The Architecture of Álvaro Siza

Magnanimous communication even beyond appearances

“…Every design is destined to capture a concrete moment of a fleeting image with maximum strictness, with all its aspects; and to the extent that this fleeting quality of reality can be recognized, the design will come our more or less clear, as vulnerable as it is exact …”

Since a great amount has already been written about the work of Álvaro Siza, it would seem excessive to add anything else. However, visiting some of his most significant work, reading and observing at length writings, drawings, drafts, and photographs allows us to approach his output from other perspectives. Maybe we are that someone alluded to by Siza that gathers those elements that leave signals in space and melt together in a process of transformation.

The most interesting aspect of the work of Álvaro Siza is its unintelligible attractiveness, which ranges from the literal level to the level of phenomena. What is not apparent at first sight gradually reveals itself once we repeat and sharpen our observations. Something apparently simple turns out to be phenomenally complex, through a subtle interaction of spaces and shapes loaded with nostalgia and serene melancholy, almost an architectural form of the Fado.

We perceive that the creative value of the work of Álvaro Siza is based on two fundamental aspects:

First, his active and critical position with respect to the physical – urban or natural – and cultural context in which he has to intervene, without decontextualizing his work.

Secondly, his capacity of synthesizing during composition and his free elaboration of existing architectural material, especially contemporary architecture.

1 Álvaro Joaquim Melo Siza Vieira was born in 1933 in Matosinhos, Portugal. Since 1952, when he began his activity, until 1999, he completed approximately 190 projects, more than half of which are projects and studies that include proposals for urban planning. His professional career developed from its beginning in Portugal to include more than forty locations to date. From 1980 until 1999, his work has extended itself internationally to forty-three cities in fifteen different countries on four of the five continents: Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

2 Álvaro Siza, Complete Works, Barcelona, 2000, p. 22 and 73.
This applied knowledge, added to his experience, is what cooperates with the evolution of the discipline itself and advances his proposal as a distinctive note of modernity in the history of architecture.

These two themes with a theoretical aspect clearly provide material for what he has been criticized for on more than a few occasions: *his methodology of design*. A disorderly process, as is natural in human thought, but a solid one rich in imaginations that organizes and synthesizes itself at the moment of implementing and defining a project. In this way, he achieves a unique character for every building, with a similar basic language in his work, an identity belonging to Álvaro Siza as the architect. Nonetheless, in the critical spirit of his designing process we notice the re-elaboration or transformation of ideas and concepts developed in exemplary work of the modern movement, such as that of A. Aalto, A. Loos, Le Corbusier, E.G. Asplund, O. Niemeyer, or F. Ll. Wright.

Álvaro Siza, like Alvar Aalto and Le Corbusier, transforms himself into a *manager of mixtures*, considering what produces a suggestive attraction for him as a stimulus for inclusion in a design. This is a creative mode of design in which diverse cultural and architectural elements engage in interplay and *rationalization* within a syntax of Siza’s own. This allows him, like the masters mentioned above, to produce a universe of answers and to open unlimited boundaries of design. As we examine his work, we also find constants of the compositional syntax of Loos, such as the frontal placement of cubic volumes, the *raumplan* in spatial organization, the use of marble as internal facing material, and the *indispensable minimum* in the design of façades. Elements of Le Corbusier’s design identified are the purist language of the twenties and the application of the *promenade architecturale*.

At the same time, there are specific influences or definite references that maintain a relationship with a specific subject or with a concrete context. For example, Siza, when commenting on two of his first projects (*The Tea House*, *Boa Nova Restaurant*, 1958-63, and the *Ocean Swimming Pool*, 1961-66), defined clearly what it means to work with nature on one side and the landscape on the other. He presents this as an example of the stages in which F.Ll. Wright developed his work. He relates the first stage to the concept of nature and the second one to the landscape, in which an affirmation of the building is produced without ignoring the basic aspects of the topography or the typology of the landscape\(^3\). All in all, the *Tea House* possesses a clear Aaltian plasticity in its volumetric composition.

