

The Other Ones
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The particular story I want to narrate here begins a couple of years before OODA's young founders started emerging from an architecture school in Porto.

Late in the summer of 2004, in a still tourist-flooded Venice, a smallish room in the old Artiglierie dell'Arsenale welcomed a representation of young Portuguese architects. The delegation eluded the fanfare of past national embassies to Italy, such as that most mythical celebration of the feats of Portuguese explorers some five hundred years earlier. And yet, this mission also held a certain promise and vibrancy. It held an untold ambition, which surely sheds some light on the present account.

Although the modern pioneers amongst Portuguese architects had international reputations since the 1960s, this was the first time that a Portuguese participation in the Venice Architecture Biennale was intentionally proposed, organized, and curated. Through a crack in the institutional passageways, before the establishment quickly took over this newly-perceived avenue to shine in a worldly context, an exhibition enigmatically named *Metaflux* arose as an opportunity to take a look at the alternative future of Portuguese architecture, rather than only at its sanctimonious present.

Truth be told, the previous edition of the most important networking event in the architecture world had already included Portuguese representatives. That was the year that the Biennale awarded the Golden Lion to Álvaro Siza Vieira — crowning his first successful Brazilian incursion, with the Iberê Camargo Foundation. Meanwhile, faced with the chance to inaugurate an official presence at the Architecture Biennale, the national commissioners avoided any hint of a conflictual curatorial choice. They brought to Venice a landscape architect's solo show, which prior, and very conveniently, had been travelling through provincial Italian towns. By contrast, two years later, *Metaflux* and its bid of "two generations in recent Portuguese Architecture" aimed at a different, more provocative game.

Metaflux tweaked the Biennale's title for 2004, *Metamorph*, and merged its formalist overtones with the conceptual notion of *Influx*. This, on the other hand, was the name of an exhibition series in which the Venice show's curators — of whom, incidentally, I was one — had already researched and portrayed a number of up-and-coming architecture practices in the Portuguese context.

Metaflux's ensuing argument was that, due to new incoming influences, Portuguese architecture was about to undergo a metamorphosis. Just as the democratic transition of 1974 had deeply changed Portugal, and its joining of the European Union had further accelerated such transformation, the boundaries that had kept Portuguese architecture relatively isolated were being

overcome in the short scope of one generation leap.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the country had flourished into a massive infrastructural upgrade, economic globalization and the embrace of a borderless consumer culture. In the 2000s, after the European Union Erasmus student exchange program started producing its first outcomes, the closed world of Portuguese architecture was also about to be revolutionized. From Generation X to Generation Y, from those coming into practice after the late 1980s to those starting one decade later, one could identify a glimpse of a mutation in form-making, in language and themes, in design inspirations and in the ways practices were conceived.

In hindsight, however, one must recognize that the promise of *Metaflux* was ahead of its time. Although the signs were there, a thorough change in architectural language was not going to be that easygoing. Well-established and recognized as it was, the "Portuguese School" — as insightful Porto critic Manuel Mendes aptly and ironically dubbed it — was also extremely resilient. After the last postmodern gushes from the Lisbon School of architecture in the 1990s, the Porto School spread its supremacy to the whole of the national architecture scene. It dominated not only the style wars, but the market itself. In its grip, it took down any resemblance of divergence or resistance, including the young promises that *Metaflux* once singled out as Generation Y. Notably, representatives of the so-called Generation X, who were aligned with an encroaching convention of minimalism, prospered and profitably perpetuated the linguistic legacy of the Porto School. In contrast, the five young Turks of Generation Y progressively split and waned. *Metaflux's* promise of an incoming blooming diversity broke down with them — and the one practice that persisted among the five was, again notably, the one that was held to continue the Oporto tradition.

