwards, it was transported to *Vale das Figueiras*. But to finish on the thinking behind the *Expo*, I believe that what occurred in the *Expo* were expansions of continuity, marked by a largely residential continuity, with some business, but little infrastructure, few facilities and little public space. In the expansions of Faria da Costa, the public space is appropriate: the street and the square, and it works very well. But the *Expo* has something that is disproportionate to the rest of the city of Lisbon, which is the fact that it is built around the largest transport interface in the whole of Portugal. Mobility is central to the modern city, in other words interconnectivity and commuting. It is not just Calatrava's station that actually works well in that context, it is all the components that are concentrated there. It has close to 4,000 parking places, it has all the trains, and maybe, one day it will have the high speed train connected to the Iberian network. It has the airport 5 minutes away (for now), it has an urban, intercity and international lorry terminal, and it has the metro. You can't do better than this. And it is done very well. The quality of the public space is incredible. Where else in the country is there anything like this? In Porto there is that intervention for the City Park, which is interesting, mainly the waterfront by Solà Morales and by Souto Moura, but here it was all done in the shadow of an event... in my opinion it is the most successful case of post-expo that I know. It would be interesting to create an echo of that on the western riverfront. The *Belém* nucleus, with the greatest concentration of museums and the renovated riverfront zone, has some potential, but it does not have the mobility and that tremendous generator. In addition to all this is a major shopping centre, which is the actual passageway from this development to all the surrounding areas, a balanced multi-use program offering a very strong tertiary sector, housing with 100% occupancy, hospital facilities, schools, museums...

AT And the Portugal Pavilion, now part of the University of Lisbon... I would like to go back to almost the beginning and ask you how you view Siza's reconstruction of the *Chiado* and your participation in this process with the large *Império* block.

GB The *Império* block arose from the strategy introduced by Siza — even if it was not obligatory to follow it, as it was outside the fire perimeter — which was to rehabilitate the interior of the blocks, opening them up to the public, and carry out a mixed development program, with business, offices and housing. It is a strategy that I doubt is being used in the rehabilitations that are currently being done around there: the idea of mixing uses seems to have died out and it is fundamental to maintain permanent life in the city. The Pombaline city and the historical center lost the magnitude of its centrality. The first movement was the departure of housing and the exclusivity of offices — mono-functionalism — starting in the 1950s. The *Baixa* was no longer busy after 7pm. It was still busy in *Parque Mayer*, and in the *Portas do Santo António* because there were a few cinemas, some theaters and one or two hotels. When the offices felt vacant, desertification set in. First mono-functionalism, and then desertification. I remem-

ber the quantity of articles I read by those nostalgic for Eça de Queirós, calling for a return of the life from Eça's times, which was obviously impossible because we are talking about the 19th century, but it is possible to bring back the business, some facilities, lots of housing and quite a few offices. This mix has disappeared and it is vital.

The operation to revitalize the *Baixa* was also fortunate to coincide with a moment of lucidity by the Lisbon metro, which had always developed its strategy separately from the strategy of the city, they had never been linked, only now the coordination of transport is in the political agenda. It was not just the extension to *Cais do Sodré* and *Santa Apolónia*, but all the escalators that connected the *Baixa* to the *Alta*, responding to an issue that had been very important at the end of the 19th century and was fundamental to give continuity to the city. People want housing in the historic center, but then no one wants to create parking: it's tricky. I am convinced that it is necessary to domesticate the car in historic centers, but if you want housing you have to provide some parking and improve public transport. On this basis, one of the most important ways of getting around in Lisbon, with its topography, is what is termed mechanical elevation, which may be a lift, an escalator, or a funicular railway, as we see in João Pedro Falcão de Campos' intervention on the Castle route.

AT One of the recent projects undertaken by you and by João Pedro Falcão de Campos incorporates a proposal for the Bank of Portugal to leave its headquarters on *Almirante Reis* and commit to a central location in the *Baixa*, through an exemplary rehabilitation project that would reconstitute the block for the first time.

GB The Bank of Portugal had an atypical block in the *Baixa* with a church at the end of the block. To my knowledge, there are two or three other blocks like this in the *Baixa*. Normally, the churches in the *Baixa* stand at the head of their block.

AT There is the *Mártires* in the *Chiado* and the Church of *São Julião*. At the moment, what do we have in these blocks in terms of functions?

GB We have the headquarters of the Bank, which is tertiary sector, a Museum, which is a cultural facility, and we have a multi-functional church space that hosts events with an admirable frequency of activity.

AT We have been talking about the city of Lisbon and not about architecture. What does this reveal about the city?

GB I have a rather unorthodox reading of architecture. I think that the architectural object is over-emphasized and that the city should be seen as a great building, obviously in continual transformation. Architecture is a form of knowledge, with the capacity to intervene, create, and transform what may be called the containers of life, considered in the broadest sense, from the house, the building, the facility, to the space of the city. It still remains a phenomenon from the conceptual, mental, and interdisciplinary point of view

and, above all, an interface with life, profoundly linked to life. I believe the architect as an agent of transformation, is someone who is alert to whatever is needed — and therefore the *ex-novo* of construction — because there is, for example, a shortage of housing or amenities, or to the correction of serious problems that spread like diseases within the city itself, to use the term that Solà Morales used to talk of the urban disemboweling — which is taboo nowadays — commonly used when the city itself has problems of poor health. And one of these is the hygiene question, which today we see as a terrible monster, but which is a fundamental issue in the creation of modern cities. In this respect, the Marquis of Pombal was lucky to have an earthquake... if there had not been an earthquake, I don't know how we would have had a healthy *Baixa* without carrying out a project like MOSE in Venice, that is to say, by creating an enormous barrier to prevent the *Tejo* from continually flooding the *Baixa*. There are many cases of cities that end up failing, because abandonment is a common reaction, or the alternative of massive investments of great artificiality. Architecture is a form of knowledge and action linked to the way that people live; and despite there being cities that are shrinking, people live in cities, and the trend of urban growth continues to be overwhelming. 4 or 5 years ago, half the population lived in cities and it is forecast that in 2050 it will be 2/3 of the population. Like all the other forms of knowledge, architecture may fall into the error of thinking that it is alone in the world, but this will not lead anywhere either, particularly in the city which is humanity's creation and is the product of sharing *par excellence*. The blending of knowledge, including that of history, is fundamental — and the architect fortunately knows a little of everything. I believe that the central role that history has come to have is very positive. There was already the history of art, but the history of architecture was only introduced in Portuguese fine arts faculties in the 1950s, for example. Before, there was just art history, in which the styles were vaguely referred to.

AT But not an active, critical history, as an instrument for the future?

GB No, it was overwhelmingly the history of what you are talking about, and I spend my life quoting it, "of time as evolution". There is no other time except this.

AT With this talk of the architect who is aware of society, of the future, who understands "architecture" — and now it is I who am quoting you — "as a container of life", I believe that Nuno Teotónio Pereira was one of the first architects to understand this, with his immensely important work here in Lisbon, with an attitude that went well beyond architecture...

GB Clearly. Rafael Moneo theorized about this. There is an article from the 1980s about a restoration of the Mosque in Córdoba, in which he says that buildings and cities have their own life. A building begins to lose its own life when it stops being used. If this cycle is not reversed, the city will end up as an archaeological site and the building as a ruin.