

Collaborative Endeavors in Souto De Moura's Legacy. A Conversation with Nuno Graça Mora

Federico Marcolini

In the recent past, the Portuguese context was characterized by the predominant role of architecture in the construction of a modern country. A product of the blending of several generations and the sharing of ideals aimed at change, the Portuguese experience seems to find the origin of this change in Porto. Although distant in time and on the fringes of European geography, it is fitting to look at that lively transformation experience through the testimony of the architect Nuno Graça Moura. From the 1990s, he collaborated with Eduardo Souto de Moura's studio, experiencing a modus operandi based on dialogue and the free exchange of ideas. It was a professional experience based on collaboration, which saw, in the relationship between Fernando Távora, Álvaro Siza Vieira, and Eduardo Souto de Moura, the tangible legacy of those free reforms that began in Porto thanks to Carlos Ramos in the 1950s. It is worth delving into understanding how architecture can act as a catalyst for other disciplines without ever sidelining its primary role. It is an essential look at a time dense with changes where Nuno Graça Moura intervenes, drawing on his own experience as a possible interpretation. It is an intimate gaze laden with memories, where the architect's work is at the heart of a dialogue between multiple actors and where collaboration seems to be understood more as an informal relationship, where one is attentive to the other. An attitude of listening to realities and times that change rapidly, where architecture stands as a repository of various expertise and collaborations between the office and the construction site.

Federico Marcolini | We would like you to introduce yourself as an architect and collaborator.

Nuno Gràça Moura | I studied architecture here in Porto at Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto. In the last year, we were required to complete a six-month internship, so I applied to Souto de Moura's office because I was fascinated by his work and I was fortunate to get the position. I began my internship in 1994 and extended my stay, only taking a break for a year and a half to finish my architectural studies before returning to the office. I remained with his office until around 2001–2002. During those later years, many projects were developed in collaboration with Álvaro Siza Vieira, which was a rewarding experience. I eventually left the office since I had begun working as an independent architect. Since then, I've co-authored publications with Souto de Moura on numerous occasions. Currently, we are engaged in two projects. My collaborative experience with him feels like it never truly ended. Over time, we became close friends.

FM | When it comes to collaboration, I'd appreciate insights based on your experience. In this issue, our primary interest revolves around pinpointing what's essential in collaborating to define an architectural project.

NGM | Among architects, collaboration remains consistent over time. While nuances evolve, the fundamental challenges remain essentially unchanged. In Portugal, we traditionally have a small architecture firm, towards the atelier concept. This was my experience when I began working with Souto de Moura. Even as he gained recognition outside of Portugal, there were only twelve of us in the office. Compare that to today when a budding architect in Switzerland designing a few houses may have the same number of collaborators as Souto de Moura did back then. In his office, collaborations were profound. While there was a dynamic between the architect and collaborators and some scope to contribute ideas, it often felt like a solo activity for the architect that was enriched by collaborators' insights. I recall my first day there: Souto de Moura showed me sketches for two houses in southern Portugal. They essentially captured the final essence of the project. Our role was to support the architect's primary vision while contributing our own perspectives. This sometimes meant adding layers of complexity, challenging, and evolving the design. I had

the same experience when I was working with Siza Vieira. Architectural practices in Portugal are presently evolving. Younger firms are less about the identities of individual architects and more about collective enterprise. I'm unsure about the dynamics of working within such larger collaborative groups, especially when all participants supposedly hold equal sway. You need a lead vision, even in collaborative or co-authorship setups. Today's collaboration in architecture doesn't seem drastically different from the past, save for a shift toward group-driven rather than hierarchical models.

FM | Collaboration today seems to demand input from a range of disciplines beyond architecture. In your perspective, which disciplines, besides architecture, are crucial today?

NGM | During times when architecture faced challenges, in the 1960s and 1970s, architects often turned to disciplines like sociology. Currently, architects often lean heavily on artistic references, striving to equate architecture with art. I argue that architecture shares as much with painting or sculpture as it does with engineering or even cooking. The underpinning philosophy is crucial. When architects attempt to emulate sculptural forms, the results can be disastrous, creating ambiguous structures that fall between architecture and sculpture. While architecture has always integrated different disciplines, especially those related to construction, there's a tendency to over-rely on peripheral disciplines during times of architectural uncertainty.

FM | How about the collaborative approach that encompasses diverse contributions? Have there been roles in contemporary architectural firms that didn't exist before?

