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A Conversation with Roger Tudó Galí trans team

«We are working on the present, but in relation to the past and with an intention for the future.» Olzinelles 31, Barcelona, 2017. Image: Adrià Goula

It's 12 o'clock on a Wednesday. trans had the opportunity to meet with Roger Tudó Galí in Zurich. The conversation revolved around his personal and professional development from being a student, then an architect and finally becoming a teacher. He revealed to us how the layering and the embodiment of time in his teaching and practice inform his attitude as an architect.

TT Was there an architectural reference or an architect that inspired you during your studies?

RGT ETSAV, the school where I studied, used to be very low-key. The professors were good, but quite anonymous compared to ETH Zurich. It was a more ordinary and domestic atmosphere. In this kind of learning environment, I was more focused on the content and I didn't really look at other kinds of architecture. The work with references did not come to me until the third year where I started to understand the meaning of architecture. Then I began looking at architectures that were hip in the 90's: Siza, Nouvel, Herzog & de Meuron, OMA, among others. And I started to become particularly interested in vernacular architecture.

TT What happened in the third year?

RGT It was kind of a natural evolution, realizing for the first time that I was really interested in architecture. I remember a moment where I talked to a friend at school, a fellow student. He was older than me, very talented and motivated. I explained to him a project of mine. We discussed it, not only the architecture I was proposing but also the process behind it. His arguments around what I had drawn helped me to understand – from a student's perspective – what design is all about and the excitement behind its process. From this point onwards, I have always been looking for something meaningful in each project I do.

TT What role did time play in your studies? How does it differ to your experience of time here at ETH Zurich?

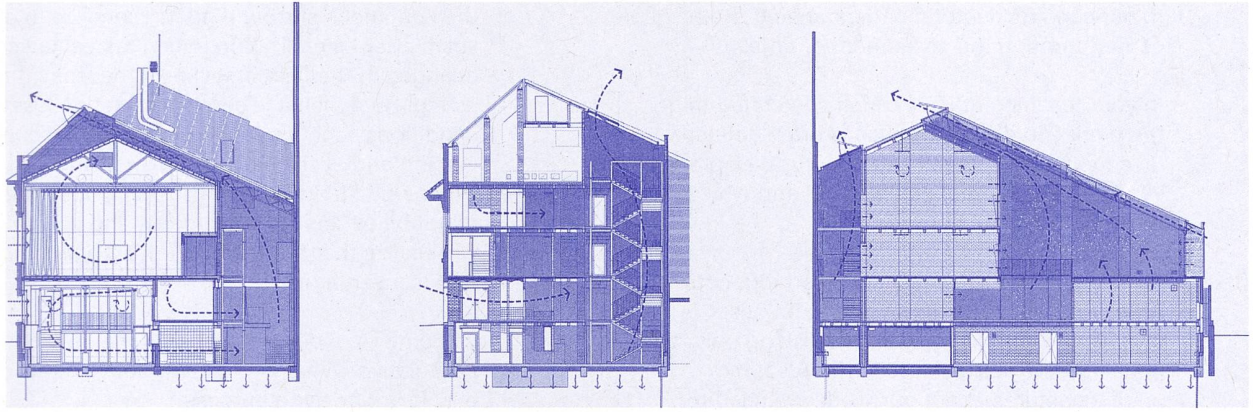
RGT At ETH Zurich you have a lot of studio hours with the design teachers; Two full days. In Spain it might only be two mornings a week. On top of that my teaching here is strongly supported by two assistants. Of course, it is in relation to the specificity of Switzerland that can afford paying not only one, but three people to teach. I taught at many schools, and in terms of infrastructure and resources ETH Zurich has been the most generous experience. These resources of time and people make it

possible that most of the students are able to explore their architectural beginnings with a certain dignity. I find it a powerful system, because it produces an environment that is quite equal. Obviously, there are some students that have mastered certain skills better than others, but because of the intensity of time investment everybody reaches a similar level of quality. Time is the key to everything in architecture. We always need more time to reconsider, to rethink, to go deeper, to start from zero again and again, to ground our ideas. But it's particularly important at a school, because for a good sedimentation of a learning process you need to practice as much as possible. And the contact between the student and the teacher is essential as in those moments the knowledge exchange is the strongest.

