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A conversation with Fala Atelier about naivety

The interminable Skype ringtone. Suddenly, Filipe and Ahmed spring onto my screen. They sit in their atelier in Porto, headphones on, sharing one microphone whilst their employees listen in. We chat about naivety, the future and cults.

TM Could you tell me a little about what you're working on right now?

AB Right now we have 12 projects under construction.

At the very beginning we were playing with very conventional ideas and progressively the projects are getting wilder. In a sense, we managed to go deeper and deeper into what we like, which is less orthodox.

FM Frightfully out of control sometimes, in a nice way. We are now seeing some of the projects that we designed in the last 5–6 years appearing. People live there. It's not just an idea in our minds, it's actually a house or an apartment. But at the same time, there is this kind of moment where sometimes you still look at what we just finished and we think to ourselves, «how did this happen?» in a good way! How did someone allow us to go this far? Now we are trying to push the envelope as far away as possible from what we did already. I mean, it's not like we are erasing what we did, it's just that we're trying to make it even stronger, bolder. Every small commission—even some cheap, low-cost renovation of a small house—can become something special.

AB What I find interesting is that none of our clients are really interested in architecture, or doing something that is daring, so all of this comes from us. For me it's more compelling to have a very unconventional house that is not lived in by exuberant, unconventional people, which results in a clash of worlds between a very ordinary, urban life and what we try to push for.

FM It's a constant condition of schizophrenia, in a way, because our clients don't care about architecture that much, they don't even really want to work with us. We are one name out of many others. We were maybe the ones that were closer or less expensive or were recommended by a friend. So we don't have this glamorous idea of a client that shows up and says «I want a Fala project». That's not how it happens at all. On the other side—that's why I called it schizophrenic—we have our own am-

bition which is much bigger than the conditions, budgets and clients that we have. We always try to make the best out of conditions that are not enough to do what we could call «proper architecture». What I think is truly important for us is, that regardless of all these obstacles we want to push it further. Even if you fall, you stand up again and you keep trying. Sometimes we are even stubborn and stupid to the point of insisting several times on things we know are not going to happen, but we just keep going. You die fighting, but we cause our own death, because it would be so much easier if we just did whatever they asked us to. Better weekends, more money. It's faster, the municipality is happy because they don't want to be put in a position where they need to think or evaluate; they just want to say yes or no. We create our own enemies..

TM But as a young office, what you talk about is idealistic. How do you maintain your idealism and when would you say it's okay to accept a compromise? Or is it never acceptable?

FM I think we are idealists, that's for sure.

AB It's difficult to answer that question in general, because in every project the threshold of compromise is different. For us, the project needs to remain one coherent piece. That's really what we fight for in most cases. In a sense, I think we've never fully compromised, because even if we need to turn the project upside down, we will basically redo a project. It's a lot more work for us, because sometimes we have to reconsider everything to find something we enjoy. But ultimately we don't compromise that much. The naive ideas are there in the finished project, otherwise we don't do it. There are no projects that we are not proud of.

FM We don't hide projects. There are projects that might end up taking a more fragmented existence, where you can feel that some aspects were left a bit behind and others were completely over-emphasised. That's also a part of being young, that many times we are out of control. Most of the projects we push too far. Sometimes the compromise you talk about is