NGM | Architecture's major shift began when engineering and architecture split. Historically, construction and architectural design were almost synonymous. Now, with the rise of bureaucratic regulations, architects require specialized consultants even before they can begin the creative process. While architects should remain open to the world, drawing on various influences, there's a temptation today to involve disciplines distantly related to architecture's core. Contemporary architectural practices often demand collaboration with landscape architects or engineers right from the project's early phases. However, it's crucial to differentiate



1.

Nuno Graça Moura with Eduardo Souto de Moura, Porto, 2019.

between getting cultural insights from diverse disciplines and collaborating directly with them.

FM | So, there's a distinction between influence and direct involvement?

NGM | Precisely. Directly embedding artistic elements into architectural spaces often results in neither commendable architecture nor commendable art. While sculptures are meant to provoke questions, architecture aims to provide solutions. Drawing inspiration from various disciplines is vital for an architect's creative evolution, yet their direct involvement in the architectural process can be problematic. For instance, I remember a well-known architecture practice in Switzerland that often appeared to discuss their collaboration with artists, but I find their most captivating works devoid of overt artistic influences. It's about the dialogue, not just the inclusion.

FM | In May 2022, Souto de Moura delivered a captivating lecture as part of the Mantova Architettura festival. He began by showing a video where he conversed with a skilled stonemason about the possibilities and limitations of working with stone. This suggested a horizontal approach to design and construction that stretches from the drafting table to the construction site.

NGM | Masonry is part of construction and therefore, part of architecture. Souto de Moura has always had a way of making architecture deeply tied to the technology available to him. Early in his career, architectural technology wasn't as advanced. The most common solutions harkened back to traditional systems like masonry. He often collaborated with local craftsmen and used traditional Portuguese construction solutions. When I worked in his office, a project never ended there, it continued on the construction site. Many final design decisions were discussed in collaboration with the team in the office, stonemasons, and other technicians. In Portugal, it's still feasible to evolve the project on-site, treating it as a 1:1 model. I recall a project where Souto de Moura was designing a university building and initially proposed brise-soleil made of wood. Given the lack of tradition and expertise in wooden facades in Portugal, he eventually used a steel structure and marble. I remember him discussing this with Jacques Herzog at Harvard. Herzog was astonished at the cost-effectiveness of this approach. Souto de Moura explained that stone was cheaper

than wood in Portugal due to the lack of expertise. These local peculiarities have often shaped his projects uniquely.

FM | How is the relationship with the other »players«?

NGM | When Souto de Moura is on site with his team, everyone involved can influence the design process. Often, mistakes lead to better solutions and he, in a truly humble manner, listens and asks for adjustments when better solutions are proposed. This dynamic epitomizes the essence of architecture. It's not a melding of disciplines but a collaboration where diverse fields converge without overlapping. Sometimes, Souto de Moura collaborates with artists. For instance, he worked with a renowned artist from Lisbon, Pedro Cabrita Reis, in the design of public buildings. While Souto de Moura does involve artists in the design process, they don't reshape the building's main idea. Take Souto de Moura's crematorium project in Uitzicht, Belgium. The main architectural concept was solely within the realm of architecture with no input from the artist. Likewise, an architect shouldn't dictate an artist's creation. I mean, there is always discussion and it improves the design, but not the main ideas.

FM | In the *Electa* volume on Souto de Moura, we found Távora's remarks about the building that housed his, Souto de Moura's, and Siza Vieira's studios particularly poignant. He considered it a »home« and emphasized the camaraderie, family ties, and teaching relationships. We'd like to get your perspective on how such a collaborative and non-competitive environment influenced Souto de Moura's development.¹

NGM | Távora's passage is deeply touching. It underscores the concept of »home« as more than just a physical structure – it's also a mental and emotional space, especially since »casa« means both »home« and »house« in Portuguese. This collaborative spirit can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s. The architect Carlos Ramos played a pivotal role in modernizing

¹ »This house was necessary because it existed before it was a building, because of our friendship, family, and teaching relationships. I wanted a place that could be a small cathedral of architecture frequented by students and architects. These relationships have been an extraordinary force in my life. Even though I now feel more tired and weak, we maintain our friendships, we meet in the hallways, we visit each other, we converse, we exchange opinions I believe it's a rare condition among architects« (Esposito/Leoni 2003: 15, author's translation).

architecture in Porto, with Távora being part of this transformative journey. This shift led to a rich educational environment brimming with modern ideas. Such a setup fostered a distinct architectural milieu, which we fondly remember as the »Oporto school«. It's more of an »atmosphere« than a style – a milieu of collaboration, the exchange of ideas, and individual heterogeneity. The architects, spanning three generations, operated under one roof, yet each brought distinct architectural influences, from Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier to Mies van der Rohe and Louis Barragán. Their shared workspace in Porto became a melting pot of ideas and styles, exemplifying the ethos of the »Oporto School«.