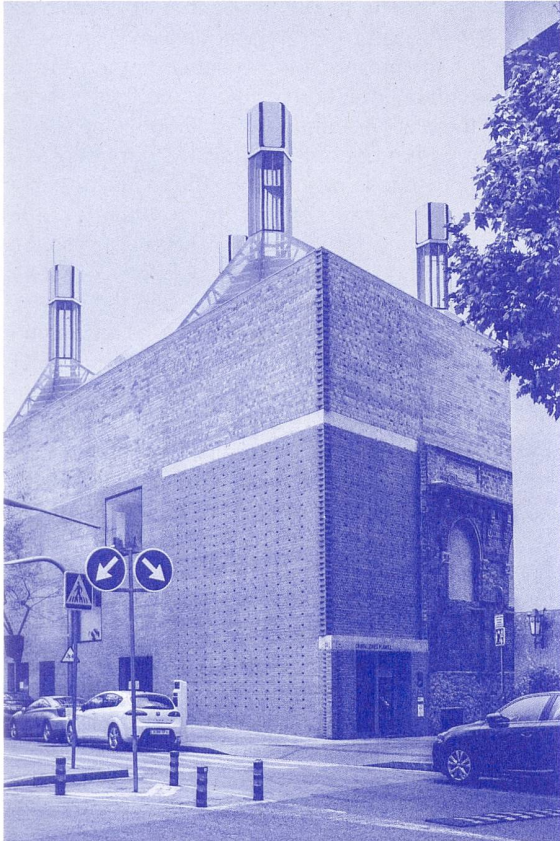
TT How did you experience the switch from being a student to then becoming an architect?

RGT In our case, we started with the office just after the diploma, and we were probably not well enough prepared to become architects. In the beginning we didn't control our design processes as well as we do now. These first experiences were valuable, especially in terms of understanding how difficult it is to build, how to deal with clients, and how to organize a real office. But, as a designing architect the most impactful lesson for me was not to build, but to teach. I started teaching quite early; four years after founding HARQUITECTES. For the first few years I taught construction rather than design. I was part of a very good group of professors and I learnt a lot from them. The responsibility to teach a course in theoretical construction and the company of these professors made it a valuable learning experience that helped me deepen my understanding of architecture in many aspects. That short – but intense – experience was fundamental for my future teaching approach and for a radical and disruptive transformation of our practice. In this way time is helping as well. You need to layer different kinds of knowledge; first failures in a practical manner to learn how to manage an office, later teaching

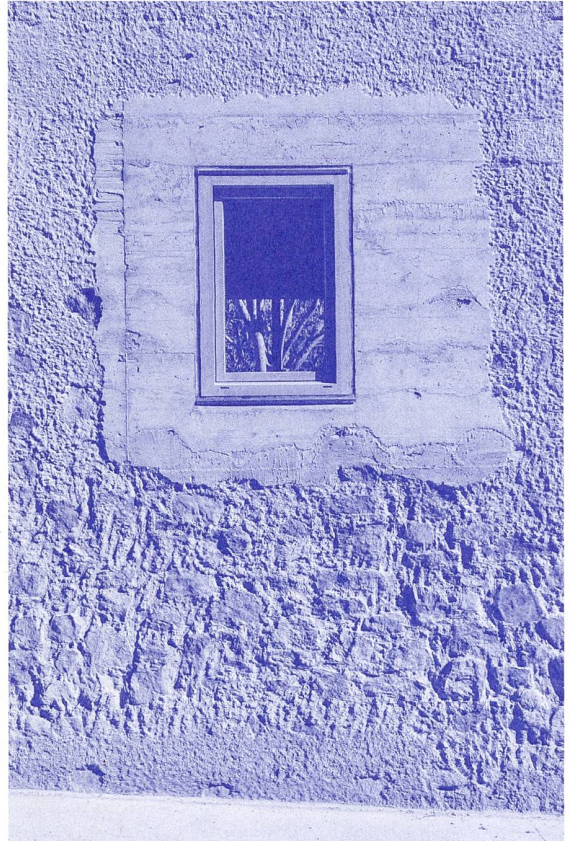
A



B



C



- A «The relationship to time, to gravity or to thermodynamics is inevitable.» Olzinelles 31, Barcelona, 2017. Image: HARQUITECTES
- B «Being reciprocal means to deconstruct an anthropocentric idea of architecture.» Ullastret, Girona, 2017. Image: Adrià Goula

- C «The «transhistorical» transformation of what is built [...] is a contribution to the existing that should provide an additional quality.» Barri de les Corts, Barcelona, 2016. Image: Adrià Goula

to deepen architectural understanding. Both earned through the investment of time.

