

## João Luís Carrilho da Graça interviewed by Ana Tostões

On July 2016, Ana Tostões interviewed João Luís Carrilho da Graça, one of the main Portuguese contemporary architects, in order to discuss the riverside projects that he has been developing for the future of Lisbon.

João Luís Carrilho da Graça was born in 1952, Portalegre, and studied architecture at the Lisbon School of Fine Art (1977).

He was assistant lecturer at the Lisbon School of Fine Art (1977-1992), full professor at the Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa (2001-2010) and the University of Évora (2005-2013). He coordinated the departments of Architecture in both institutions until 2010, and was responsible for the creation of the PhD in Architecture at the latter institution, which he also directed (2011-2013). He was professor at the University of Navarra (2005, 2007, 2010, 2014) and at the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning of Cornell University, New York (2015). Since 2014, he has been full professor at the School of Architecture, University of Lisbon.

He is the principle of the architectural office João Luís Carrilho da Graça Arquitectos with an extensive work built.

He was nominated and selected for the Mies van der Rohe European Prize in Architecture (1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015) and received several awards, such as the AICA (1992), the Secil (1994), the FAD (1999), the Valmor (1998), the Pessoa (2008), the Order of Merit of the Portuguese Republic (1999), the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from the French Republic (2010) and the Medal of the Académie d'Architecture of France (2012).

In 2013, he received an Honorary Doctorate degree from the School of Architecture of the University of Lisbon and in 2015 the Royal Institute of British Architects International Fellowship.

ANA TOSTÕES How do you view the city of Lisbon, which, since the 1930s, developed in a modern and initially dictatorial framework, transforming itself into a twentieth century capital? You have a very unique view of the immense metropolitan area of the city, evident in the exhibition in the Cultural Centre of *Belém* a few months ago; it was surprising to see an architect focus on such a geographic and site-specific exploration, in contrast to the usual option of talking about your own work.

JOÃO LUÍS CARRILHO DA GRAÇA It is not that I haven't talked about my projects, because I always regard them as a kind of node in a territory, in a landscape, intensifying a series of territorial situations that were already recognizable before. But you spoke of two fundamental aspects. One is greater Lisbon: I think the most stimulating thing right now is being able to look at Lisbon, not just as the wonderful city we know, historically built on this geographical space, but as the heart of a region that has developed tremendously and which is not often thought about. The biggest challenge is to understand how Lisbon can be transformed into a city with the scale of the metropolitan area, based on its very clear boundaries from a territorial point of view (the *Alcântara* valley, the *Trancão* River, and the Loures floodplain). This entire geographical area can and should be thought about, starting with the intensification of its most interesting and intense points, contributing so that all this might make sense in the future.

AT Do you consider that this geographical and poetic vision...

JLCG ...landscape, territorial, historical...

AT can be combined, in a sustainable manner, with the infrastructure that is lacking?

JLCG Yes, of course. But what I find most interesting at the moment is the relatively rare possibility that should have happened years ago, to have on one side the *geringonça* (the current left-wing coalition in Portugal), and on the other, a Municipal Council with a strong desire to see the city as a whole and to transform it. This is a unique moment and it is fundamental that it be allowed to happen.

AT I believe it is a rare moment, but our history has had similar moments: during the 1950s, for example, there was a qualitative leap and major development in Lisbon. The construction of the *Infante Santo* Avenue— with buildings by Alberto Pessoa and João Abel Manta —, *Alvalade* with better or worse architecture, but with good urban design, the large social housing estates, *Olivais*, etc. It was a very important moment for the city.

JLCG Sure, but the transformation that the city has undergone in recent times is almost the opposite of this and has been a challenge. 7 or 8 years ago, when I competed for the *Boavista* plan, the *24 de Julho* Avenue was for me, from the perspective of the plan, a horror story made of pollution and noise, it was something from which we had to be protected and which we had to turn our backs on. No one imagined that the area could be habitable. In the space of a few short years, with the decrease in traffic, the conditions have changed drastically.