FM | Some time ago, we discussed the atmosphere in Souto de Moura's studio. We spoke about a former collaborator, and you emphasized the collaborator's valuable contributions to both the project and the culture within the office. It seemed the studio balanced professional and private life, with no rigid roles or tasks?

NGM | In the early days of Souto de Moura's career, only three people worked in the office and the workload was lighter. They were peers, sharing time both in and out of the studio. Conversations extended beyond architecture and lasted for days. I suspect Souto de Moura's interests in Bach and Miles Davis originated from these conversations with collaborators who infused the office with their passions. Távora's office had a similar vibe. This culture of dialogue, collaboration, and camaraderie is emblematic of the Porto environment, likely due to the city's size.

FM | Giovanni Leoni's essay in the exhibition catalog you co-curated with Francesco Dal Co suggests Souto de Moura views architecture as an ever-evolving discipline, drawing from the past while anticipating the future.² Would you agree?

NGM | I question if revolutions truly exist in architecture, or if they're fleeting. For Portuguese architects like Souto de Moura, Siza Vieira, and Távora, tradition plays a crucial role. But tradition isn't just about

² Souto de Moura is quoted saying that »architecture is a profession against nature, in which the design constitutes a non-existent practice, a sum of various operations to build, to materialize an idea that we ask ourselves or that is asked of us, a process that constantly updates with new information, not an isolated act« (Dal Co/Graça Moura 2020: 15).



2.

Nuno Graça Moura with Eduardo Souto de Moura, Porto, 2019.

3.

Eduardo Souto de Moura and his collaborators in their office, Porto, 2019.

aesthetics. Quoting Siza Vieira, it's »a reason to bring innovation«. Being »conservative« means preserving and evolving ideas, rather than maintaining the status quo. As a renowned Portuguese writer once told me, »I'm conservative, not in the sense of refrigerating items to prevent change, but in the manner of retaining and expanding upon ideas and concepts« This perspective involves integrating the past while pioneering something new, a viewpoint not always aligned with modern architecture. Central European traditions differ from ours. Our prolonged engagement with tradition, in a conservative milieu, perhaps drove architects to seek fresh influences beyond national borders. Merging these influences with our traditions resulted in particular architectural languages. This tri-generational experience, shared by these three architects, is unparalleled. While we may not witness a fourth iteration, their legacy will inspire future generations.

FM | What's the takeaway from this collaborative journey?

NGM | My fondest memories with Souto de Moura are outside the office – on construction sites, during overseas trips. He's passionate and knowledgeable, discussing varied topics with the same enthusiasm he reserves for architecture. Today, many believe that once you establish your practice, you must design something groundbreaking. But innovation isn't instantaneous. When Souto de Moura left Siza Vieira's firm, his initial designs bore a strong resemblance to Siza Vieira's. That influence remains palpable today.

FM | How would you define collaboration?

NGM | Collaboration involves continually engaging with experiences and individuals. A collaborator shouldn't just echo your thoughts, they should challenge and enrich them. Their added value might be intangible, but it's invaluable. Talent alone doesn't guarantee longevity in an office. In fact, Siza Vieira once advised Souto to leave and establish his practice, believing he'd be more productive independently.

FM | Lastly, can you share a memory epitomizing Souto de Moura's idea of collaboration?

NGM | Towards the end of my tenure at Souto de Moura's firm, we collaborated with Siza Vieira on the Portuguese pavilion for the 2000 Hannover Expo. Following a productive session, Siza Vieira and Souto de Moura shared a sketch. When discussing door details, Souto de Moura directed me to Siza Vieira for answers. Ironically, Siza Vieira pointed me back to Souto de Moura. Both were trying to emulate the other's design approach, which highlights their mutual respect and adaptability. This episode underscores their humility and the importance of continuous inquiry in design, emphasizing the need for an open mind and rigorous examination of every project element.

References

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