

**DVD 1** | Urban places and public realms: Debates on Space and Architecture



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**NIGHT CONFERENCES VIDEO**

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Critical essays by:  
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## Urban places and public realms: Debates on Space and Architecture

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## NIGHT CONFERENCES VIDEO

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**Conference 3** 13/09/2010

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**Mauro Galantino**

Chairman: Silvia Milesi

## **Eight houses**

*Pasquale Mei:* a glance to the contribution of Manuel Aires Mateus

“The project is not in the site, but in its possibility to transform it”. Manuel Aires Mateus (October 2010)

In the cycle of the conferences that took place in the Open City-Piacenza International Summer School, the Portuguese architect Manuel Aires Mateus introduced eight projects of isolated houses in Portugal. The projects, that were displayed at the last Venezia Architecture Biennale, People meet in architecture<sup>1</sup>, born from the idea of composing an architecture capable of telling the new ways of life through the space as a mean for expressing the thinking on the contemporary society.

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### **POSITIVE / NEGATIVE**

The eight houses confront themselves with different contextual and topographical conditions. Each of them has been represented at the Biennale with two models: the first one, more classic, represents the built elements, and the second one, more conceptual, its negative: the void. This dual representation opens to a better understanding of the architecture: in the first type of models it allows to investigate the relationship between the architecture and its context, meanwhile in the conceptual models it's possible to investigate the

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<sup>1</sup> XII Biennale, edited by Japanese architect Kazuyo Sejima, is focused on the idea of redefining of the architecture, to consider its potentiality in the contemporary society: we become people in architecture.

compositional freedom of the interior spaces of the house. This express a dual relationship between the external and internal space, through the relationship between positive and negative. This relation also becomes metaphor of the double relationship that “life has with architecture and architecture has with life”<sup>2</sup>.

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#### ARCHITECTURE / PLACE

The designing research of the two Portuguese architects, is not to put an architecture which is subjected inside the context, but to be able to build the site itself through the relation that the new building, considered as an object, is able to determine with the place. The idea is not to change the context, but to build it through the relationship that the new building is able to establish with the environment. Therefore, the possibility to transform the context, it becomes the basic idea that links those eight projects. Meanwhile the apparent compositional freedom of the interior space is a further validation of the relationship with the outside, through themes of architectural composition: addition of roof, or of dome, subtraction of the excavation of the wall and of the ground. In this way it takes place the “mise en scène” of the landscape through openings, accesses, views, frames. This particular relationship with the surroundings establishes the quality and especially the character<sup>3</sup> of the interior space.

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<sup>2</sup> Manuel Aires Mateus in occasion of the conference held in Open City-Piacenza International Summer School.

<sup>3</sup> It's interesting the notion of character, where the composition is not only a material but also a way to determine a specific quality designed space

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**EIGHT HOUSES**

**1** *House in Crouche*. The idea is to explore, through a study of composition, “the point of recognition of the archetype of the house”<sup>4</sup>, in order to evoke the sense of the architectural features of the traditional space of the dwellings: the wall, the roof, the window. The form is an irregular lozenge, a quadrangular shape which recalls the square. The inclusion of a patio brakes the compactness of the volume, generating a central void, while a further process of subtraction of the four internal spaces, where the different rooms of the house find places. The interiors are composed with each other so as to not have spaces linking the individual rooms. This allows to avoid a hierarchy between the served and serving spaces, and the accesses through doors and openings: the openings are determined by the particular intersection/composition of the rooms.

**2** *Cadoços house*. The site is in the countryside of the southeast region of the Portugal and it is characterized by the presence of old cork trees. The choice of location of the house has been influenced by the location of the cork trees. The shape of the house has an irregular perimeter with a central double void which is joined to preserve the space for the tree, reversing the compositional relationship of nature/artifice. The irregular shape of the perimeter is held together by a single roof-terrace under which the indoor spaces are freely

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<sup>4</sup> M. Aires Mateus in “Presentation” of the text by Francesco Cacciatore: *Living the limit “Abitare il limite”*. Lettera Ventidue Edizioni. Siracusa 2009. (Pag. 12)

placed, fixing a relationship between full and empty that symbolizes the porosity and the lightness of the oak. The metaphor becomes tool of design research, determining the nature of the dwelling space.

**3** *Aroeira house*. The shape of the house is a hexagon<sup>5</sup>, and it is built around a central void which opens itself into an infinite space, where a field and a river that preserve its natural condition find space. The rooms that are arranged in circle around the void, they are never separated by walls. The roofing, completely white, is connected with the highest height of the lot. The perception is of a deliberately sculptural dimension.

**4** *House in Monsaraz*. The area is characterized by the presence of a lake and the ruins of a castle that was overlooking the wetland that has been dried up during the time, witnessing the possible change in a territory. A constrained site, that does not allow the possibility to build on it, has established the particular relationship of the house with the topography of the place, forcing the architects to the composition of an underground space, necessary also to protect the dwelling from the heat. A patio mediates the relationship between inside and outside, while "a dome facing towards the sky intercepts and illuminates this central space of the project"<sup>6</sup>. The intersection of two domes

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5 Manuel Mateus focuses on the form of the house that refers to the type of housing produced in the '60s and '70s.