Although local architectural debates following *Metaflux* pursued that mirage of a richer diversity of practices in the Portuguese context — even soon unearthing the fresh potential of a Generation Z — the fact was that such prospect was not to be accomplished. At least, not so soon. Slow mutations did occur within the form-shaping canon, as they would in any evolutionary process. Yet, the following years were not to see any proposals that would consolidate an envisaged creative hybridity, away from a Portuguese School increasingly reassured of its formal dominion. Rather, after a smaller circle of cultural influencers had surrendered to the increasingly universal language of the Porto School, its sway continued to spread until it actually became the bland jargon imprinted across the landscapes of an entire country. Forward to 2020, and while the last surviving forms of 20th-century Portuguese vernaculars still sporadically pop up in nouveau-bourgeois villas or in the random regionally-committed tourist resort, the Oporto Suave has definitely taken over.

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When I was recently prompted to take a closer look at the architectural practice of OODA, this tale of fading revolutionary promises had been cooking in the back of my mind for a while. Meeting them, visiting their offices, and capturing the vibrancy of their motivation, positively brought that perception of a certain progression of architectural affairs to a quick boil. Many years later, in the midst of an encompassing state of dormancy, here was an unexpected reincarnation of Generation Y, which came close to the original beliefs in a potential metamorphosis in Portuguese architecture.



Here was an architectural collective that ticked all the characteristics that had once held the promise of a shift in practice, but with a curious twist. While bred out of the Porto School pedagogical musts, OODA's five founders displayed an array of cosmopolitan professional

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apprenticeships, ranging from the offices of Porto and Lisbon's Generation X, to international references such as OMA and Zaha Hadid Architects. While they trusted the formal heritage and the drawing tradition of their close peers, they also imported foreign design methodologies, such as thorough research booklets or pristine 3D renderings.

True to transformations in their own country, they aimed at a European identity, rather than only at national affinities. As typical of their generation, they even carried a pop, catchy, and meaningless acronym as their practice's designation.

However, to these traits, once described as the sure signs of belonging to *Metaflux's* Generation Y, OODA also added a novel twist: they revealed a less common, but surely fierce drive to make it beyond the self-imposed, regional architectural identity of the Portuguese School. Refusing to perform exclusively in and for their own backyard, they unashamedly bared the bold aspiration to become a truly global practice — both inside and outside their country. And, while dodging the more obvious path of media recognition in the discipline's usual legitimization circles, they spent the first ten years of their practice flexing their muscles to achieve such ambition. Unlike the average Portuguese practice, they devised a market strategy and went for it with daring determination.

Unapologetically, they took advantage of their social networks and immediately aimed to work with the biggest Portuguese economic groups. Brazenly, they entered every international architecture competition they could physically endure. And yet, they were also clever enough to stay one step short of becoming the next, grey and boring corporate architectural practice in the Portuguese context. They still believed that, as bold as it could be, architectural quality and innovative form-making were essential to shape their identity. Evaluating with precision the background from which they emerged, they aspired to a transformative practice — and they knew they had the tools and the will to pursue that necessary change.

The aspiration for transformative change is often confused with doing away with the past. As if progress would necessarily imply throwing the baby away with the bathwater, innovation is frequently seen as inimical to tradition — as much as diversity and pluralism are seen as dangers to some pure, uncontaminated original source of identity. Such ways of thinking, while apparently attempting to preserve a given heritage or system, normally contribute only to its faster decay. When formal, conceptual and practical innovations cease to happen, mediocrity eventually prevails. Instead, when advances continue to be pursued, when new themes and possibilities are explored, when ambitions to supersede past achievements subside, tradition evolves and a given inheritance is kept alive.

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This is the reason why, as seen in the work of Álvaro Siza Vieira, a master builder who keeps innovating, remains a reference, while his followers often fade into irrelevance. And this is also the reason why, on the tenth anniversary of their practice, the work of OODA, as of a very few others in the younger generations of Portuguese practitioners, offered again a glimpse of promise.

For sure, OODA will not revolutionize the Portuguese School. But with their ambition, as well as their instinct for the right mix of design tradition and form-making invention, they may offer one of the diverse paths which that school needs to thrive in new directions. For sure, as they claim, they possess the right mixture of optimism and sensitivity, which may allow them to leave accounts of genealogy behind, and let them germinate on their own terms. Nonetheless, from that genealogy they also own a specific DNA that may help them thrive in new contexts.

