

Notes from a Study: contemporary remarks on a pioneering text

Notas de um Estudo: reflexões contemporâneas sobre um texto pioneiro

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Abstract

Written in 1976/7 by Brazilian architect and professor Rodrigo Brotero Lefèvre the text "Notes from a Study on the Objectives of Teaching Architecture and Means to Achieve them in the Design Process" discusses some parameters and paths for helping to bridge the gap between teaching and practice, between design activities and construction activities, between the individuality of creation and the necessity of learning to creatively work within a team. This re-reading of that fundamental text seeks to understand some of the circumstances of the author and his time and some of the most relevant reflections the text proposes, which include the dealing with the difficulties, and obstacles to overcome, and the advantages and interests in promoting and activating the possibility of the architectural design process to be taken as both a self-understanding individual process and a collective team process.

Resumo

Escrito em 1976/7 pelo arquiteto e professor brasileiro Rodrigo Brotero Lefèvre, o texto "Notas de um Estudo sobre Objetivos do Ensino da Arquitetura e Meios para Atingi-los em Trabalho de Projeto" discute alguns parâmetros e caminhos para ajudar a superar as lacunas entre ensino e prática, entre atividades de projeto e atividades de construção, entre a individualidade da criação e a necessidade de aprender a trabalhar criativamente em equipe. Esta releitura desse texto fundamental procura entender algumas das circunstâncias do autor e seu tempo e algumas das reflexões mais relevantes que o texto propõe, que incluem possíveis caminhos para lidar com as dificuldades e obstáculos a serem superados, assim como as vantagens e o interesse em se promover e ativar a possibilidade do processo de projeto arquitetônico ser praticado tanto como um processo individual de autoconhecimento como um processo de trabalho coletivo em equipe.

Introduction

A craft profession is recognized as an activity connected to the type of knowledge that is gradually acquired through practice. The art of construction, or architecture, has traditionally been organized by an amalgamation of the activities of several "officers", or "craft" professionals, trained in practical life to acquire certain specialized knowledge, conveyed by example, who are coordinated by a (more experienced) major officer with a vast mastery of these crafts, for having been practicing them for some time. Some professionals in the art of building, or architecture, had some literary knowledge; but its erudition is usually linked to the recognition of appropriate, everyday and/or noteworthy precedents, as applicable to the case, and to their skills in emulating them in a more or less innovative and/or experimental way.

This concept alters when the exercise of architecture changes from being a "craft" profession to intending to be a "liberal profession", and the architect is no longer a professional trained by hands-on learning, but qualified by accumulated theoretical knowledge. Architecture, or the art of building, will never be a totally abstract activity. However, the focus of its teaching and learning changes: it becomes the domain of the art of knowing how to design in architecture. The qualification of this professional is almost restricted to training and individual mastery of a metalanguage: the a priori abstract figuration of what may or may not be a work of architecture. In order to be recognized as a product born of an intellectual, personalized, and individual conception, the "new" profession – architect – degrades to a secondary level of importance (and often even forgets) that the execution of a work – and even its design – is always an activity that must involve a team of people, qualified in different types of knowledge, both theoretical and practical. The learning and "training" process of a future architect changes fundamentally, as its goal turns to be the provision of an appropriate environment and incentives for architecture, or its design, to be accomplished, ideally, from a supposed personal and private "creation", which is operated, in each case, by a single and isolated individual.

But as the ingrained millenary practices of construction still exist and resist, inertially, to changes, the daily practical reality, in most cases, continues to be carried out indifferently to intellectualized explanations. The job of building "in the traditional way"

has not, so far, been eliminated in any way: it still exists, although precariously under the law. On the other hand, as ideas and thoughts produced by intellectual thought also progressively reverberate, in one way or another, in reality, neither is anything exactly the same as before. The "new" profession of "liberal architect" gradually consolidates, permeated with contradictions, sailing between idealized chimeras and partial successes. And, for this very reason, very recently, young graduate architects are perplexed by realizing their profound ignorance of the practical things of the profession of building, or architecture. They see that they are barely or not prepared at all to work in this real, complex, and contradictory world, in which their knowledge and skills will possibly be of little value. And where, almost always, their status as an architect will not guarantee them any priority; and even if they do have an opportunity to practice their profession as an architect/a-designer, they will almost always be part of a group or team, which will rarely be under their command.