As precursors or references for the libraries of the Faculty of Architecture of Oporto and the University of Aveiro, both designed by Siza, we can mention two Scandinavian libraries: the Public Library of Stockholm (1926) by E.G. Asplund and the Viipuri Library (1935) by A. Aalto. This is proven in particular by the form of skylighting.

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If we examine the Bonjour Tristesse housing complex by Siza in Berlin, we will notice a combination of Germanic expressionist syntax, especially that of E. Mendelshon and H. Scharoun, with an architecture of the *indispensable minimum* in the manner that A. Loos also uses as a solution for the corner of his building on Michaelerplatz in Vienna (1910). Single details that are also common to A. Loos and E. Mendelshon can be detected in the Pinto Sotto & Mayor bank building: the internal marble facing refers to the former architect and the curved appearance to the latter.

In the buildings by Siza for The Hague, for example the housing and commercial buildings in Schilderswijk, in the same project we notice characteristics of Dutch expressionism originating from both the organicist current of Amsterdam, represented by Theo van Wiljdeveld, and the constructivism of Rotterdam, a trend set by J.J.P. Oud and W.M. Dudok. We could say, then, that Siza’s ideas for these buildings approach those of H. Berlage and M. De Klerk, since some of their brick and shingle designs form examples of a noteworthy rapprochement with the Dutch constructivist current.

In the Portuguese pavilion for Expo’98 in Lisbon, according to K. Frampton the following appear as reference points:

* The inter-war rationalist language of the design of G. Terragni for Palazzo dei Ricevimenti (1938), for E 42;


* The large scale of:
  The Presidential Residence (Palácio da Alvorada) in Brasilia (1959) by O. Niemeyer.
  The Assembly Building of Chandigarh (1961) by Le Corbusier.

Siza himself, however, states that when he had to design the pavilion, he observed buildings by E.G. Asplund and covered areas designed by O. Niemeyer.

These last perceptions, beyond placing influences within a historic and architectural context, speak of Siza’s flexibility in composition, wisdom in observation and synthesis, and his capacity to transform and ability to adapt when he has to create and place a piece of architecture in a given context. Like a good designer, he magisterially unifies the knowledge with which he identifies himself during the development of his own methodology, in order to implement it in his work with a characteristic signature that sets him apart. On

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this point, it is feasible to verify how close Siza finds himself, in terms of methodology, to Alvar Aalto’s architectural interpretation.

The fine definition of architecture in general – the location and the building, and even specific detail of the minor elements that complete the composition, are founded on a basic theme of human creation: geometry, which maintains an articulated distance from the landscape in order to allow a “dialogue” between them. The geometry of the general plans that Siza applies in his proposals with geometric elements of their architectural program seems to adjust to the shape and dimensions of the site, especially when he places a building in an urban context with definite fixed limits. In this case, the intermediate spaces created provide an interesting plasticity of space to the overall area, which, in its entirety, reflects a communication of opposites between the static (the constructed volume) and the dynamic (open or partly covered spaces). It is also necessary to point out simultaneously that the program of spaces needed plays a significant role, dictating an adjustment to the most efficient use possible of the site in the case of housing complexes, which somehow require stricter adaptation to and exploitation of the landplot.

When the site is wider, the geometry of the building, based on its own rules, plays a more free role within the landplot, in a less dependent way. That is, it accommodates itself almost exclusively to the rules of from, exploiting the orientation and / or views of the landplot. In any case, the preliminary volumetric sketches that Siza prepares for each project are illuminating for the observation of the dialogue between both kinds of geometry, that of the site