As I discussed at the dinner table with one of OODA's founders, if this young practice from Porto wants to make it into a demanding international context, besides their unabashed drive they must also cherish the singular blend they represent. As *the other ones* from an increasingly diluted Porto School, to which any Portuguese architect can now claim membership, they must simultaneously cultivate their local and international design tools, but also ascertain the conceptual themes that may contribute a specific difference in an increasingly homogenized global context.

As it is nowadays recognizable in a global city such as New York, the architects who have visibly managed to get a recent share of the construction market are the ones that bring with them a distinct cultural identity. Often, they carry with them a common European background. Occasionally, they even share a professional history, as in the case of multiple OMA spinoffs now active in the Big Apple. As part of a new-fangled Portuguese generation, OODA also have it in their genetic code to bring about a specific cultural sensibility that may serve their ambition well.

As others in a previously imagined Generation Y, OODA made it their trait to engage in a deep site analysis before they initiate any new architectural project. In those exhaustive zoom-ins, profusely illustrated in multipurpose concept design booklets, they actually combine the methodological rationality of a post-OMA Anglo-Saxon school of design with the intuition and care for a sense of place that was always cherished as characteristic of the Porto School. In certain designs, that particular fusion has induced results that can be seen as one of OODA's potential contributions to a distinctive vocabulary of form-making: a way of having place itself molding and breaking down the rigidity of architectural volumes and programs.

This particular sensibility may appear as a subtle sense of physical gradation in which a historical

reference pervades the aesthetic language of a renovation project, as it happens in their Alcochete Hotel. Having started their career with many small rehabilitations, OODA have it in their chromosomes to know the value of creative adaptive reuse for the times to come. But such sensibility becomes even more visceral and thought-provoking in proposals such as the Casa CM, the Botanical Hotel in Bussaco or the Douro Hotel & Winery. In these designs, the sense of an existing place literally subsumes the architecture, even if daring architectural objects and references are still stirring beneath. Bold shapes and well-solved programs are there, but they smartly recede in face of a heightened recreation of a strong geographic place.

Such operations of blending architecture and landscape become particularly appealing in a time in which regenerative strategies are called upon to urgently reposition architecture vis-à-vis an impending ecological crisis. In particular, these designs point to a desirable balance in-between the architectural constructions that are still demanded by the market, and the pockets of green space that must be retained and integrated in an irreversible Anthropocenic built environment.

When today's architectural currents still reveal a real difficulty to abandon formmaking strategies that are proven to be unsustainable and ecocidal, OODA may have here a particular approach to make themselves unique to increasingly environment-friendly international clients. Some of the most progressive global studios, from the corporate forces of SOM or Foster and Partners, to their rising contenders, like Snøhetta or BIG, have already sensed that the weather is shifting, a climax change is arriving.

So, they must urgently devise innovative strategies to reshape their practices into effective responses to the climate crisis and the demand to decarbonize our societies. Others will soon follow. And those who have already demonstrated the ability and audacity to conquer economical markets with aesthetic and cultural arguments — as OODA have been successfully doing — they are particularly suited to take the lead in advocating for a change towards much-needed environmentally-sensitive architectural proposals.

Taking advantage of being *the other ones* in a rigidifying, increasingly formalist and disengaged Portuguese School, OODA have the adequate global drive to align with changing tides and bring their architectural heirloom to new, relevant directions. They show the motivation to finally deliver on the promise of a transformative Generation Y in Portuguese architecture. Adding to the fruitful diversity of their design bids, beyond the artistic and literary references they already master, they may turn their inherited cultural sensibility, their design skills, and their openness to innovation into an architectural language that, out of a renewed notion of genius loci, welcomes a much-needed

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eco-architectural hybridity. After all, if one still believes in the advantages of an architectural pluralism, biodiversity is the new diversity — and OODA seem to possess the intuition and ambition to make that diversity the right tenet for their next ten years of blooming.

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