The possibility of suggesting ways to help them overcome, even if partially and circumstantially, this gap between teaching and practice, between the design activity and construction activities, between the individuality of creation and the basic need to learn how to work, creatively, as a team seems to have been the intention of the architect and professor Rodrigo Brotero Lefèvre in his 1976/7 text, "Notas de um Estudo sobre Objetivos do Ensino da Arquitetura e Meios para Atingi-los em Trabalho de Projeto". In this encouraging and complex article, the author organizes several reflections, vast and pertinent, in a systematic and coordinated manner, dealing with the possibilities, hardships, problems, obstacles to be overcome, and the advantages and interests in promoting adequate incentives to enable the possibility of "design work" occurring as a process of individual self-knowledge, and through professional and creative teamwork. It may seem little, given the complex panorama of professional life, slightly described above. But it is not. Furthermore, 40 years after it is published, the content of this article remains very relevant: the problems it points out still happen, the proposals it organizes are still possible, feasible, and interesting. Therefore, it seems important to emphasize, again, its pioneering contribution to the teaching and practice of architectural design, also in contemporary times.

Complexities and contradictions along the way

Originally published in 1977¹, this text (or a preliminary version) was originally written in French, during Lefèvre's stay in Grenoble, France², in the 1975/6 school year; and it was probably translated into Portuguese (and possibly expanded) by the author himself, after teaching in Brazil again in the second half of 1976. Rodrigo Lefèvre was temporarily removed, between 1970-1976, from teaching activities at FAU-USP, where he worked as a teacher since 1962. Unlike the situation of other professors, who had also been politically persecuted, he had not been officially terminated from the faculty in the years he was "compulsorily" removed from the university. His return established a "de facto" situation, in spite of the dictates of bureaucracy and the institutional body of the university, which were reluctant to accept his presence. Rodrigo returned into being a teacher, but only because he wanted to.

When he returned, he already had in his baggage the desire to deal with the subject of "team project work". The temporal coincidence of the preparation of these reflections with the period of absence from the university suggests that his previous activity as a teacher was not the only or the main trigger of this reflection. I would even dare to suggest that his stay in Grenoble is an opportunity, rather than the cause of the writing of that text, since an important part of these reflections seems to have its origin in his experience as an "employee architect" in the company Hidroservice, where he worked since 1972 and until the end of his life. In later moments³ Lefèvre will defend the validity and the importance of his professional per-

formance as an employee at a large company, in spite of the criticisms of the "liberal" standing from his peers and in line with the reality already faced by a great number of his students. But it is in this text that this subject is pioneered, although not explicitly, debated.

From the 1970s onwards, important changes in the capitalist appropriation and production of Brazilian cities were established, and, at the same time, the social origin of a major portion of the students of architecture schools significantly changes. From the end of the 1960s, with a pressure to increase places in public universities, good students, well educated in public primary and secondary schools, which were also of good quality, started to gain legitimate and massive access to public higher education; at the same time, many private universities were also opening their architecture courses. This layer of young middle-class students was often the first generation of their families to reach university. However, more often than not they did not have the necessary social stock to thrive in an office of their own, only with orders from one-time customers; nor did they reach access to important government orders, still common in the 1970s, when they formed the bulk of the usual clientele of architects belonging to the generations that graduated before this teaching expansion.

The son of a traditional bourgeois family, Rodrigo Brotero Lefèvre chooses to participate intensely in the political struggles of that crucial moment in the 1960s-70s, when hopes of social change are shattered by the destruction of the democratic regime and the establishment of the military dictatorship of 1964-85; an engagement with dramatic consequences, which resulted in the extreme fragility of his personal and professional life. As soon as he could, he returned to his architect profession⁴; in parallel with some individual design orders and undertook, as a basic source of income, wage-based and regular employment in a large engineering company. Which, on the other hand, allowed him to adopt a work regime that was flexible enough for him to keep exercising his teaching activities.

