

Scarcity and Expression

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Learning from molecular gastronomy



Spatial colour study.

Ricardo Carvalho's UAL architecture school represents a contemporary upholding of the traditional concept of scarcity.

The building itself conveys the idea, a simple restoration of plain interior spaces in a palette of whites and timbers, polished concrete. Student work is executed in a consistent graphic and architectural sensibility. Each graduate project is documented in a printed volume of identical dimension; they sit in a neat row on shelves in the school library. The impression of this stylistic restraint is not one of dull servility, it is of willful dedication. When questioned about the school's 'minimalistic' style policy, Carvalho smiles and clarifies the misunderstanding. The restrained aesthetic of the school's work is not a stylistic adherence to minimalism; it is the aesthetic expression of an ideology of scarcity.

This proposal attempts to understand the concepts of place and identity as manifested in tradition and heritage. Evident in the vernacular is a shared value placed on economy of means; this is a collective consciousness in Portuguese culture. There is an ostensible cultural dichotomy between restraint and expression, between a history of oppression and frugality, and a history of diversity and richness on the geopolitical frontier between Europe and the world.

The project reimagines the txoko, a traditional gastronomic society, as a meeting place providing the spatial possibility to foster expression and diversity. The Molecular Gastronomy culinary discipline allows for the expression of a creative process through the medium of food, it promotes the reinterpretation of fundamental elements, and the refinement of an aesthetic experience. The building presents communal space to make an exclusive culinary sub-culture more accessible.

The project sought to develop an architecture of concealed expression, of suggestion and subversion. The undulating interior of the society halls and kitchens is hidden beneath the public plaza; the calm and controlled face betrays knowledge of the activity below through architectural gestures. Light floods the underground spaces through these points of interaction where the interior bursts through the seams of the site in moments of colour and angular geometry. A structural grid extends into the public space, undermining the authority of the existing walls; its asserted orientation creates dynamic moments where it meets the pre-existing structure.

Applying principles of contemporary Portuguese design; the predominance of form over ornamentation, inherited knowledge in material manufacture, and variations on tradition, the project locates itself in the uninhibited continuity of identity and place.