

Difficult Lessons

Portugal's unprecedented initiative to remake the image of its public schools during an economic recession, and the team of architects and engineers in charge of the controversial plan.

By Julianne Chou | December 2015



Braamcamp Freire Secondary School, Pontinha, Portugal. Photo by Invisible Gentleman

As a boy growing up in the outskirts of Lisbon, João Dias knew he did not want to attend the local high school that his sister had. Braamcamp Freire Secondary School was run down, and it did not have a good reputation, so he chose to go to the next nearest school to where his parents lived in the working class town of Pontinha. Residents explain that Pontinha, whose name translates to “tip” in English, marks the point at which the city ends and the suburbs begin. By American standards, the town is not far from Lisbon at all; from the tall stacks of modernist apartment blocks in Pontinha one can easily determine the outline of Portugal’s historic capital in the distance. The lone tourist to take the subway there from central Lisbon, however, will quickly get the idea that the two are of rather distant worlds.

João is now an engineer for Parque Escolar, a state-owned corporation formed during a recent initiative by the Portuguese government to renovate nearly all of the country’s public secondary schools (roughly the equivalent to high school in the US). His partner there, also an engineer named João, is an apt comic sidekick; in a monthly rotation, they drive from their office in Lisbon to the city’s Northern periphery to make house calls at seventeen different schools. Their job is to ensure that that the projects, even well after construction, are running smoothly. One of the schools they continue to monitor is Braamcamp Freire, the secondary school that João Dias’ sister had attended; another is the Vergílio Ferreira Secondary School, his chosen alma mater. João was going to take me on a tour of both, and even though his English is excellent, he warned me that he would be especially embarrassed of his speaking skills should we run into any of his old teachers.

Portugal's "Secondary School Modernization Program" was originally the vision of José Sócrates, the country's Socialist Prime Minister at the time the program was initiated in 2007. Sócrates was concerned about the state of Portuguese education after the country had returned relatively low results on three PISA surveys, which compares different countries' educational systems by testing 15 year-olds worldwide in reading, math and science.¹ The initially 2.4 billion euro (roughly 2.79 billion USD) program – funded through a combination of European Union grants and loans² – aimed to redevelop 205 deteriorating school buildings, with the ultimate goal of renovating 332 of the country's 477 secondary schools by 2015.³ The theory was that a wholesale improvement in the learning environment could elevate student performance and help keep kids in the public schools.

Parque Escolar EPE, as its website states, "is a corporation governed by public law with administrative and financial independence and its own assets. It is subject to the supervision of the Portuguese government ministers responsible for the areas of finance and education."⁴ Acting as a nonprofit developer of sorts, Parque Escolar's sole purpose was to implement the modernization program. In part, this meant hiring and collaborating with numerous local architects to update the existing buildings in accordance with contemporary theories of education and building performance. Seeing the program as more than a mere maintenance exercise, however, Parque Escolar also aimed to establish each school as a central place in its respective neighborhood by making the facilities more accessible and useful to the surrounding community.⁵ In an ambitious plan that is the only recent one of its kind in Europe, the project managers, architects, engineers, financial managers and education experts at Parque Escolar would ultimately find themselves at the helm of a larger experiment in rebranding the country's public education system.

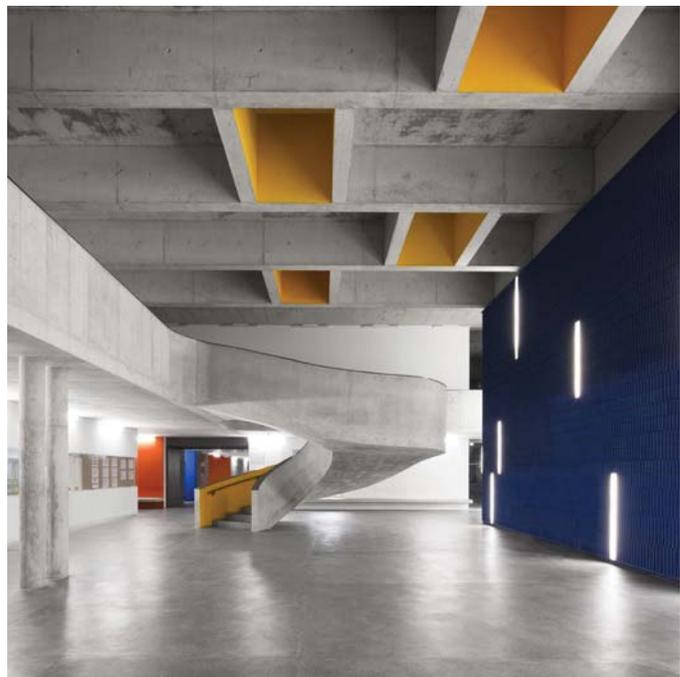
Towards the far end of Pontinha's main street, where the sleepy strip of traditional style restaurants and family-owned shops begins to trickle off, I met João in front of a large street sign pointing to the newly renovated Braamcamp Freire as if showing the way to a frequented tourist site. Dressed in jeans and sneakers, João could nearly have passed for a student as he removed his sunglasses to greet me. I followed him towards the entrance of the school and saw a diverse group of teenagers chatting in front of a pastry shop; then, from the tiny rooftops of the old town, a large concrete mass began to reveal itself against the sunny skies above. Splashes of primary colors – deep blue, bright red – peeked out in turn, and I instantly recognized the school from the many architectural websites that had featured its exemplary design.