Thus, after a half-decade interregnum from the university, Rodrigo Lefèvre resumed teaching at FAU-USP in August 1976. But it was not enough for him to go

¹Recently republished in KOURY, KOURY, Ana Paula (org), 2019, p.87-140.

²According to Koury (2019, p.32), "in 1975 [Rodrigo Lefèvre] spent a year as a professor at 2 interdisciplinary studios at Unité Pédagogique d'Architecture in Grenoble, France, where Sérgio Ferro was a professor. Lefèvre's stay in France gives him an important entry into psychology due to his contact with Françoise du Boisberranger, from where he extracted the elements he needed to transform the way of approaching the project. From this stay comes the textbook "Notes sur le travail de projet dans une école d'architecture, for students of Unité pédagogique d'architecture, Grenoble", later translated for FAUUSP's students (Notas de um Estudo Sobre Objetivos do Ensino da Arquitetura e Meios para Atingi-los em Trabalho de Projeto de 1977) and transformed into a University Extension Discipline taught in collaboration with Architect Paulo Bicca in 1982."

³As in his testimony in the forum "Arquitetura e Desenvolvimento Nacional" organized by IAB-SP in 1979 (transcribed in KOURY, 2019, p.157-178), and in the text "O Arquiteto Assalariado" published in the magazine Módulo in 1981 (transcribed in KOURY, 2019, p. 187-194).

⁴In a way, he never stopped working, since even during the period in which he was a political prisoner he continued to carry out studies and projects, made possible with the support of external collaborators.

back to be a teacher and make a difference by direct contact with some students. When he returned, he also resumed his writing practice, which had already been prospering simultaneously with his professional and pedagogical practice. Designing, writing, teaching – as well as acting politically – were not watertight worlds for him, but facets of the same reality, intensely lived in all its aspects⁵

Despite the struggles and contradictions of his time and condition, Lefèvre refuses to face the reality then experienced as "disappointing", understanding that it is his duty to help build instruments to face it in a consistent and transformative manner. This seems to be the objective, or rather, the bottom line, of "Notas de um Estudo..."; although the author only says it at the end of the text, in the last point of the fourth chapter:

There is a trend among us to see all our actions, all our attitudes, all the products of our work as disappointing. [...] That is, our subjectivity, with its high complexity, ends up supposing, through reflections on itself, that it can do things of high significance, of great importance – but in reality, in doing, drawing, writing, making a sculpture, relating to someone, the result of such doing always seems diminished to us, always smaller, always disappointing. [...] In fact, this disappointment is nothing but an attitude that corresponds to an idealistic position. The produced object is what matters, what is real, and the modifier. It is a modifier in all aspects, whether in the external reality or in the inner reality of each person's head. A produced object is never disappointing, it cannot be disappointing, it is, in all instances, the concrete syntheses of human thought – and it contains human thought. (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p.138-9)

And to face and overcome this disappointment syndrome, Lefèvre understands that it is not enough to rely on "tangible things", because theories (or theoretical reflections) can also be, and are, equally concrete things:

But if we take a theory as an object, then we may have the option again of unraveling it to look for the elements of the culture to which it belongs, to look for all the different aspects, to look for even its future, to look for how it was produced, or what is its use and what has been required to conserve it. But this implies not taking a theory as truth, it implies taking it as a means, necessarily, among others, to develop knowledge. (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p.139 - final paragraph of the text).

⁵As in Lefèvre's text, "Do Pensar, do Fazer..." (in KOURY, 2019, p.141-150), originally published in 1979.

In light of this understanding on where the author apparently wants to go, perhaps a brief exegesis of some of the issues that the text's journey establishes may be proposed. Also, to better understand how the issue of "knowledge development" is approached there: not in a general way, but focused on a restricted and specific subject, the teaching of architectural design. Maybe it's a microcosm. But it contains, or may contain, as anything and everything, the world.

