

Alvaro Siza 1992 Laureate Essay

Thoughts on the Works of Alvaro Siza

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I have always had the impression that Alvaro Siza's architecture sprang from archaeological foundations known to him alone—signs invisible to anyone who has not studied the site in detail through drawings with steady, focused concentration.

Later on, those signs come together because they convey a feeling of growing out of something necessary, of relating, connecting, establishing and constructing, all the while maintaining the tender uncertainty of hypothesis and discovery.

The construction is slow and intense. It is made of the discrete, if not downright secret, signs of an attempt to start anew, based on establishing some creative and apparently simple and explicit signs of a universal design system.

Siza's work is characterized by just that sense of architecture as a means of listening to the real, in that it hides at least as much as it shows. Siza's architecture makes one see, and it reveals rather than interprets the truth of the context.

It seems then, that he has very carefully removed parts from the design, which is very clearly and harmoniously drawn, in order to create expectations. All non-essentials have been removed, but even that, in turn, has left its traces, like when pencil strokes are erased and redrawn in a drawing. Sharp corners and sinewy curves are interwoven for an apparently mysterious reason, something that has to do with the very history of the design. Its thoughts, misfortunes and changes are not totally forgotten, but are transformed in the construction of a mental site, of a context just as real as the surrounding physical one.

Alvaro Siza Vieira is clearly considered one of today's greatest living architects. He is an architect still able to make authentic affirmations with his architecture, still able to surprise a culture as base as ours by coming on stage from unexpected quarters. The interest in his architecture shown by younger generations in particular results from the complex mixture of meanings that emanates from his work. His architecture is formed in quiet and seclusion; then there is the slight but ever precise touch of his works, which seem to emerge as clean, precious points among the contemporary urban blight, yet at the same time making one painfully responsible for those problems. In addition to this mixture and the tradition of poverty and the gentle melancholy of Portugal, his native country, there is the affection that his architecture seems to bring to the conditions of the urban periphery. On the other hand, the micro surgical confidence of his work, the emergence of the extreme eternity of the elementary acts of building, the sense of natural modification of that which exists, a suspended modification does not erase the errors of the existing nor the uncertain course of the project, but solidifies it into a single poetic objective.

Over the years, all of that has made him become more secure in the methods and processes of his craft without eliminating his sense of trepidation, of attempting to have his designs express the margins of an architectural problem, when he checks with his hands and eyes.

The quality of the tensions which he draws up and details is touching (to use a word out of fashion like him) and derives principally, in my opinion, from two themes: attention and uneasiness; the clear certainty which is that the essential is always a little different from the directions chosen, and from possible explanations.

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For Siza, even detail is not an incident or a technological exhibition, but a dimension of the accessibility of architecture, a way of verifying by touch the feel, the uniqueness of a thing made for a particular place with contemporary techniques, to come into contact with the everyday things by handling them. His is a technology of detail created from unexpected distances between the parts which introduce a spatial tension between the smallest and most commonplace elements, for their mutual placement, superimposition and interconnectedness.

To speak about Siza's architecture, however, one must start by admitting that it is indescribable. This is not critical or textual indescribability alone (in fact the latter would certainly be one of the best means for the purpose, perhaps in story-form), but the same inability of photography to communicate the specific sense of his work. This is also because his design includes a unique temporal dimension, resulting not only from the processes required for coming into contact with his structures, but also from his ability to establish a type of autonomous memory of the design, completely present in the final structure, built by the accumulation and purification of successive discoveries which are constituted as data of later structures. Nothing is planned in and of itself, but always in relation to belonging. Above all, for Alvaro Siza, coming from northern Portugal—stony, clear, poor and full of intimacy, where the light of the Atlantic is long and illuminates poverty in an abstract way, reveals all the harshness of surfaces, each change in the road around homes, every scrap, in a grandiose, dry and bittersweet manner.

I believe that Alvaro Siza could be justifiably considered the father of the new architectural minimalism, but a minimalism far from any abstraction or perceptive radicalism, in which the architectural sign is incision and superimposition. A timid, unequivocal, circumscribed assurance seems to characterize the forms of his new minimalism. It is careful concentration, the capacity for detailed observation and characterization. If it appears that the use of elementary structures is most indirect, it is rather a hidden, precise plot from which emerge by cancellation some signs suspended between the memory of the plot's established order, and a new, stringent logic of external and internal relations which the system renders clearer and more evident, even in their wavering.

The first time I visited Portugal, I had met Alvaro Siza the year before in Barcelona, a little more than twenty-five years ago. Then, the next summer we spent a couple of days together in Oporto and went to see his works, many still in progress: Banco do Oporto in Oliveira and the Vila do Conde, his brother's house, the pool at the ocean and the Quinta da Conceição in Matosinhos, already completed in 1965.

I remember being particularly struck by the small homes in Caxinas, a village thirty kilometers north of Oporto and home to a few hundred fishermen. For the past several years prior to that, these fishermen were renting part of their own homes to people who came to the ocean for the summer from the country's interior. Then, that modest gesture toward tourism created the spontaneous appearance of some one-or two-story homes, often illegal. The town asked Siza to formulate a plan to regulate development. He began with a study of the features of the old and new existing facilities. It is essentially a work of the imagination, attempting to create a morphological vision from the few signs that poverty has left in the form of buildings: colors, materials, types, dimensions and rhythms.

Then, on that basis, he set up a linear-development plan of two story homes: a small set facing the sea. These homes were planned and built amid many difficulties arising from the designs. One of them calls for a small square to the north, linking the internal street with the sea; another incorporates a cafe already existing on the ground floor; the rest was regulated through a series of building codes that he thought would be followed almost spontaneously.

The extreme poverty of the project is put to good use with pride, taking advantage of any sign available, stretched between surfaces of colored plaster of the utmost simplicity, in a strong Atlantic light, with elementary gestures: putting up a wall, placing a window, opening an empty space in volume, coloring

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doors, beginning, ending. In an atmosphere that is hardly primitive or folkloric, the resort village at the tip of Europe on the Atlantic seems to make references to many modern European cultures.

The second time we met, resignation seemed a thing of the past. Only five days had gone by after April 28, 1974 (the date of the revolution of the carnations), when, without encountering guards or bailiffs, I entered the office of the new Minister of Public Works, my friend Nuno Portas. Seated in a pompous armchair in that grand office was Alvaro Siza. He started explaining to me the work plan of the SAAL brigades, spontaneous cooperatives of planning and building. The new political opportunity seemed to have transformed his usual patience into great energy. Then, after great hopes came disappointments.

In the meantime, however, Siza became one of the great architects of international fame. The first great acknowledgements came: the invitations to the IBA in Berlin, his win at the Venice competition (later disillusioned, which is common in Italy), his work in Holland, in Portugal at Evora and Lisbon, and in Spain at Barcelona and Malaga, where we worked together. Finally came the award from the European Community in 1986 and then the Pritzker in 1992. We met many times in various places, busily and excitedly discussing trends in architecture. Yet he never gave up his discomfort and pride of being from northern Portugal, born on the edge of Europe.

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