

Interview with Manuel Aires Mateus

Marianne Calvelo

“Architecture is the art of permanence, not ephemerality. The principle it is subjected to can be eternal. Having a clear idea is essential in architecture.” This was the last piece of advice the internationally acclaimed Portuguese architect, Manuel Aires Mateus, left his students with after an intensive two-week design studio this winter semester 2012 in the University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning.

Mateus, following an early collaboration with architect Gonalo Byrne in 1988, founded the office Aires Mateus & Associados with his brother Francisco. Their projects - variable in scale and characterised by an austere play of mass and materiality - have helped shape contemporary architecture in Portugal, and increasingly influence architecture globally. Known for translating traditional Portuguese forms into detail-free surfaces and for an emphasis on sculptural austerity, the work of the practice has molded the contemporary architecture of Portugal and has received numerous awards both nationally and internationally. Besides his professional activity, he has held professorial roles at prestigious universities including Harvard University, USA, University of Ljubljani, Slovenia, Accademia di architettura di Mendrisio, Switzerland (since 2001), Universidade Aut3noma and Universidade Lus3ada, Lisbon (since 1997).

Mateus’ design approach always begins with the call of instinct. He firmly believes in working with what is already known and to hand: drawing from the existing, the now, the here, is of prime importance. Referencing an internal and self-reflective starting point while confronting the immediacy of the programme, the site, materiality, etc., in fact amounts to a search for permanence, and for Mateus this means resisting time. His is an architecture that seeks to both be in continuity with, and transcendent of, the now - something that gives his work a timeless quality.

Marianne Calvelo, a Masters student who took part in the intensive studio in Auckland, interviewed Mateus shortly before he left.



Manuel Aires Mateus in conversation, The University of Auckland, School of Architecture and Planning, 2012. [Photo: GKHC Photography]

How did you get into architecture? Was there a specific time in your life when you decided to become an architect?

My answer is not very interesting because my whole life has always been around architects. My father was an architect and my mother was a painter. There wasn't really a particular time, it just sort of flowed naturally. I started early – I made and sold my first model when I was 14. It was a model of stairs for the house of the brother of Gonçalo Byrne.¹ Many years after, he became my boss. I started working very early in an office, which was common at the time anyway. I have a very common background. I'm from Lisbon. I grew up in Lisbon. I studied in Lisbon School of Architecture. I started working in Lisbon.

How did you establish your office with your brother?

It was more or less obvious in the beginning, that we would share work together. I started to work with Gonçalo Byrne while studying, and it wasn't long until my younger brother Fransisco joined me. We were very lucky to work with such a generous man. When we had enough to work on our own, we moved out and opened our own practice. Even after we left, I continued to collaborate with Gonçalo on some other projects. He became a great friend, someone I would consider part of the family. We also decided to have two small offices, in order not to have a big office. The idea behind it was to have a common investigation in which you have two different physical places you can work. This allows you to move from one office to another to really focus on a particular project. In a way, the strategy worked.

With the architectural work you are doing, do you feel you are moving with the times, or trying to react to or criticise current architectural trends?

I think that we are always trying to establish a position in any given moment. We try to react to every single thing that is going around. It is also important not to accept that we have too much of a fixed position about anything. Of course, we have our principles and we live according to them. It is important to understand that every process taken on every project is always different to another. No two projects are alike. We like to work *inside* the possibilities of every project. We always try to understand the limits of each situation. It's sort of like working on the question or working on the problem. We begin by thinking about the underlying question in every project that gives rise to the need of architecture. We try to make it as clear and as defined as possible. It then becomes easier to arrive at an answer.

Where do you find inspiration?

I think architecture is driven by instinct. This notion of instinct is very important. We don't have time; we have to react to things. To have instinct is to have knowledge. We should have knowledge in many fields and understand that it is possible to use it in a free way. We combine theory and other technical subjects and pick from the fields we want and need and use it with a certain freedom. This is instinct. For example, I have no knowledge in cooking; therefore I have no instinct in the kitchen. If you put me in a kitchen, I wouldn't know what to do! [Laughs] I have an instinct only about things I know how to control. We are driven by instinct. Inspiration is instinct. But to have instinct we must have knowledge, and then we *react*.

Your projects are primarily characterised by materiality. Is this a deliberate theme in your works? How did you come to this thinking?

I think it is something you cannot avoid. It is a common mistake to avoid this idea – the need to build and define space by materiality. If you look back to the beginning of the 20th century, they were trying to achieve a limit where it was possible to define interior and exterior by the use of glass. But now we know, we can differentiate the two conditions of space through materiality. We have to use it as a sort of a field. We are not only dealing with the relation to the inside of space but also the relation to the outside. It is very important to understand that *architecture is about life*. It is about common sense. We have to design it from the centre, from the interior. Architecture is about living in it and is never just about the design. Too often, we place it by an idea of an interesting shape or mere design. We are always talking about *real life* in architecture – this notion is often neglected.

I am aware that you are a strong advocate of permanence of architecture although some could oppose that architecture has ephemeral qualities. Could you elaborate or further justify your ideas on its permanence?

This idea of *permanence* in architecture must be considered beyond the physical qualities of the building. Architecture moving from time to time, like fashion and its trends – does not make sense in this context! Architecture is about ideas that have a connection to things that do not move at all! The way we live or move is not so different from the way our parents or grandparents move. We are different in many aspects, but not in our basic use of space. We still sit and stand in the same way. But also at the same time, architecture is sort of a base, subject to new and unexpected things happening. We have to have an open field that allows many different things to happen at the same time. Its permanence often forces the building to take on different uses. It has an ability to respond to different demands making it timeless. A good building is a building that could be transformed by many functions. I believe that architecture is not really eternal, but its principles and ideas can be eternal or permanent. Architecture must be seen from this standpoint, where the ideas embedded in its architecture could last more than the physical aspect the building. *the permanence of idea*.