A



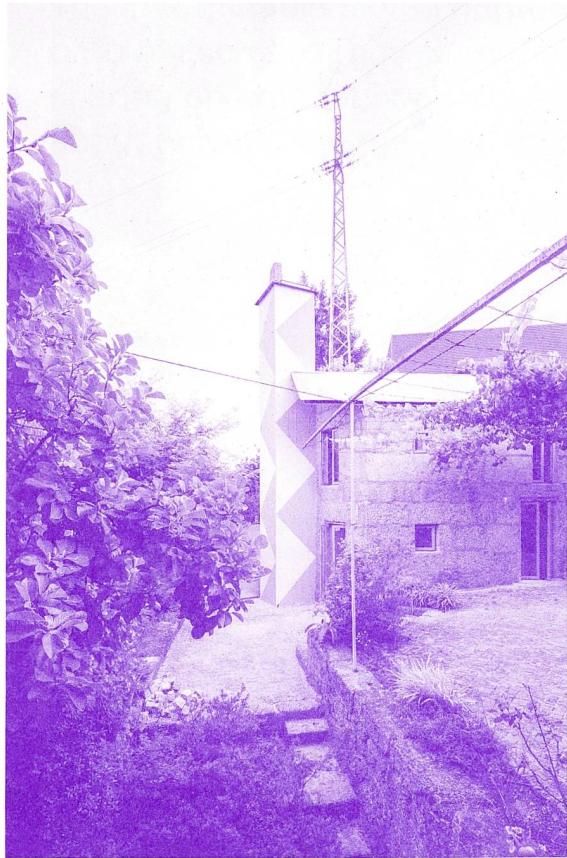
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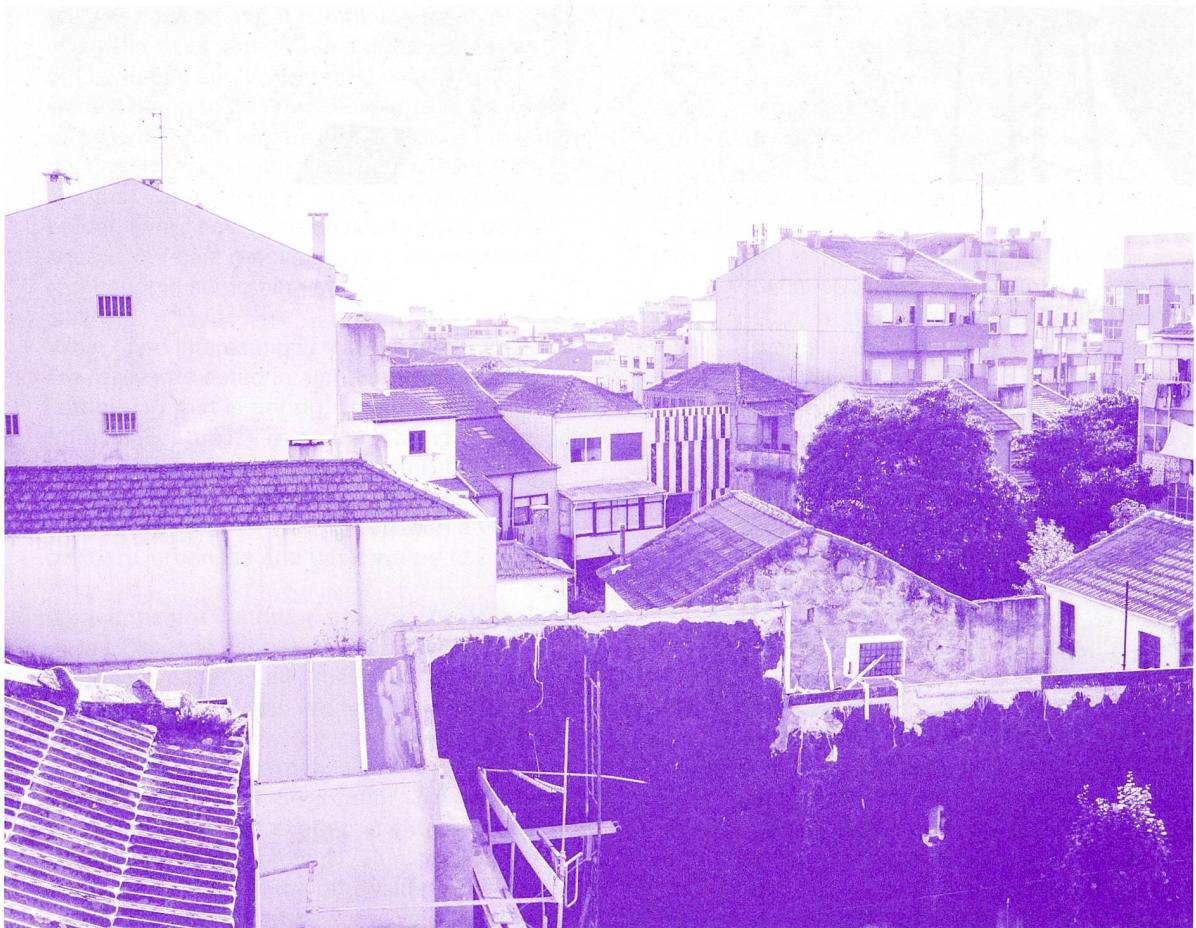
A Loft in Amparo, Porto, PT