TT In your teaching at ETH Zurich you stated that the work you do in the office is often defined by conditions that make architecture reciprocal. What kind of conditions are these and why do they interest you?

RGT Maybe this is another layer of learning, catalysed by time. I think through the process of designing, building and then visiting our buildings, we learn and re-learn. Also, by holding lectures about our work, we need to revisit our buildings all the time. So instead of finishing a project and never seeing it again, we are reconsidering them over and over. When you visit your own buildings, you are confronted with all your previous thoughts. This is producing an interesting sedimentation of experiential learning, where we start to realize what is working and what isn't. You can see the successes and the failures. You have to suffer the reality. Every time we understand more clearly how our designs behave and exchange with their surroundings. What is convincing and what is not so convincing. My personal conclusion is that the most convincing moments are happening when an invisible condition is becoming visible. When we feel that a certain hidden interdependency is appearing. The relationship to time, to gravity or to thermodynamics is inevitable. We cannot avoid these frictions. We are interdependent with what is surrounding us. In general, all natural phenomena connect buildings to life and make them more than just objects. Small moments such as the sound of a door or other less obvious expressions like feeling a breeze or the temperature of a wall, give us the opportunity to realize that we belong to a larger scale. We are not alone in this world – not designers or users in the middle of nothing. When we realize – by a real experience – that something is happening in the building, that is in a reciprocal and empathic connection with something bigger, like time, gravity, natural light, or convection, then there is the possibility for an emotional understanding of where we are. The awareness of interdependency makes the space special and touches something inside of us. Usually, it makes a building more convincing, because it is connected to something that is beyond our egos. Something stronger than just an anthropocentric or speculative point of view. Being reciprocal means to deconstruct an anthropocentric idea of architecture. Sometimes designing can be too speculative. Although a building might be beautiful and connected in a design-based understanding, it can be disconnected from

the conditions surrounding it. Therefore a few years after its realization, when tastes have changed in the field, it will become less interesting. But when it is connected to timeless conditions such as gravity, it is provably convincing and at the same time enduring. When you stand in front of such a design it might be difficult to fully understand it, but you realize that there is something happening that is meaningful.

TT You criticise a design approach that is too speculative. What kind of role does the future play in your design process?

RGT Something beautiful about our profession is that it can be «transhistorical». We are working on the present, but in relation to the past and with an intention for the future. It is necessary to consider the future condition. One can do it with more or less intensity, but I think everybody has to deal with it. The magic of designing is that sometimes the creation is coming alive, and sometimes it is even timeless. Some buildings transcend our own lives or ideas – transcend the human scale, and the idea of a building becomes useful for future times. It becomes part of the future. The expansion of an architecture that carries the condition of being alive is one of the aspects of designing that I find most important. Good buildings – sometimes – extend their intended lifespan immensely. The possibility of designing something that can last beyond many human lifetimes is very powerful. In the office, this idea of the «transhistorical» always triggers many discussions. If you have to imagine the future of your building: Do you want a very flexible building? Or would you rather imagine a very specific and special building? Or maybe something in between that is flexible enough for adaptations and specific enough to have a soul or a character? We accept that architecture is always «transhistorical». It is transcending historical periods, so we understand that buildings are not only used by the immediate client. Or that future architects will have to reuse what we are designing now. So, when we work with existing buildings, we usually prefer to discover and reinforce the specificities of the existing rather than working with an homogenic space easy to reconfigure. We believe that the buildings will improve with strong and sensitive mutations rather than by moving a few walls. The «transhistorical» transformation of what is built – whether it is your building or someone else's – is a contribution to the existing that should provide an additional quality. It should not just be a functional and operational solution to the problems of the existing.

