

NEB: an opportunity to recentre architecture

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At the end of the first half of 2021, as part of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Association of Architects (OA) organised a European Conference on Architectural Policies (ECAP).

The debate event was held on 8 and 9 June at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon.

EPAC 2021 reflected a commitment on the part of the OA to respond to an appeal from the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and assumed the mission of **architects as agents of change**, constructing the New European Bauhaus (NEB), putting forward a dialogue on the current challenges for a post-pandemic future and crossing architecture, art, city and politics: From Bauhaus to the New House – Post-Covid Landscapes.

Organised into statements, keynote addresses and four round-table events, the latter being:

- A| NEB seen from outside Europe;
- B| Transformations of the city in the post-pandemic period;
- C| Architecture, art and sustainability;
- D| Architectural policies and the NEB,

EPAC 2021 presented a contemporary debate on new forms of living under the premise of sustainability, to which various generations of architects, artists, cultural agents, academics from diverse fields and managers were invited.

NEB is an interdisciplinary project, still under construction, that opens paths and perspectives towards new paradigms; as architects, **it is our desire to further sustainability and guarantee the conception of quality architecture and the protection of our cultural heritage.**

EPAC 2021 was an opportunity to discover a path towards reinventing architecture, and expanding the scope of the practice thereof, and of the image we want to transmit of architects, in interconnection and dialogue with other disciplines and fields, gathering testimonies of excellence, diversity and inventiveness and opening up perspectives for a more inclusive city.

NEB: a project of hope

The paradigms that were established towards the end of the last century are now being called into question. They were based on mistaken beliefs, and what we are now experiencing is a “rebirth”, another vision of the reality of the world. And Bauhaus is a reference for this New House initiative.

It is impossible to speak of architecture without speaking of architectural policies

What is important to note here is that *policies* are not possible without having *strategies* in place first. The programming for the four round-table events conformed with this idea: starting first with an opening up, as wide as possible, and then on to the expansion of this clearly European initiative to the non-EU world, and finally to the policies.

When one speaks of the quality of the territory, quality construction, the importance of the quality of housing for all, one speaks of the policies and strategies for the new house.

The creation and development of the city is probably the greatest achievement of humanity.

Architects do not own the cities. In relation to the city, architects are agents of change, agents of regeneration, reuse, adaptive reuse; they are agents of the heritage and agents of the living city, which shares the space with the historic city, the city of the memory, and depends on the life of the buildings and the life of the cities themselves.

In the contemporary city, the cycles of obsolescence (e.g. of industries, of ports...) have accelerated so much that suddenly one sees large sections of the city enter into decline. If nothing is done to regenerate such areas, they will become archaeological sites with no life of their own within 50 years. **The relationship between memory, culture and life** is fundamentally important and **architects are agents of the living city, the living landscape, the living territory, together with their colleagues** from the fields of engineering, landscape architecture, history and archaeology and people from so many other professions, in short; **with all the users** of the respective areas.

The city, indeed, belongs to all and no one at the same time. And **the new challenges the city faces are absolutely extraordinarily complex**. The dynamic relationship proposed by Ursula von der Leyen, which came as a pleasant surprise to all of us, reinstates culture, the arts, humanity itself at the centre of a number of forms of knowledge that were very much marginalised in when the city was built.

The truth is that architecture itself was being marginalised, just as culture and art, in particular the performative arts, have been; culture and civilisation can translate to both present and future knowledge – values, heritage, and history – because culture only makes sense if it is a continuous, ongoing thing, like identity and memory, which are dynamic. For identity, heritage is of the utmost importance, but if it does not have a life, even if only a symbolic one, it will die. This is our great challenge.

And one issue is very important in a post-pandemic situation: bringing culture into the centre of things and reinstating the discussion of nature vs. artifice, in order to stop the destruction of the planet. There is no Planet B.

