

Constructed Geographies: Paulo Mendes da Rocha

Curators: Jean-Louis Cohen and Vanessa Grossman; Scientific Consultant: Catherine Otondo;

Exhibition project: Eduardo Souto de Moura and Nuno Graça Moura

Casa da Arquitectura — Portuguese Centre for Architecture, Matosinhos, Portugal

May 26th, 2023 – February 25th, 2024

Alexandra Demetriu

architect, cra-de studio, Barcelona, Spain / Bucharest, Romania

Jury expert for Mies van der Rohe Awards

demetriualexandra@gmail.com

The exhibition “Constructed Geographies: Paulo Mendes da Rocha,” Jean-Louis Cohen’s last curatorial project, is currently on view at the Casa da Arquitectura in Matosinhos, Portugal. For more than ten months, from May 2023 until February 2024, this display offers the unique opportunity to explore the life and work of one of Brazil’s most celebrated figures, Pritzker Prize architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha. Running in parallel with major architectural shows such as Pompidou’s Norman Foster or Herzog & de Meuron at the Royal Academy in London, the Mendes da Rocha retrospective stands out for its unique approach.

Navigating the Legacy of Paulo Mendes da Rocha

In December 2019, Paulo Mendes da Rocha made the remarkable decision to donate the complete collection of his work to Casa da Arquitectura, the Portuguese Center for Architecture, a non-profit cultural entity dedicated to support research and disseminate architectural knowledge to both professionals and the general public. Perceived in Brazil as a controversial gesture and national scandal, the donation act stands out as a statement to Mendes da Rocha’s deep respect for architecture as a historical and cultural phenomenon, and a reflection of his belief in the importance of making his work accessible to a wider public.

In 2020, after receiving the vast volume of material produced during his long professional life, from the 1950s to the present day, Casa da Arquitectura embarks (together with Paulo Mendes da Rocha at that time) on a two-year project to catalog, conserve, and exhibit the collection. An effort that involves the digitization of over 10,000 drawings, 6,000 photographs, 500 publications, slides, personal writings and correspondence, several projects, as well as the creation of a dedicated research center and exhibitions. The ambitious pursuit is put on hold in May 2021, with Mendes da Rocha’s death, after one year of preparing the project together with the co-curators Jean-Louis Cohen and Vanessa Grossmann, the exhibition architect Eduardo Souto de Moura, architect Catherine Otondo, archive responsible, and many others. “Constructed Geographies” finally opens to the public on May 26th 2023, two years after Mendes da Rocha’s death, and two months prior to the unexpected death of its senior curator Jean-Louis Cohen.¹

¹ The exhibition is complemented by an extensive publication — a presentation of the exhibition, but also of the Paulo Mendes da Rocha collection, the donation to the Casa da Arquitectura, a 456-page catalogue in two independent versions, Portuguese and English. The book also includes a long interview by curators Jean-Louis Cohen and Vanessa Grossman with architect Eduardo Souto de Moura.

Also in connection to “Constructed Geographies,” a parallel exhibition takes place concurrently at Galeria da Casa, CA, Matosinhos: “Beyond Drawing: Talking with Paulo Mendes da Rocha” — an insight into the architect’s philosophy of life. Curators: Marta Moreira and Rui Furtado. Exhibition design: Ricardo Bak Gordon (26.05. 2023 – 25.02.2024).



4. Edifício Jaraguá São Paulo, 1984-1988

Com o passar do tempo, Mendes da Rocha ofereceu a São Paulo vários edifícios de apartamentos, começando pelo Guaimbê, em 1962, até ao Aspen, em 1986, os quais se destacam na paisagem movimentada da metrópole. Construído em 1984, o Edifício Jaraguá deve o seu nome ao seu posicionamento num cume com vista para os vales dos rios Tietê e Pinheiros, que oferece uma vista para o remoto Pico do Jaraguá.

Mendes da Rocha descreveu esta obra como «uma casa alegre e transparente, com vários de seus espaços oferecendo vistas alternadas entre as duas paisagens». Graças à sua orientação, cada apartamento «é iluminado de forma diferente, de manhã e à noite ele se torna transparente e atraente».