B House with a Curved Wall, Porto, PT

C



D



C Small House with a Monumental Shower,
Amarante, PT

D House in Rua do Paraíso, Porto, PT

	actually good, because the client offers a certain battle or the regulation forces us to limit ourselves, so we need to be even smarter and find a way that makes an even better project than if we were just running wild, which is an important lesson.	The first projects we did, we didn't even know how to calculate the fees, so we actually ended up paying to work. There are all of these very practical aspects of naivety, that even today we suffer from. But at the same time, we laugh at what we do, in a good way. It is a positive naivety. It's a condition, that's true, it has its ups and downs. But at the end of the day, everything comes out of this kind of lack of responsibility that we self-impose.
AB	When it's too easy, then there's no challenge anymore. If you have a client that just gives you a <i>carte blanche</i> and you have an amazing site—it's almost too easy!	Do you see your naivety as a critique of the way that today's architecture has a tendency to take itself a bit too seriously?
FM	Yes, it's too easy, but let's face it, that never happens, and we wouldn't refuse it if it happened.	It's not really a critique. I think it's a very selfish thing, actually, that we do. We are like this because we like being like this. I don't think there was any point where we said, «we should be like this because other people are something else».
TM	You describe yourselves as a naive architecture practice. Naive is often something that is construed negatively. It's the kind of thing you would say to a student as a backhanded compliment: «oh, such a naive project», yet you really choose to celebrate it. Do you see this naivety in a purely positive way?	I don't think we are trying to be critical of what is being done, but at the same time, we don't like the way that some things are being built. It's true that the celebration of very austere architecture can tend to bore us. Just talking personally here, I actually come from the ETH, and Swiss architecture has a lot of this very stiff, rigid, precious mentality, that I have a lot of pleasure in avoiding. The architects that we truly admire are not extremely self-conscious, and you can feel that there's joy in what they do.
FM	It's a tool. It's like a defence mechanism. This naivety is not alone, we are not just naive. We are naive, but we are a lot of other things at the same time. Coming back to this idea that sometimes this definition is not used as a compliment, but as a critique: one of the best critiques that we ever received was from an architect friend, who said that if we were his students, he would fail us, but give us the maximum grade. I don't think that ever happens, but it's a perfect definition. It's this idea that it's interesting enough to be relevant, but wrong enough to not be acceptable.	Most of the architects that we could address from this ETH-like environment have a very closed set of ideals. Like, «this is how it's done and if it's not done like this, it's wrong», and we are the opposite side of the spectrum. We think that Botta is outstanding, we think Sottsass is outstanding. We think Siza is the best architect alive and Märkli is equally good. And there is Shinohara. There is serious architecture and there is playful architecture and all of them can take place at the same time. Sometimes on the table we are discussing a project where the two references are on opposite sides of the spectrum. For some reason, they just make sense together in that moment. So we don't put ourselves in a position of denying anything.
AB	To a certain extent, it's also a reaction to the fact that we started very soon after our studies. What we got from our studies was still very present when we started working. So I think it's also an attempt to unlearn certain things, and to have this mindset where you can learn afresh. So it's not totally unrelated to education. It's about trying to find a space where everything is possible again. When you finish your studies, your head is full of stuff that has been put there, and it can be a bit suffocating.	We try to avoid dogmas in a certain sense. Every time there's an idea that stiffens in the office, it's kicked down straight away. What I find the most interesting in the last two or three years is that a lot of the things that we did by necessity at first became tropes. There's a similar thing happening in the collages: because at first they were just a very practical tool. A blunt way of doing images. Now it has impacted very clearly the way we conceive the
FM	It's also a bit of a condition. I mean it's a condition in the sense that we are naive, literally, because everyone is very young in the office. I am the oldest and I'm 31. The office is only six years old, so we started at a time when we should have been doing internships and working for third parties. As we don't have any experience—we never worked for anyone else in Portugal—we didn't even know how to do an execution project. We didn't even know how to fold the paper to deliver to the municipality!	