The structure of the discourse

The text "Notas de um Estudo sobre Objetivos do Ensino de Arquitetura e Meios para Atingi-los em Trabalho de Projeto" is organized in an introduction and 4 chapters. Perhaps it comes from the conscious, or atavistic, memory of Rodrigo Lefèvre's basic education in Jesuit teaching at Colégio São Luiz, the choice to adopt a way to start and develop the text within certain rules and measures of classical rhetoric. For example, in the introduction, the author humbly apologizes for the fact that it is incomplete work, or of little value, which he considers to be "more of a bunch of ideas, appraisals, assumptions than something structured and developed to reach proven conclusions" (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p.87). Modesty is ethically required as an attitude to be adopted, as opposed to displays of erudition or an arrogant authority attitude. But being excessively modest is possible: the text is actually very well structured, carefully and extensively developed, slowly lingering on long definitions of concepts and ideas, before dealing and working with them. The text also reminds me of certain features of Spinoza's way of thinking, whose philosophical writing deliberately adopts the rhythmic concatenation of mathematical demonstrations.

The introduction clarifies that the text's intention is to bring to light – that is, to show in a clear and systematic way – the "subjectivism" of pedagogical works. Which, paradoxically, would be precisely a consequence of refusing and/or masking the inherent subjectivity of human acts, in favor of an "objectivism" – which is also not a manifestation of the desire for objectivity, but its peculiar distortion and/or concealment. It also explains that, in order to better develop this idea, the first chapter will establish definitions (or operational concepts), the second some postulates (or theories), the third a working methodology, and the fourth some "notes", or considerations on how to support the presented proposals for effective application. Finally, still in the introduction, Lefèvre presents some synthetic definitions of the text's

operational terms: subjectivity, subjectivism, objectivity, objectivism; in themselves, and in their relationship with each individual.

Chapter 1 begins by clarifying that what will matter, in this case, are not these terms in themselves, but how these aspects are expressed by the attitudes of an individual, in his or her relations with other individuals. The specific individuals, under examination in this case, would be architecture students. But they can also be, as deduced from the possible motivations that gave rise to this text, the members of a project team, whether they are students or professionals, in their relations with each other.

The first warning in the text is against the idea that teaching – and, indeed, design – can be done from scratch. When starting a design task, therefore, avoiding the nihilistic attitude of “I don’t know” is necessary, from the realization that, in any case, something is already known. Because it is precisely the understanding of this “something” that can reveal what one really need to know. Note that this consideration, although addressed to students, is in fact to teachers; who are seem, in the text, as those with the task to help and make learning easier, and not simply to “grant” their knowledge (supposedly supreme and unchallenged...) to students that are unprepared and/or in a pristine state of ignorance. For Lefèvre, “the objectives of a didactic work [...] can only have this knowledge [of the student] as a starting point. Once the previous knowledge is denied, the proper objectives [of a didactic work] do not exist or are not clear” (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p. 90).

Lefèvre warns of possible problems arising from producing studies and designs permeated by “subjectivist” and “objectivist” attitudes. I admit that, whenever I read or remember this text, I mentally change these words for terms that, in my view, can be equivalent: “pseudo-subjective” and “pseudo-objective”. I understand that there are subtle differences between both terms; but I appreciate the prefix “pseudo” because it has been used, since the ancient Greeks, to qualify what is not, but intends to be, what is a lie or false – in this case, a “false conscience”. It also suggests the idea that, when we are students or teachers, we are rarely the ones who are there, but we consciously or unconsciously operate under the domain of a “heteronym”, or a persona, or a character.

The good news that Rodrigo brings us is that, even though our products – drawings, texts, sketches, models etc. – have been carried out under the influence of

our “pseudities”, the strength of facts saves us: even so, “a thorough and systematic study of these results can help to objectify the subjectivity of this individual” (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p.91). This simple sentence had a profound impact on my learning and professionalization as an architect, teacher, and writer; in fact, it is one of the primary sources of inspiration for two of my first texts on teaching architecture⁶. From the reflections born from a meticulous and careful consideration of that sentence, I understood that the role of the teacher, especially a design teacher, is not to make judgments of taste, nor to make a priori judgments, nor that of providing magic formulas for students to be “successful” in their tasks – or any other explicit or disguised authoritarian teaching attitude. But only analyzing, with as much knowledge, rigor, and erudition as possible, the results, only the results – and not the ideas; only the products – and not who produced them. Therefore, I understand that:

The presence of architecture criticism should occur only when the practice of design has already started. A minimally responsible architecture critic should refuse to discuss ideas that have not yet seen the light of paper – or of the monitor, if that is the case. The first attitude of design teachers could be to only critically discuss the student’s design. It seems to be obvious, but it is not. (Zein, 2018, p.79-80).