You've talked a lot about good architecture, could you now define for us a good architect?

A good architect would be hard to define. In reality, he or she is one who is able to resist time. One who is clear and always precise. As a result, one could create good architecture – that is clear, strong, logical and efficient. I think good architecture is always about an idea that we *all* could understand.

Which architectural movement do you think are you part of? Imagine 20 years from now, students who will be studying your work intensely, what period do you think you would belong to?

I hope it would still be contemporary! I hope I am still alive and making! [Laughs] Ideally, I would like to escape from this definition of time. I think once you define an architect being part of a certain time, you are already putting certain limits on

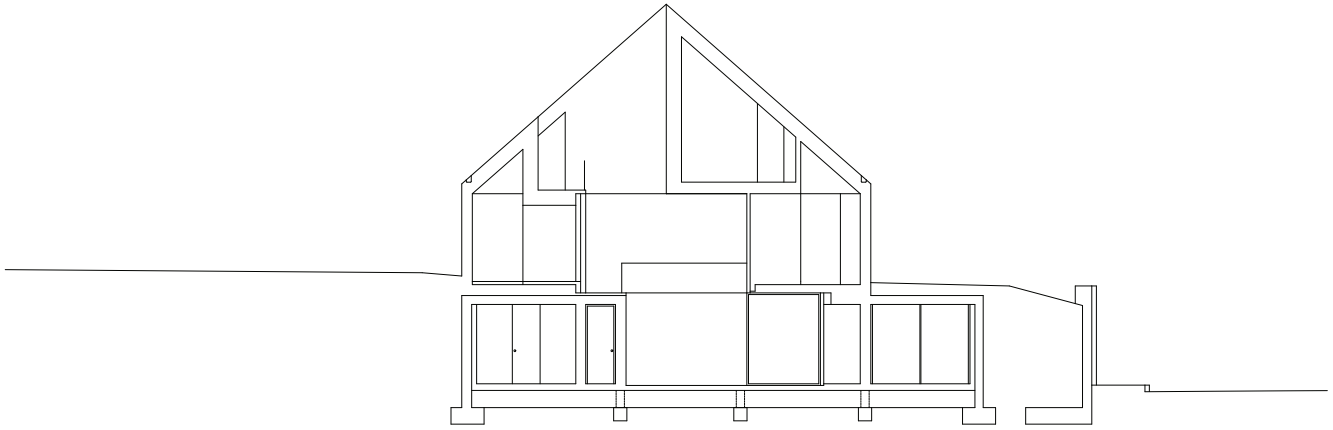
the architecture. Quality architecture requires resistance to trendy or fancy ideas of our own time. We have to understand that through history we have to make links and connections, and not simply aim to create a sheer iconic image, which will only be lost in a few years.

What advice would you give to students studying architecture? When you have young fresh architects applying in your office, what sort of person do you look for?

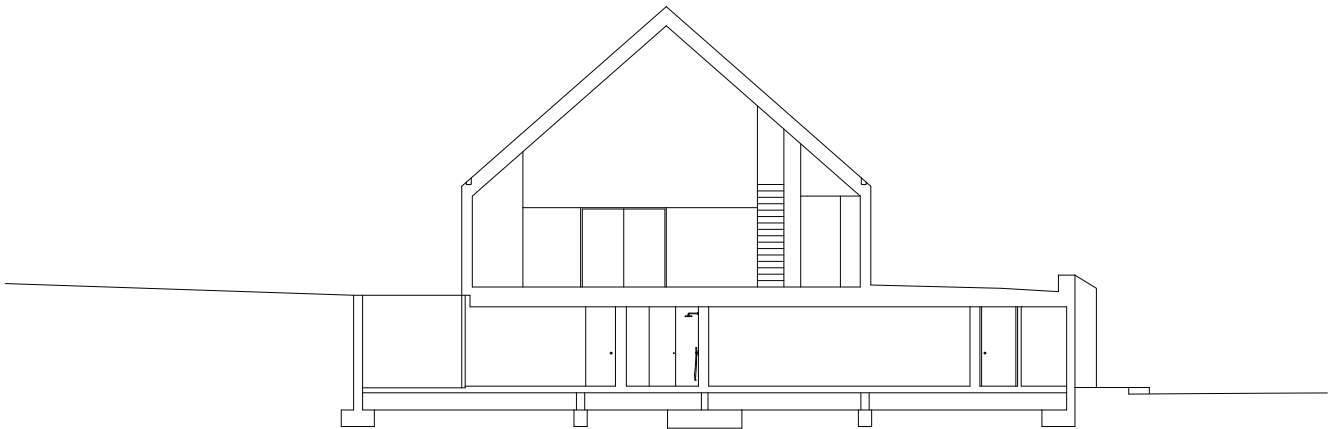
Well, for me the most important requirement for somebody to be part of the office is the commitment to working. Architecture is a profession that could allow you to live a wonderful life but it has to be done by being committed to it, done to the end. Otherwise it is a waste of time. This doesn't mean that we suffer, it simply means committing to something that is really important. You are all able to do extraordinary things. The most important advice I can give to you is to maximise your own capacities. Use your memories and your own experiences. Don't just combine things that everybody already knows! Aim to reach the maximised potentials of a human being, an artist, and create an identity for yourselves!



Leiria House Renders and Section,
Leiria, Portugal 2008-2010. [Courtesy
of Aires Mateus e Associados &
Francisco Aires Mateus Arquitectos,
with photography by FG+SG - Fernando
Guerra, Sergio Guerra]



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