AT You're an architect who has worked on highly strategic places in the city, less easy places perhaps. I am referring to the School of Communication, the Lisbon School of Music, and the German School. You are perhaps the architect who has done the most work alongside one of the city's disruptive structures, the *Segunda Circular* Road. But you have also worked on the



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historic centre and on Lisbon's most wonderful infrastructure, the riverfront. How do you see these projects?

JLCG I always looked at intervention sites as spaces with potential, with strengths that were more or less recognizable and understandable, which, from a territorial, landscape and historic perspective, means that the sites end up being similar to each other. It almost always involves re-establishing the relationship with the topography and the surroundings, re-qualifying places in urban terms and on behalf of the city, and working simultaneously for the highest possible quality of building construction at every scale.

AT Your work is based heavily on manipulation of the topography. I am thinking of *Belém*, the Cruise Ship Terminal, later connected to the *Campo das Cebolas*... Your way of working on, not the object itself, but rather its relationship with the land, as if it were a mega-structure, is very interesting. It reminds me of the approach that was taken at the Gulbenkian, through the integrated creation of building and garden.

JLCG The built topography of the city is baroque and extremely complex. The ridgelines and water courses, for example, that mark and structure any territory, immediately create a kind of distorted grid. In Lisbon, when an architect tries to adapt to this complexity, the project designs, no matter how basic they want them to be (simple symmetries, basic geometries), turn out to be very complex in the construction and recreation of the city at each of its stages and points. That's what makes the city so spectacular; if we look at each case, there is always a desire to do very simple things, but the topography does not allow it and we have to adapt.

AT Do you view your approach to place and this desire to work with the landscape as a process in continuity with the Modern Movement?

JLCG Not necessarily. The precepts of the Modern Movement are admirable from a philosophical and abstract point of view, but later there were many things that failed, to a certain extent, and which we had to re-think. Despite having initially taken the position of continuing the Modern Movement, with all that we have subsequently constructed and understood, I discovered points of contact with other times in history, in the transformation of any urban or architectural space. We can think of the cases of André Le Nôtre in Paris or Schinkel in Berlin... there are innumerable examples whose fundamental aspect is that they build in the name of the city and in a territory, naturally taking history into account; that is what I always attempt to embody in all that I do and think.

AT Do you believe that this is recognized by the people who use the city and its spaces?

JLCG I don't know. I remember that when I was competing for the Cruise Ship Terminal, on the one hand, I wanted the dock walls to be present and for the building to be as small as possible while meeting the brief, but mainly I wanted the park to be a city park, used not just by the cruise ships in high season, but when there are no cruise ships, by everyone. Even the building itself, if it is not being used intensively, could be used for other purposes. I believe that everything you build, even if it is private, has to be part of public space. In designing a house, I design it even if it is only in the visual field of the public space. The urban and civic dimension of or activity is fundamental; there has to be a social effort and a correspondence between that which society thinks, or at least a dialectic and a dialogue with society.

AT Lisbon is a special city because in the end it is more marked by very strong public spaces than by extraordinary architecture, as often happens in other cities.

JLCG Yes. The *Miradouro of São Pedro de Alcântara*, for example, is an incredible place in so many ways: the relationship with the valley and the views, the kind of cinematic traveling that we experience whenever we pass through there: the presence of the people, the stone, the water, the magic light reflected in the water (because of the enormous scale of the estuary): it is almost a synthesis of the city of Lisbon.

AT What project would you like to do now in Lisbon?

JLCG It seems essential to me not just to look at the city, but at the metropolitan area. Lisbon is at a point in time at which, if there are intelligent decisions regarding the way to make it evolve, it could progress extraordinarily. I would like to think about the *Tejo* estuary as a central space in this metropolitan area. The potential of the estuary is enormous and I do not know if we are managing to make even minimal use of it in terms of river transport, enjoyment of the body of water, of the relationships with the marvelous spaces that have been forgotten. I believe that this enormous potential can be perfected in ways that do not involve much construction, but rather through the way they are used.