But Lefèvre’s text goes much further than these general recommendations. It examines, step by step, several of the possible and common situations that occur in interactions between teachers and students, in project teaching studios, carefully unfolding each aspect, revealing its different sides, making pertinent suggestions, etc. The language the author adopts – does not say “students” or “teachers”, but “those who dedicate themselves to doing this or that...”, often using this generic and indirect form (perhaps even more expressive in French than in Portuguese) – it occurs, in my view, out of sheer delicacy. Whoever had the privilege of meeting the author in person will remember his extreme warmth, mixed with an ethical sense of truth that never allowed him to renounce saying and doing what was necessary. In fact, this was my first contact with Rodrigo, in August or September 1976: through his overwhelming criticism about a design proposed by a team of fellow students of which I was a part. Said with such authority, firmness, and, at the same time, sensitivity, that I realized that, I was standing before, finally, a master (Zein, 2001).

⁶Texts written in 2001 and 2003 and republished in Zein (2018, p.68—89 and 90-103).

The second chapter of this text will deal with “postulates” – which, in my view, could also be called “theories”, or at least, a very promising and consequent outline of a theory formulation. This section is also organized in 3 parts, or “problems”, and a synthesis, or an application of the exposed contents: a) the problem of demonstration; b) the problem of judgment; c) the problem of self-demonstration, and d) constituent elements of an action directed towards an end. The third chapter ends by resuming and establishing the definitions proposed in the first chapter, basing them more thoroughly and explicitly.

From this second chapter, I will extract only what seems to me to be one of the key phrases for understanding the focus, intentions, and objectives of the text:

Anyway, what we want to look for is where it is unique distinguished and how they can develop until superimposition or coincidence, two things that are: on the one hand, the “desire” to reach an verbally expressed end, formed in the field of consciousness, almost always present throughout the action, but remaining objectively inoperative; on the other, a “real willingness” to reach an end, formed in the core of evidence, which often gives sensitive results. (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p.118)

Lefèvre's proposal, therefore, is that this duality between abstract wanting and concrete making needs to be synthesized in an integrated/abstract “doing wanting”. Unfortunately, this is not what usually happens in most teaching activities, particularly in architectural design. And even more particularly in the context in which Rodrigo wrote those words – the 1970s – hard times when architecture schools, from all over the world, were permeated by many discourses and by a paradoxical devaluation and debasement of design activities. This situation, although it has changed, is still current and recurring, in many and varied situations, even today, almost half a century later. It is interesting (and sad) how Lefèvre's words still sound relevant today:

Perhaps only the degree of awareness of students on architecture and urbanism problems is being achieved, without reaching enough changes in their core of evidence to assume a “real willingness” to participate in the solution of these problems. Perhaps [...] (if) it is only making students aware of their need, not even allowing, or promoting, a change in the students' “attitudes” in search of a “real willingness” to seek solutions to architecture and urbanism problems. (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p.118-9)

Of course, a lot of things has also changed, in the decades that permeate this text, and the contemporary moment. I may sound be biased, but, in my opinion, if something has changed, it is because texts like this existed, were read, influenced, and helped to change the world. That we have forgotten where the incentives to rethink teaching and the profession came from is just a stumbling block, which I am sure would not bother the author of the text either. It is not, and it does not matter much, who said it first. Because changing social and pedagogical attitudes, can never be attributed only to an initial big bang because its effectiveness is given by the accumulation, concentration, repetition, and emphasis, in different ways, on different occasions, of some fundamental concepts. As Lefèvre does, by the way, in the excerpt I highlighted above: he says almost the same thing, twice. The keyword, in this case, is “almost”. It is neither error nor redundancy: it is precision and encouragement to readiness.