TM	projects. Now the projects seem almost more like collages than the collages themselves.	AB	Usually these moments happen when somebody asks us to do an interview on Skype.
AB	We are interested in the materiality of your projects. To me, it often seems to be used more as a surface and is less about the weight or tectonics of the actual material. That may be linked to this idea of the 2D collage being almost projected onto the space. Why exactly do you choose to use the materials in this way?	FM	Or lunch breaks! Lunch breaks are productive. 80% of our thinking is done during lunch breaks. We need to have a table with food in front of us to reach the breakthroughs. As someone who works on this every day, you kind of have an idea of what you want to do and where you want to go. Maybe the fact that these interviews are starting to appear, forces us to think about it in a different way. Because for us it's very easy to justify something, like, when the three of us are discussing something, and we say «no let's try it in pink or in green or blue», we know why we're trying it, but we are not verbalising it. When someone asks us, why pink, why blue, why green, that's when we need to prove or disprove ourselves.
FM	Volumes are not that much of an interest for us. We design very flat things. First, it's cheap, second, it's practical. We found a space for experimentation. In a way, architecture is always designed 2D. We don't know how to think in 3D.	AB	You recently made the comparison that the office runs a bit like a sect. There are certain beliefs that are beyond rationality, and as soon as somebody new arrives in the office, there are a few things that can seem really weird. But I think ultimately it starts making sense after a little while.
AB	For example, we never did any of those mass studies where you see like 50 models in foam on a table. Even for the buildings we built from scratch, which would have a volume, we drew 100 plans. From there, we did 100 tests in collages. These are always seen from a certain perspective, as if we're imagining what the house would look like from this perspective. Later on, we would build a model, just to show it to the client. We pretty much don't do models. About 25 to 30 years ago, Shinohara was presented with this software that allowed volumetric experimentation. The early print screens from his work in the late 80s are amazing. He would take photos of the screen, because the print screen command did not yet exist. You can see today how the discovery of that technology impacted his architecture. The last phase was very much influenced by this new tool. I think the tools we use in the office today end up moulding the architecture that we produce. Maybe the tools were selected because in our context, in Portugal, the buildings are all side-by-side and we often tend to look at them frontally and we don't perceive the volume behind it. Or maybe we did collages because we had no time to do anything else, so it became a technique. That's why we can never answer if the chicken or the egg came first.	FM	It's like a very cute religion.
TM		TM	Is it okay to sometimes indulge in your own guilty pleasures? Things that fascinate you?
AB	There's only a point in using another mode of representation if it actually has an impact on the way you do architecture. We started doing collages a lot more out of necessity, then we took it seriously enough to let it impact the way that we do architecture. Now it has become such a thing to us that we are not really able to think in 3D anymore. Everything we do is a mishmash of a lot of 2D things.	FM	We have so many guilty pleasures! It's not by accident that I said the name of Botta before: he is a guilty pleasure. The thing is, we could almost individually do all the projects and they would be consistent with everything we did before, but the thing we said before about expanding the envelope and trying to be more eclectic means that in every project we need to try to push something in a certain direction. Sometimes we need to convince each other of how relevant that specific aspect is, and how much we will need to fight for it.
TM	In the office, do you have moments of reflection on what you've done, or is there not so much time? How do you go about shaping your identity?	AB	We disagree a lot also. There are a lot of debates in the office. I think it's healthy. So when we finally agree on something, it was worth the fight.
AB		TM	You talk a lot about your references, and I can feel that when you speak it is something that is at the forefront of your mind. As a young office, how is your identity shaped through these references?
AB		AB	Looking at pre-existing models to do architecture is something that is very natural to us. That's something we had in common.

FM	We have no reason not to show, or talk about those things. First, because they are good names, so we are not ashamed. We have seven books on Botta in the office and none on Mies or Corbusier. This imbalance is what we think is really interesting. We have countless books on Siza, we have a whole shelf on Japan, with some names more frequent than others. We have 5-6 books on Märkli. It's imbalanced, but it's imbalanced with the names that we wanted to be imbalanced with. It's not an accident.	attitude towards «relaxed experimentation» and this kind of, «fuck it, let's try it» attitude, maybe that's going to be more or less constant.
AB	We don't live in that fantasy of the genius that has architecture coming from above. Everything we do comes from somewhere else. We are very comfortable with that, and I think that's the only way to do architecture in the same manner, because we simply don't have ideas that come out of nowhere.	It's very important for us to reflect on what we do, but not that much on what our attitude is, because if you overanalyse it, there's no point anymore.
FM	Any architect that says that they do: they are lying.	I think what we're very good at defining is what we don't want to do. Maybe that's what's going to be more constant in the future; these things that we are not interested in. What we don't do now, we will not do it in the future either. But then let's have a talk again in 10 years and see how it goes.
AB	They are lying to themselves, mostly.	I wonder if you would still be just as relaxed. Maybe you'll be sitting there in suits.
TM	Do you think that this is something that would change when you age? Is this something specific to being young: you are really looking for something and when you age, you start to become more set in your ways?	Maybe that's the only thing we know for sure: we won't start to wear suits to go to work.
AB	As soon as you think you know what you're doing, you're lost. As soon as you start having a method you believe in, it's not worth discussing. When things get stiff and too repetitive, cyclical. A normal architecture career goes through that, it's true. There's the point when you stop looking for something, but usually that's when it starts becoming less interesting. We don't plan on sticking to the same thing, but if it happens, you should tell us and we will close the office.	No, not me.
TM	I'll send you a PDF of the interview in ten years' time. To try and come a little bit full-circle, let's talk about this idea of naivety. How do you think that you'll be able to stay naive even with all this experience that you get? Do you think that it's possible to stay naive while ageing?	
FM	I don't know. As I said, there are aspects of this condition that are caused by age and lack of experience and so on. So, naturally, those are going to disappear with time. But the general	