Architects and policy

The Bill on Architecture and Quality in the Built Environment is currently being debated in Spain; it aims to establish the importance of quality of architecture by law. The quality of architecture for the planet, for the territory, for the landscape, for the city, for the public space, for the built fabric and for

our homes. **Of interest is that architecture means quality of life** for those who are there, live there. The city is the people, and in all cases making a new house happen is something that should involve all concerned. This is a discourse that is of interest to **architects, who, in Portugal, have distanced themselves excessively and dangerously from a polis-oriented policy.**

This is a matter that deserves our utmost attention, and the government, or the respective governing body, can count on architects. This matter is in our hands, and it demands the ability to establish dialogue with our peers in other professional associations, other professions and municipal decision-makers. The latter are, primarily, the elected representatives, followed by the private citizens.

The State, the local governments and the administrations all have a regulatory function. But the property developers also have a key role to play. Finally, because a city belongs to the citizens, **there can be no NEB if someone is left behind.** There is no sustainability without the social dimension.

The matter of participation is also very much a topical one. We see no future for the new European house without discussing the issue of participation; it is a path we must learn. **Architects have an opportunity** in this recentring of the discourse because in the world of sustainability and the world of technology there is a lot of gaps, both upstream and downstream, left by the advanced technologies.

There are, essentially, three levels to architecture. The first, which has a wider base: the fundamental decisions architecture and design makes about the form and the space – more compact or more dispersed, more open or less open, more transparent or less transparent. The second level has to do with passive energies, inertias and insulation. Then there is the third level, that of the advanced technologies. Transversal to all of these is the universe of computerisation, digitalisation, the new tools used in design. But there is an entire world upstream of this, one specific to the field of architecture, which is that of the fundamental decisions, of the integration of the advanced technologies; also, downstream are the people, the culture, the heritage. Who is going to live here? How are they going to live here? Who manages the spatial quality? The time-based dimension of inhabiting a space is something that is not addressed by the advanced technologies. Natural light, the cycle of night, day, winter, summer, etc., introduces time into the architectural equation. There is an architectural world both upstream and downstream of the advanced technologies: the technologies that are also an integral part of the decision-making in the world of architecture.

NEB calls for a recentring of culture, a recentring of civilisation, a recentring of humanities and a **recentring of Architecture.**

Taking knowledge of and resolving dichotomies

In order to celebrate and divulge the NEB spirit, the OA organised another initiative in December 2021 that highlighted works selected and distinguished by New European Bauhaus and New European Bauhaus Rising Stars Prizes, as well as an exhibition of ideas and designs by architects who responded to an open call.

The call asked for interdisciplinary projects that featured the collaboration of, or were coordinated by, architects and/or architecture students and that linked in an innovative way, sustainability, aesthetics and inclusivity, promoted quality of life and favoured simplicity, functionality and the circularity of materials.

The OA once again assumed its mission of accompanying, stimulating, divulging and giving space to colleagues who establish dialogues between the arts, technologies, creativity and sustainability. Architecture can be conducted on many levels and the OA can respond to that; the NEB has made it possible to widen the scope of the profession, in coordination with other disciplines and areas.

The motto for Bauhaus was “form follows function”. Architecture was never only a matter of form; what we are really interested in is how we want to live in our cities, how we want to live in society.

Education, the “school”, and Bauhaus was indeed a school, with its exchange of knowledge, is the most ideal and effective way of introducing a structuring and systemic change. It is the most relevant place to cultivate change amongst children and young architects, welcoming their disquiet in relation to certain situations and involving the whole community.

In a clear, uncomplicated way, and without moral or methodological issues, **the young architects who presented their design ideas** used all tools available to them, including aesthetic tools, and revealed true advancement by resolving a number of classical dichotomies when it comes to being an architect:

idealism vs realism; high/advanced technology vs low technology; socially abstract vs socially specific; aesthetics vs ethics; landscape vs architecture; design scales – from the territory to the building detail.

In their professional activity, they are able to **interpret social and societal needs** and interlink a desire to go back to the basics with the sophistication of computerised prototyping.

They are part of a new, sustainable, culture that is inclusive and beautiful and have signed up to the European Green Deal.