As janelas, rebatidas de modo a permitir fechadas sustentam lajes de betão engenhosamente retilíneas. Localizadas cinco degraus abaixo do piso a sala de jantar são autónomas, contribuindo para a sensação de espaço no céu sugerida pelo arquiteto.





Jean-Louis Cohen at the opening of the exhibition. ©Ivo Tavares Studio_Casa da Arquitectura

The Geographies of Modernity

When faced with the immense volume of the archive and the real spatial context of the main hall of la Real Vinícola building, where the exhibition takes place, the curatorial work of “Constructed Geographies” seems an almost impossible “extraction” endeavor. Nonetheless, Jean-Louis Cohen and Vanessa Grossman present a comprehensive curatorial narrative. Twelve paradigmatic projects are used as anchors in this narrative, while related projects and unbuilt works are seamlessly woven through extensive documentation in the display.

Entering the exhibition hall, the visitor embarks on a journey through the intersections of geography, construction, historical time, and the personality of Mendes da Rocha in a format suited for both the wider public and architecture professionals. At the heart of the display is a linear and horizontal 65-meter-long continuous vitrine containing the selected original pieces from the collection. All original documents, from preliminary sketches to intricate structural drawings, delicate architectural volume study models made by the architect himself, construction photographs, personal snapshots and auto-portraits, project descriptions, and handwritten notes, offer an intimate and unique perspective on Mendes da Rocha’s work and personality.

The central showcase, interrupted by perpendicular explicative plinths and tables with commissioned models, orchestrates a non-chronologic and non-typological route, which starts with the influence of the hometown of Vitória and ends with a global vision of addressing the planet’s environment. The intended evading of chronology and typology creates a nonlinear experience, allowing for a more open exploration of the topics presented from the spectators’

point of view, while also emphasizing the coherence and clarity of seven decades of architectural work with no need for an exhibition outline or map.

Eleven video projections define the perimeter of the exhibition: ten original videos crafted for the exhibition by Filipe De Ferrari and Ciro Miguel, and the film produced for the Brazilian pavilion during the 17th Venice Architecture Biennale, under the curation of Alexandre Brasil, André Luiz Prado, Bruno Santa Cecília, Carlos Alberto Maciel, Paula Zasnicoff, and Henrique Penha. They not only complement the models displayed in the central showcase, but also immerse the viewer in the architectural atmosphere of the projects. The sheltered space in Patriarca Square Remodeling in Sao Paulo, the vibrant life that flourishes in SESC 24 de Maio building, the ludic atmosphere of the recreation in the Jardim Calux School in São Bernardo, invite the visitor to enter the spaces imagined and link the experience of the exhibition with the architecture on display.

In addition to the perimetral projections, three vertical displays complement the setting: a large exhibition display, one with the original forty-four drawings by Flávio Motta for the Osaka Pavilion (censored by the military dictatorship in Brazil), another large display with the interpretive models created by the students from the Berlage Center for Advanced Studies in Architecture and Urban Design, and the last, the original panel from the Pompidou Center International Competition in 1971, maybe the most provocative. Each of them has a specific purpose in the professional trajectory of Paulo Mendes da Rocha: the Flavio Motta panel alludes to the difficult relationship between the architect and the Brazilian state, the Pompidou Competition refers to his worldwide recognition, while the seven interpretative models of the Berlage project testify to his future legacy.²

As presented by the two curators, the projects are not simply built structures, but seem imaginative multifaceted geographies that reflect Mendes da Rocha's deep connection to the land and his desire to create an architecture harmoniously integrated with its surroundings, a profound understanding of Brazil's particular topography and natural resources, and thus emphasizing the architect's commitment to a unique, coherent, and contextual approach. "Constructed Geographies" revolves around the architect's stance against prevalent trends, focusing instead on a consistent, unwavering pursuit of architectural integrity.

2 Conceived as a hybrid between a history seminar and a model-making workshop. The result of the Berlage workshop, seven sectional fiberboard models, colored with acrylic paint, and textured with marl dust are included in the exhibition "Constructed Geographies" as a central piece of the curatorial discourse. Curators: Vanessa Grossman, Jean-Louis Cohen (spring 2023).