Parque Escolar had hired the relatively highbrow Lisbon firm CVDB Arquitectos to redesign Braamcamp Freire, and the project has continued to win awards and recognition from the international design community since its completion in 2012.⁶ In California, public K-12 schools in urban areas are notoriously ill-equipped and underserved; meanwhile, private schools are building college campus-like facilities in a race to market themselves to the lucky few. With Portugal's schools also facing a significant social disparity in education, I had arrived from California with a distinct desire to know: what kind of society was this, which would make such a deep and wide investment into the appearance of its public schools?

Most of the schools that Parque Escolar set out to renovate were the prefabricated "pavilion" schools built en masse in the 1970s-80s when Portugal had to accommodate a quickly growing high school population, particularly outside of the main cities. Unlike the periphery, the main city centers had an established presence of urban schools dating back to the 1930s-40s or earlier. The pavilion schools, on the other hand, were cheaply

made and were not built to be sustainable in any sense of the word. At the start of the program, 77 percent of the country's stock of public secondary schools had been built in the 1970s or later, and they were rapidly falling into disrepair.⁷

Braamcamp Freire had been a pavilion school, but the few original structures that still stand have been disguised by the school's prodigious new home. The distinctive work of exposed concrete – an odd material choice for a school, one may think – contrasts its indestructible mass with a selective play of geometry and color to disclose isolated moments of curiosity. When walking through the new building which seems to assert its permanence ever so confidently, one can imagine how it must have been for students to see the flimsy, piecemeal pavilions of their old school transform into something so bold, and so official.



Braamcamp Freire Secondary School, Pontinha, Portugal. Photos by Invisible Gentleman

When I visited the school, it was summer vacation for Portuguese students. I would unfortunately miss out on the miniature social dramas played out in the colorful hallways during break, and the precarious wielding of chemicals in the newly refurbished labs – scenes I could only extrapolate from my own memories of high school. João told me that parts of the school could be closed off to allow for the town to use the building's community spaces during afterhours or on weekends; if such events did occur, I would not be there to witness them. Save for a few summer school students preparing for their college entrance exams, the building was almost empty when I saw it. But in that moment, the school happened to possess a solemn beauty more often associated with frequented monuments of architectural tourism (such as the works of Le Corbusier, who appeared to have been a major influence here).

Attempting to rein in my awe of Braamcamp Freire in its pristine state of emptiness, I asked João whether he felt the new building had made any impact on the students. After all, with a new performing arts center, smart boards in a number of classrooms, and science labs with some of the latest technologies, the facilities could rival those of many elite schools in the US. Although he couldn't really compare Portuguese schools with ours – he has never been to America, as he and his wife prefer to travel to Asia – he explained that he is particularly proud of the modernization program because he has personally witnessed how the renovations have changed

many of the students' feelings about their schools. João recalled that when he was in high school, he didn't even know where the school library was. One of Parque Escolar's most adamant design guidelines for the architects was that the library act as a central space in each new layout. He now sees students spending time there outside of class, and he also observed that they stay in the building long past the end of the school day. João does not know whether the new building has improved student performance, but he does know that "the students love the school...for the emotional connection is much stronger."

Parque Escolar had made a rigorous effort to collaborate with local school boards, parents, students and teachers during early phases of the redesign process. An early report in 2012 by the multinational Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which administers the PISA exam, found that "local stakeholders" were generally pleased with the outcome.⁸ But as with any building, there are aspects of the schools that don't work very well. Some of the gymnasiums are terribly ventilated, which can make indoor dance and gymnastics classes particularly uncomfortable. The window shades used in some of the schools are not durable enough to withstand the Atlantic Portuguese winds, not to mention flying soccer balls from courtyards down below. A common complaint from both teachers and Parque Escolar was that architects don't always design schools with the awareness that most of its users are of an age group that are apt to destroy the building in any possible way – sometimes in a concerted effort to show off to their friends, sometimes simply to express themselves.