6 M. Aires Mateus in "Presentation" of the text by Francesco Cacciatore: *Living the limit "Abitare il limite"*. Lettera Ventidue Edizioni. Siracusa 2009. (Pag. 114)

of different sizes, one concave to the sky and the other towards the interior space, creates a play of light that becomes a material presence. The private spaces, which are also illuminated by light from above, do not open directly to the outside, but in fact are mediated by the patio. In this way it comes out a strong difference between interior and exterior spaces. The chosen materials are combined with earth tones, while the only white surface is the one of the dome that evokes the memory of the old bins of water. The time here illuminates.

**5 Houses in São Braz I.** The house opens toward the sea, with a distance about few kilometres, on a lot with steep slope. The idea of this project highlights the particular topographical location of the house, in diagonal according to the direction of the slope of the site. The interiors are arranged around the emptiness of the central patio that opens up one of the four sides, the one facing the sea. The house has a height greater than the previous houses: this in order to build spaces that converges towards a kind of telescope that looks out to the sea from the distance.

**6 House in Monte Caveira.** This house originates on a tiny lot and its shape is archetypical, with a very simple functional program. It is a house for holidays, and its simplicity is also evident inside: a large main room and two bed rooms with services.

**7 House in São Braz II.** It is a holiday house in the Algarve, a very warm region. The idea of the project was born from the direct and careful reading of the site,

this time less rugged, and from the redesign of a rural wall already existent. “The program has been interpreted, considering the home as a wall, projecting roofing systems, that even if open, may confine defined spaces<sup>7</sup>”; the bed rooms find place in the back, and the living rooms in the front. The metaphor of the wall becomes a measure that is able to contain the inner spaces that are relate to each other with the idea of having a stronger continuity with the landscape.

**8** *House in Quinta do Lago*. The project rethinks the topography of the site, generating a new soil, leant on two points; the pure volume of the slab gets holed in order to look to the sky. A thin line of tension is drawn from below and above, between nature and artifice of the architecture that with its weight challenges the notion of gravity.

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#### MATERIAL ... LIGHT / TIME

The projects of the single family houses of Mateus brothers, born from the relationship between the interior space and the site. They are meant to be devices focusing the landscape, in witch the architecture is settled. The focus, in fact, is directed to the research of how to build a piece of that landscape. The reading of the topography of the site establishes the starting point of the research design that moves the point of view from a typological condition to a topological. In this way the space of the architecture and the topography of

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<sup>7</sup> M. Aires Mateus in “Presentation” of the text by Francesco Cacciatore: Living the limit “Abitare il limite”. Lettera Ventidue Edizioni. Siracusa 2009. (Pag. 108)

the site turn into the landscape. The architectural object is small and contains external space. The artifice redeems a natural condition of the site, waiting from long time to be acknowledged, and it does this through a podium, a wall, a dome, a terrace. This allows to redesign the idea of the project, to return to the starting point of the planning process and to solve possible ambiguities not yet solved by the shaping process research, but also allows to reshape the landscape through architecture, conducting it to accomplishment. This moment of uniqueness of the project measures the eternal time of nature, transforming it into a commensurable time and then in a space where man finds shelter. To measure time through the typical elements of a traditional house (wall, window, floor, balcony, roof) becomes the method, the tool through which to compose the domestic space. Those characteristics are the elements of the system that sets the ambition of the project idea<sup>8</sup>, a rigorous system, but able to get rid himself of the rule, since the problem does not consist in demonstrating the truth, but in winning the freedom of action, in order to achieve spatial solutions of abstract formal clarity. This allows, in a very modern condition of architectural composition, to overcome the hierarchy between “served spaces” and “serving areas”<sup>9</sup>, eliminating those spaces that are passing through. An evolution that extends the boundaries of the possible way of the contem-

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8 So as Louis Khan used to define: “What do you want to be a building”. Portuguese architects often have repeatedly declared their interest to study the works of American architect.

9 Definition used by Louis Khan

porary designing composition. On the other side the dimension time, through excavation<sup>10</sup>, finds shape through the particular relationship with the matter. The particular relationship with the light, in addition to determining the spatial quality of the houses, also leads to a condition of suspension and waiting that only the passage of time may flourish, or resolve or conclusion. In the intensity of the light coming from above or in the thinned out light collected in the patio, the space finds its own destiny, as time holder that measures the life time. The ruin, as a future memory, will be the result of the resistance that the architecture will show to the time. The play of light, in the architectures of Mateus also becomes the variation of the system, the exception that makes stronger the rule of the composition that gives structure to the design research. The matter produces shade and it dematerializes itself, the oxymoron of the lightness of the stone is completed as in a surrealist painting *Le Château des Pyrénées* by Rene Magritte. The Gravity is contradicted, the contemporary thinking of architecture is realized. The functional program as “space factory” is realized; the contradictions, that the project face, are composed and unmediated. The freedom expressed.

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**CONCLUSION/QUOTATION**

“In a time when investigations on what really construct the architecture differ in many different directions, anyway there will be reasons to think that, ulti-

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10 Excavation, subtraction of matter, is a compositive technic from two Portuguese Architects.

mately, nothing of what is considered to be fundamental has changed from the beginning. This statement does not hide any kind of melancholy, or even seek to establish a new dogmatism: we are not concerned about the demonstration of the truth, but only about the conquest of the freedom of our actions<sup>11</sup>”.

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11 Informal conversation between Francisco and Manuel Aires Mateus and Gonçalo Byrne and Valentino Cabelo de Sousa, in 2G n. 28 Aires Mateus, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2004. (pag. 135)