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6 As examples, we could mention the following: Cuatro Casas, Matosinhos, Portugal (1954-57); Matosinhos Parish Center, Portugal (1956-59); Lordelo Cooperative, Oporto, Portugal (1960-63); Manuel Magalhães House, Oporto (1967-70); Office building on Avenida D. Alfonso Henríques (design), Oporto (1968-74); Vila Cova Complex, Caxinas, Vila do Conde, Portugal (1970-72); SAAL Housing in São Victor, Oporto (1974-79); Borges & Irmão Bank Branch, Vila do Conde, Portugal (1978-86); Bonjour Tristesse Housing Complex, Schlesisches Tor, Berlin, Germany (1980-84); Center of Contemporary Art of Galicia, Santiago de Compostela, Spain (1988-93); Intervention for the rebuilding of the Chiado, Lisbon, Portugal (1988-); Housing in Concepción Arenal, Cádiz, Spain (1989); Housing Complex at Schilderswijk, The Hague, Netherlands (1989-93); Terrein Ceramic Housing and Office Buildings, Maastricht, Netherlands (1990); Boavista Complex, Oporto (1990-98); “Dimensione Fuoco” Laboratories, Exhibit Space, and Housing, San Donà di Piave, Italy (1993); Manzana del Revellín Cultural Center, Ceuta, Spain (1997); Administration Building, Southern District, Rosario, Argentina (1997).

7 We could mention the following examples: Tea House, Boa Nova Restaurant, Leça de Palmeira, Portugal (1958-63); Luis Rocha Ribeiro House, Maia, Portugal (1960-69); Ocean Swimming Pool and Restaurant, Leça de Palmeira (1961-66); Ferreira da Costa House, Matosinhos, Portugal (1962-65); Alves Costa House, Moledo do Minho, Portugal (1964-71); Alves Santos House, Póvoa de Varzim, Portugal (1964-70); Francelos House (design), Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal (1976); Hotel and Restaurant at Monte Picoto (design), Oporto (1981); School of Architecture, University of Porto (1986-96); Santa Maria Church and Parish Center, Marco de Canavezes, Portugal (1990-90); Office Building, Oporto (1993-97); University Administration Building, Alicante, Spain (1995-98).
and that of his proposal. At this point in the analysis, it would be interesting to ask whether this is not an important part of the methodology of design.

We could call this fashion of designing that Siza has “scientific intuition”, in which all his cultural baggage is resumed, ordered, and verified in order to achieve, by transforming and adapting it, the architectural definition of his own that he is seeking. This, a real personal dimension of his is displayed, one produced by the dialogue between himself and the Other. It would be possible to state that this is one of the most meaningful lessons that he transmits to us in his work as a way to face every subject of design. What seems on the surface to be dissipated, lacking a theoretical base, anti-didactic or random, is found, more in depth, to be solid and striking, like the definite material nature of the captivating interplay of his volumes, whether these are tectonic or non-tectonic. In most cases, the volumes compose the building; in others, they are involved only as episodes within rigorously rectangular structures.

The geometric distortions that appear often in each work are a continuous invitation to discover the dialogue of opposites: within a solid and impassive volumetry, an articulation, an unpredictable break, or a plane appears. The planar elements that stand out of the pure architectural frame, distorted or undistorted, vertical or horizontal, in general fulfill a specific function, that of protecting from the rain or the sun. Likewise, where openings seem coincidental, the cause becomes evident: outstanding frames that enclose windows frame specific views of the surrounding landscape. In spatial terms, the dynamic and articulately expressive gaps always unveil a surprise. This conjunction of the one and the other in his architecture seems to be his own interpretation of the “both-and” phenomenon of Robert Venturi.