João did emphasize that the success of a renovation can depend heavily on cooperation from the school's administrators. Some, like the occasional bad tenants, have not fulfilled their responsibilities to daily upkeep, and more lenient principals have yet to instill in their students a strict social contract of respect for the buildings. Diogo Almeida, another engineer at Parque Escolar, oversees a number of schools in Lisbon proper and is particularly exasperated with the endless list of maintenance problems that have emerged out of the renovations. As we toured the Pedro Nunes Secondary School in Lisbon's fashionable area of Príncipe Real – its historic yellow shell, delicate wooden staircases and tiled marble floors symbolic of a bygone era – he stated that, "In my honest opinion, schools should be built like prisons." He showed me how, room after room, each of the thin wooden doors of the original school were disintegrating due to the architect's insistence on refurbishing them with new hardware in the name of preservation.

If a student breaks something, Diogo explained, he makes the student pay for the repairs. He said that some of the families argue that they cannot pay, but then he sees the kid "with an iPad or something," and his sympathy will wear thin. "There are some schools where the families are genuinely struggling to meet basic needs like food," he said. "But most of the students in this school are more well off, you know?" A father of two, Diogo – who appears to have the casual confidence of an athlete but speaks with considerable philosophical candor – felt that the renovations certainly hadn't improved student performance. If anything, the new schools have just been a distraction from the larger problems with the Portuguese education system. "Teaching used to be a respected profession," he said. "Now, it's something that anyone with a college degree does when they can't find another job. And everyone in this country – I mean, *everyone* – has a college degree."

Like some of the teachers I talked with, Diogo observed that schools in Portugal have had to deal with more disciplinary issues that they ever have in the past. At the root of the problem, he believes, is that parents have to work too much. "I work until about 7pm, then I get home and we have to cook and eat dinner, then I help my kid with homework, then it's time to go to bed," he explained. "Parents used to be responsible for teaching

their kids how to be citizens, how to behave in society. Now there is no time for that, and teachers have to be the parents.” He recalled a cartoon he saw once: it illustrated the past as a father yelling at his son for getting bad grades; in the present, the father was yelling at a teacher for his son’s bad grades. But Diogo appeared to prefer pragmatism over nostalgia. His views on immigration? “I say bring them all here. We need the kids so that we can fill these schools. And I need someone to pay for my social security!”

João Dias later told me that people tend to be more critical of the renovations to the historic schools than to the modern ones that were built in the 1970s and 80s. In Pedro Nunes, I could maybe see why. The aging yellow buildings, dating back to 1911, had been awkwardly linked together with a minimal prosthetic of concrete, glass and steel. Inside, painted on the walls and ceilings was extra-large signage in bold Helvetica directing people to spaces such as the cafeteria and restrooms. Accompanying the Helvetica were giant icons depicting a fork and knife, a girl and a boy – graphic ornaments that Diogo said he never really understood. The two sharply different styles of historic artifact and punchy contemporaneity didn’t seem to blend together at all, nor did they work together in their distinctness.

But perhaps the modern school renovations garnered less criticism than the historic ones because the architects of schools like Braamcamp Freire had more freedom to do as they pleased, seeing that they had so little existing material to work with. This is true in the physical sense (Braamcamp Freire was in much worse condition and was not historically precious, so they were able to remake almost the entire school without nostalgia) but also in the social sense (most pavilion schools were in the periphery and, being less wealthy than the cities, had much more to gain from the renovation program). And, perhaps as a result of having such a dearth of infrastructure, towns like Pontinha likely had fewer expectations about what exactly a school should look like.



Garcia D’Orta Secondary School, Porto, Portugal. Photo by Fernando Guerra.

The Lisbon office of Parque Escolar is quietly nestled on a high floor of a modest, 1960s office building near the city's Southern waterfront. A week after my visit to Braamcamp Freire I caught João Dias on his way back from an afternoon espresso break, an enduring cultural pillar in the Portuguese day (most of the schools I visited were designed to have their own espresso bar, in addition to a cafeteria). As I sat with him in Parque Escolar's tiny conference room, which was jam-packed with drawing sets full of little lines, notes and numbers, Helder Cotrim, one of the in-house architects, excitedly described the circumstances behind the program as a "perfect storm" that had "tested the limits of architectural, engineering, mechanical, and electrical scope."

What Helder had likened to a near miraculous weather event was the rare alignment of interests and economic conditions in Portugal just before and during the European economic crisis: there was political will, money from the European Union, and an increased investment in public projects as a result of the recession's devastating effect on the private sector.⁹ All of these factors convened with enormous force under the direction of organizations like Parque Escolar, whose team was charged with using its private sector experience to implement the renovations in as cost-effective and timely a way as possible. The OECD report had cast a promising outlook onto Parque Escolar's role as a private company serving a particular public interest, stating that it "may serve as a potential model for international application."¹⁰