After presenting the concepts and ideas, developing the postulates and theories, determining the problems, their causes, and developments, in chapter 3 the author will, finally, propose what he calls a “methodology outline”. A new repetition of the above excerpt: it is not enough to understand the problems that arise, a “willingness to real” needs to be activated to solve them. For something to change, a possibility of an alternative future to the status quo must be designed.

But although the name given to this part is “methodology”, it is not a “vade-mecum” at all, nor a list of tasks, nor a point-by-point catalog of things to accomplish, nor a formula. Because Rodrigo Lefèvre does not propose that the outer space changes to conform to any genius and supreme solution. But that we, beings under education and learning, students or teachers, change internally, from the understanding of our own truths.

In several sentences of this section of the text, he starts with “what matters is that...” or “what is important is that...”. What matters is that students (and obviously, he is also talking about fellow teachers...) “try to discover what they are as a product of their education [...] what they are as an element inserted in a set of relations of other elements, seeking to understand their position, their choices in this set of relations” (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p. 125). Becoming aware of oneself would be the only real possibility for learning and change. It is impossible not to remember the Pythagorean “know thyself”, translated by the Greeks from the

knowledge of previous cultures and civilizations; and that, albeit they used to be esoteric, they are now available to anyone. It seems to me that this excerpt must be understood as a statement of a deeply spiritual nature. Which has nothing to do with any kind of religious affiliation. But with the deep ethical attitude that supported and moved the actions and thoughts of the author of this text.

I make a point of quoting, too, the final sentence of this chapter, especially because it is perhaps one of the best known quotes (although I do not know to what extent they are well understood) of this text:

Subjective will be transformed into objective, into an objective process, a development degree, when the representation, that is, the images of objects and phenomena and images of the relations between them, of that objective design at that development degree, are not fragmentary and not incomplete, in accordance to reality, are in the sphere of evidence and in the sphere of consciousness at the same time. At that moment, the verbalized "desire" correlates, it is part of the "real willingness" to take an action, in search of an end. (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p.129)

Please read it again, slowly, word for word. Even if you don't understand it – and it's not easy, I've been trying to understand it for years, and I certainly haven't fully did it yet – keep reading. Personally, it reminds me of classes on Spinoza, given by Marilena Chauí, which I had the privilege of watching shortly after reading this text for the first time. In Spinozian philosophical geometry (if I understand it correctly, I apologize to the teacher for my limited simplification and literary tendency to analogies, metonymies, and metaphors) perfect Freedom occurs when it proves to coincide with perfect Necessity. Or something like that.

But it would be impossible to the kind and modest being that Rodrigo Lefèvre is to finish a text like that, in such a triumphant way. Perhaps that is why the fourth and last chapter called "sparse notes" follows, which it apparently needed to be added due to the "existing real conditions". All the notes (which he numbers from 1 to 11) are extremely interesting. But as there is no intention here to exhaust the subject, I exercise my subjectivity and choose to comment briefly only on some aspects that interest me most. I would even say that they excited me the most.

I already made a similar selection at the beginning of this article, commenting on Rodrigo's considerations on the deception syndrome, and theory as a concrete object. But I would like to end with an excerpt that, in a way, validates and author-

izes the effort of this text. Prophetically, perhaps. Or it is just longing. It is point number 8:

Trying to understand other people's ideas, trying to synthesize and then convey to others so that they can participate in the subsequent syntheses, this should be an additional activity to adopt in teamwork [...] in such a way that the others can adhere firmly to the syntheses by developing real provisions for the fulfillment of tasks to develop those syntheses, to verify those syntheses and to resume those syntheses, that is, with new syntheses, to restart the process. (LEFÈVRE, 1977 In KOURY, 2019, p.136-7).

Back to the future. With the awareness that everything that comes from the past, but remains meaningful, remains pending, remains a challenge to be fulfilled, continues to exist, by being and acting, in this present.

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