- TT So the understanding of time in a design process can bring a powerful quality to architecture?
- RGT Architecture is not only space and matter. Architecture is time, too. The idea that time is embodied in a building, that you catch the presence of certain moments for us is very important. That is one of the reasons why we are usually working with thermodynamics, natural light or acoustics because these dynamic phenomena are permanently informing the inhabitants about time. And we like to embody it in matter, to make it visible. Time is becoming physical by specific reactions or organizations of matter. Therefore, we usually decide to not hide the existing surfaces with finishing materials. We realized that by showing certain construction systems and its behaviors we gain the quality of introducing the time of certain construction processes. The process of one, two, three years of construction, all the small mistakes and traces of the construction workers or the feeling of thermal mass render the building of much higher quality. Time is embodied in the surfaces and inside the built body and you perceive and relate to it. With flat white surfaces it is not possible to perceive that. In that sense such embodying time is paradoxically a condition of timelessness.
- TT When you relate a building to an invisible condition that is transforming – we are thinking here about the climate that will be very different in a few years - how will such a building deal with that kind of transformation?
- RGT Yes, up until now the paradigm was that buildings have a lifespan which is outlasted by the conditions of the surrounding climate. And if you imagine now a long-term design, but it is, in fact, relying on something that is in radical evolution, then you have a problem. But I am confident that it will be much more problematic for most buildings that do not have a clear and natural connection to the climatic conditions. Most are not using the strategy of thermal mass, even though in a warm climate, thermal mass is usually the best possible solution. Light construction assumes that you will plug in a heating or cooling system. I believe that the buildings we built will most likely resist this transformation of the climate, because they are designed to create natural comfort in severe warm conditions. And most of our designs start with the thick wall, and they are prepared to work without mechanical systems. In the future we will probably need even more thermal mass than we are already using. Or maybe in a few years we will have to change our thermodynamic strategies and design buildings that are more adaptable to new climatic conditions.
- TT We want to speak more about your attitude as a teacher: In your teaching you often mention Louis Kahn as an inspiration. Louis Kahn once said – interestingly, it was also in an interview here at ETH Zurich – that the academic and the professional field should be kept separate. Would you agree with that statement?
- RGT Maybe, depending on the moment. I have been through an evolution regarding this topic through the many years I have been teaching. As architects, we have to understand what is happening around us. Society is always in evolution. Then, what should the discipline and academia be looking for? Sometimes students and professors need to have a more realistic and practice-oriented approach. In some other periods, it seems necessary to have a more ethical and political approach. And sometimes even a more utopian approach. The balance between the current state of society and what is being taught at the academy is fundamental and always in evolution. Ideally, we need to move forward and at the same time we need realistic supports to produce projects that don't lose the perspective of the conditions of reality. As I said before: Gravity is always there, and can be understood from a hyperrealist, political or utopical point of view. And the reality is that I've always been in evolution. In the 2000s, when everybody was celebrating architecture for its formalistic way of exploration, my reaction as a professor and as a practitioner was to produce a very honest, simple, and realistic thing. So, with the students I was building real buildings for real purposes in society. Then – 15 years ago – I was more focused on sustainability dealing with the ethical responsibility of architecture. And later on, I was basically only teaching about the future and the built, urban and social transformation around climate change. A more political dimension of architecture, which was utopian, theoretical, and multidisciplinary. And now, I feel that the important thing is learning how to redefine our ways of inhabiting and how to create good and convincing architecture from a more reciprocal point of view. I would say, now I have adapted a more existential approach as a catalyst for the realistic, ethical, and social drives.
- TT Would you say that in the office you have gone through a similar evolution?
- RGT Yes, but in academia the expression of an attitude comes earlier and is often more radical. In the office you could read the fragments of the same attitude evolving. So, at the beginning

we managed very low budgets with a realistic framework. Then, we started to expand our ambition concerning sustainability in our designs. Lately we have been looking for better and more convincing architecture. And then, right now, I have started to open the door to what I am teaching at ETH. The redefinition of a purpose is becoming very important to me and how to apply it in the office environment. How to redefine the meaning of a building not from an ethical perspective, but from a more essential or fundamental point of view. What is really important for a certain kind of building? I am still looking for answers, but it is a search for clarification on what architecture is about.

Roger Tudó Galí, born 1973, currently teaches at ETH Zurich as a visiting lecturer and is one of the four founding partners of the Spanish architecture office HARQUITECTES. Between 2004 and 2009 he worked as a teacher at the Architectural Technology Department of La Salle de Barcelona. Since 2009 he has been teaching at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura del Vallès. Between 2016 and 2019 he was a guest teacher at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid. In 2021 he was a guest teacher at Harvard University Graduate School of Design.