Three basic constants in the work of Alvaro Siza can be pointed out:

[8] Kenneth Frampton, in his introduction to Alvaro Siza’s complete works, states that “…Siza oscillates between the tectonic and the non-tectonic, an interplay that becomes especially evident in the granite facing that covers the reinforced concrete and steel structure…” in the Galician Center of Modern Art in Santiago de Compostela, 1988-93, see Álvaro Siza, Complete Works, Op.cit., p. 48

[9] As examples of these two concepts, we could mention the following: Luis Rocha Ribeiro House, Maia, Portugal (1960-69); Pinto & Sotto Mayor Bank, Oliveira de Azaméis, Portugal (1971-74); David Vieira de Castro House, Famalicão, Portugal (1984-94); Carlos Ramos Pavilion in the School of Architecture, Oporto, Portugal (1985-86); School of Architecture, University of Oporto (1986-96); Institute of Higher Education, Setúbal, Portugal (1986-94); Galician Center of Modern Art in Santiago de Compostela, Spain (1988-93); Serralves Foundation Museum of Contemporary Art, Oporto, Portugal (1991-99); Revigrés Showroom, Águeda, Portugal (1993-97).


[11] The following are concrete examples: Alves Santos House, Póvoa de Varzim, Portugal (1964-70); La Malagueira Neighborhood, Évora, Portugal (1977-97); David Vieira de Castro House, Famalicão, Portugal (1984-94); João de Deus Childcare Center, Panafiel, Portugal (1984-91); Residential and Commercial Buildings in Schilderswijk, The Hague, Netherlands (1984-88); Carlos Ramos Pavilion in the School of Architecture, Oporto, Portugal (1985-86); School of Architecture, University of Oporto (1986-96); Institute of Higher Education, Setúbal, Portugal (1986-94); Galician Center of Modern Art in Santiago de Compostela,
The first is the economy of expressive media in the overall volumetric outline and the planar outline of façades, without becoming minimalistic because of this. In the delineated impassiveness of its composition, it always displays a complex gesture that deprives it of this label.

The second, the white or very light color of the outside, emphasizes serenity, tends towards neutrality, and reinforces the dialogue of opposites between nature and architecture.

The third, the patio and / or gallery in all its most varied versions and forms of composition, offers to the building, as an immaterial element, what the soul offers to man: an air of opening to the other, towards another open interior spatial dimension that is in contact with the outside, thus allowing it a private life and an image of its own that is often shared with the public sphere.

What is noteworthy in these three concepts is that they are found both in bourgeois single-family dwellings and in public works of various economic levels. In the affordable housing complexes of Malagueira – Évora, Siza himself points out that the color white and the economy of expressive media are basically due to financial and technical limitations, more than any historical or architectural type of influence. The presence of the patio can also be considered a similar case: although it arises from historical influences such as the L-shape of the Roman or Arabic house with a patio, it explains itself psychologically and functionally through the need of the specific user for a micro-climate and a transition in the internal – external relationship of his own.12

The combination between rectangularity, which generally dominates in specific volumetric elements, and various gestures of distortion in the organization of the whole is another one of the characteristics that without becoming a constant in Siza’s work, is observed in some of the examples mentioned. It produces some distorted, daring, and almost indiscriminate movements of planes and volumes within his geometric rigor. This allows the creation of unknown angles and obscure corners, which make us think of a mannerism with the literal meaning of the word, that is, “alla maniera di” (in the manner of). Thus, a risky and light Michelangelo-like interplay of deformed geometric elements manifests itself in the functional, formal, and spatial integration and articulation of the building.

Spain (1988-93) – in this case, we are considering the first idea that Siza had, of building this museum with white marble, which he later abandoned out of shyness or responsibility, as he himself stated, in order not to produce an excessively strong impact on its surrounding environment -. Church of Santa María and Parish Center, Marco de Canavezes, Portugal (1990-96); Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Fundación Serralves, Oporto, (1991.99), Sede de la Asociación de jóvenes Empresarios, (ANJE), Oeiras, Portugal, (1992-95), Show-room Revigrés, Águeda, Portugal, (1993-97), Edificio de Oficinas, Oporto, (1993-97), Pabellón de Portugal en la Expo’ 98, Lisboa, (1995-98), Rectorado de la Universidad, Alicante, España, (1995-98).