I asked Helder and João if most people in Portugal knew about the school renovations. With an ironic, self-deprecating chuckle that seems characteristically Portuguese, Helder replied that, "Yes, most people knew about it because it was so controversial!" Many people felt that the program was unnecessary and extravagant, especially once the economic crisis hit Europe and austerity cut many of the government's programs. It probably didn't help that José Sócrates, the former Prime Minister who had dreamed up the program in the first place, was arrested for corruption and tax fraud in 2014.¹¹

When I first arrived in Portugal, I had mentioned to the owner of a surf shop in a tiny coastal town about an hour's drive outside of Lisbon that I was in his country to learn about the secondary school renovations. He had a teenage son in the local school, and he certainly knew all about the program. "To tell you the truth, it's a big waste of money!" he exclaimed with as much passion as when speaking about certain overrated surf breaks. "For instance, they did things like spend 200 euros on a chandelier...I'm quite certain that much of the money is in someone's pocket somewhere." He politely corrected himself to say that the English phrase he had been looking for was light fixture; nevertheless, this was the first opinion I had heard of the program which on the surface had seemed to me so hopeful.

Indeed, during its second phase in 2012, shortly after the construction of Braamcamp Freire, the program was suspended and Parque Escolar was shut down. A Portuguese friend told me that among the European countries under austerity, Portugal is said to be like the "teacher's pet" – it tries hard to limit spending and follow the rules to show the EU that it can behave; that it's not one of the bad students. Parque Escolar did comply, and the program was allowed to restart in 2014. There would of course be less funding and various draconian conditions, however, including that the designs would "limit architectural expression." Even though Parque Escolar was criticized as extravagant, the organization is now considering moving on to primary schools once it is done with secondary schools. As Helder pointed out, "Now the schools that haven't been renovated say: what about us?"



Soares dos Reis School of Arts, Porto, Portugal. Photo by Luís Ferreira Alves

João maintained that even though the public schools have no money, their image did change in the students' eyes. "The public schools became cooler, and now students have started to leave the private schools to return to the public ones," he said. Helder added that, before, the schools were nothing special. They were just a light to turn on and off. Even though the increased complexity of the new schools has meant far more intensive maintenance for Parque Escolar, which has committed to overseeing each school's initial lifecycle of 30 years, Helder was proud of the fact that "Parque Escolar gave the neighborhoods a sense of a center, a reference in the periphery."

When I visited an arts-focused high school in the smaller city of Porto which was one of the first ten pilot schools to be renovated, a graphic design teacher named Agostinho Serra echoed João's observation that in the beginning some people preferred the historic schools. "They had *charisma*...they were old and falling apart, but students loved them because they had history," he said. I could understand how, at first, the new buildings had yet to become places that held any significance in the students' lives, or in the neighborhood. With any attempt to redevelop what already exists, there is the well-warranted fear that what makes it unique will be blindly swept away.

But on the white walls of the school, which critics initially deemed "hospital-like" and "clinical," I saw that students had put up drawings and paintings that they had produced in their classes. They had also designed and fabricated signage and posters for the new building, and the few spaces left over in hallways and under stairwells were overflowing with sculptures, installations, and handwoven textiles. Whether or not one liked the particular aesthetic of the building no longer seemed like a relevant question to me as I stood there in the atrium, gazing at artwork from students over the years. This building was clearly made for them. And, unlike an architectural monument frozen in time on the glossy pages of a magazine, it would inevitably grow with them. In a few months' time, the students would come back from their holidays, bringing with them all of their youthful chatter, and the hallways would soon be full again.

Notes

- 1 See Alastair Blyth, Rodolfo Almeida, David Forrester, Ann Gorey, and Gaby Hostens. (2012). "Modernising Secondary School Buildings in Portugal". OECD Publishing. p 17
- 2 See Blyth et al., p 48
- 3 See Blyth et al, p 10
- 4 "Parque Escolar: Mission and Objectives." (2016). Retrieved October 1, 2015, from Parque Escolar: <http://www.parque-escolar.pt/en/company/mission-and-objectives.aspx>
- 5 See Heitor, T. V. (2009). "Modernisation of Secondary Schools." In J. Pimenta, ed. *Secondary Schools | Rehabilitation* (pp. 18-21). Casal de Cambra: Caleidoscopio. p 20
- 6 See, for instance, Baptista, L. S. (2015, September 25). "Braamcamp Freire School in Lisbon by CVDB Arquitectos". *Architectural Review*.
- 7 See Toussaint, M. (2009). "Designing to Fit the Contemporaneity". In J. Pimenta, ed. *Secondary Schools | Rehabilitation* (pp. 23-25). Casal de Cambra: Caleidoscopio. p 24
- 8 Blyth et al, p 47
- 9 See Blyth et al., p 32
- 10 Blyth et al, p 11
- 11 See Roberts, A. (2014, November 25). Portugal Ex-PM Jose Socrates to be Held Amid Corruption Probe. Retrieved October 2015, from [bbc.com: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30177599](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30177599)