12 Álvaro Siza, Complete Works, Op,cit., pp. 28, 164 and Philip Jodidio, Álvaro Siza, Op,cit., p.18
With this spirit of composition, his architecture, in which light seems to be the agent of transcendence and transfiguration at all levels, appears as an artistic expression or the art of transformation, as Siza himself states.

“...Architects do not invent anything, they only transform reality…”13

In the psychological dimension, a nostalgia for height or elevation appears in many of his closed or partially covered spaces – recovas (covered colonnades), galleries, skylights or illumination located in the upper part of the walls (invisible but perceptible), as well as in the height of the doors and windows of public buildings.

As we enter even further into a more delicate and profound aspect concerning what Siza’s work transmits, the essence that it communicates as a final result is the product of continuous and patient research of what is contained in each place and more specifically, in the building itself. A complex development that culminates in a synthetic result with conflicting traces. At times, in the study of his work, we are disconcerted by the counterpoints that we find. Discomfort in front of a counterpoint occurs when a human being is not yet capable of internalizing the dialogue between opposites, the coexistence of contrasts, the joining of divergent elements, or the bonding of different forms. However, this becomes clearer when we are acquainted with Siza’s philosophy concerning architecture, which “...means absorbing opposites, surpassing contradictions and searching for the Other in each one of us ...”14

In this interplay of shapes, volumes, planes, and places with multiple meanings, belonging to different scales of space and light that even seem whimsical, there is always a surprise present in order to receive man in the best possible way. This could not happen any other way, since it concerns an architect who defines himself as follows:

“...I am a conservative and a traditionalist, that’s it, I move between conflicts, compromises, mixture, and transformations…”15

In various projects of his, we note some formal inconsistencies, which reflect nothing but a certain impassiveness16, meaning not indifference but an objective compromise. And it is at this point precisely that we perceive that Siza’s buildings possess a coherent balance, an attractive range, and a worrisome complexity.

Each one of the three constants mentioned above seems to display, within architecture, the human aspect sought in a building. With the economy of expressive elements: sobriety, essentiality, and severity; with the color white: objectivity, simplicity, and abstraction; with the patio and / or gallery: possession and intimacy. And in everything, a "beyond" that begins past the

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16 We consider impassiveness a virtue, as indicated by its meaning, the absence of passion.
rational limit of observation, providing a sort of timelessness for each composition, in which extravagance and waste are fortunately absent, the fertility of doubt makes itself present, and gravity\textsuperscript{17} appears as a consequence.

To conclude, we can distinguish the following in the main axes around which his compositions are oriented:

1.- The simultaneous presence of freedom and restriction, geometry and nature, the rectangular and the oblique, rigor and flexibility, opaqueness and transparency, innovation and tradition. On this path of the development of a design, Siza himself claims that “…tradition is a challenge for innovation. It is made of successive grafts…”\textsuperscript{18}

2.- Knowledge, creative observation, and re-elaborated and / or transformed application of the types and the language of modern architecture appear as a fundamental part of the theoretical base for his work. From there on, his interventions are always sensitive to the urban or natural physical context, in order for the environment not to lose its genius loci with the new architectural item, but to be enriched instead.

3.- The implementation of the human aspect, with spontaneity, subtlety and in some cases even humor, keeping in consideration the meaning of the institutional and the symbolic. The values of memory and atmosphere that a building has to possess are included along with this; that is, the genus institutum or the specific spirit of the project.

To define succinctly everything enclosed and communicated by Siza’s work, his buildings display a balance of the following: austerity within abundance and richness within spareness, showing the attachment of a high value to emptiness and a clear disdain for waste.

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\textsuperscript{17} This term is used in the sense that Fernando Tâvora means in his written homage to Álvaro Siza, “…the gravity of moral and intellectual behavior is related to physical gravity in that both complementary meanings concern reference, the containing of weight, and intelligent and thoughtful action ...”. Álvaro Siza, Complete Works, Op.cit., p. 68-69.