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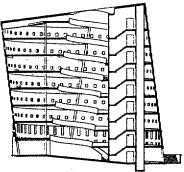


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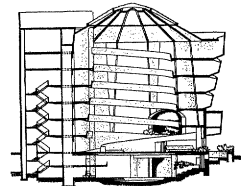
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# In Praise of Siza

by Kenneth Frampton



In a late age that is all too susceptible to media-driven, cynical aestheticisms of one kind or another, from the opportunistic nostalgia of historical pastiche to the arcane speculations of a self-indulgent neo-avant-garde (not to mention the mirror-glass professional, who, with his passing genuflection toward the classic, persists in maximizing high-rise development in the name of progress), it is refreshing to find that the much-coveted Pritzker Prize this spring finally found its way to the Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza Vieira. Insisting, as few have either the capacity or the inclination to do, on the ethical imperative of attempting to reconcile countervailing forces in a multifaceted, fragmented world, Siza constantly strives to reintegrate many conflicting demands and affinities within a single, open-ended work. Invariably departing from the archaeological contours of a topographic ground within which other vectors are to be inserted — from the sociocultural complexity of the program to the unfolding genealogy of the modern tradition — Siza's projects work through a complex critical spectrum, wherein each *parti* establishes its own dynamic domain by reengaging and reflecting upon an arrested moment in time. Whether or not this moment actually transpired in the given site is in some sense irrelevant, for Siza is also committed to a continuation of the modern project in the broadest possible sense.<sup>1</sup>



It is a measure of his exceptional cultivation that he is able to draw upon such a wide range of sources, by means of his spontaneous reworking of themes that are (or at least should be) the five-finger exercises of our craft. In this way, he has consistently revitalized the received modern repertoire by demonstrating the extent to which our available heritage may be conceived as a *répétition différente*, thereby breathing new life into old bones. To this end it is instructive to examine the brilliant reworking of Frank Lloyd Wright's canonical Guggenheim section in his own unrealized DOM administration complex of 1980, projected for a German lock manufacturer. This proposal, far from being just a virtuoso display, is in my view a particularly didactic example of his habitual method. Departing from a typological retracing of Wright's creative development, Siza passes in this instance from a rereading of the seminal Larkin building of 1902–04 in Buffalo — the introspective office building artistically considered — to a transformation in which the inverted ziggurat of the Guggenheim Museum of 1943–59 will become the warped cylindrical office tower of Siza's project for DOM. By fusing two epistemic Wrightian moments, almost forty years apart, Siza posits a partially conic tower inclined so as to balance an artificial landfall, introduced by him as part of a walled

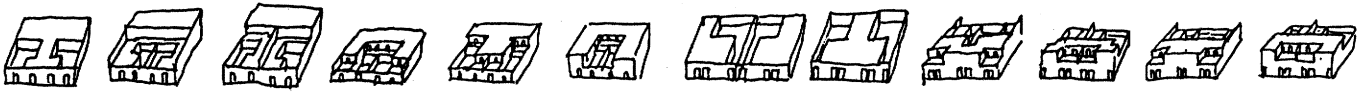
Above left: Alvaro Siza Vieira, DOM Factory (project), Cologne, Germany, 1980 (sectional drawing). Above right: Frank Lloyd Wright, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, 1943–59 (sectional drawing)



Alvaro Siza Vieira, Quinta da Malagueira housing, Evora, Portugal, 1977–to date

*temenos*, into a flat and featureless suburban site. Here there was nothing topographic to build upon, nothing save the relative flatness of a *Wirtschaftswunder* megalopolis. As with Wright's introspective place-form, this inclined frustrum enabled Siza to assert a landmark and a decisive topos within an otherwise bland landscape, while criticizing from within the Weberian "steel cage" of the neo-Miesian office building.<sup>2</sup> By providing concentric segmental office volumes, in gently stepped formation fed by a continuous, spiraling public ramp turning about a central, circular, top-lit void, Siza was able to propose an inflected, democratically open, synaesthetic experience "rarely encountered in constructions of this size and use."<sup>3</sup>

While insisting on the relative autonomy of architecture, Siza swerves away from the aestheticized nihilism of deconstructive architecture, for although he often asserts the heterogeneous sculptural nature of his form, he never allows it to disintegrate into gratuitous disjunction. His work is thus at once autonomous and inflected in respect of its context, which not only amounts to the site itself but also to the brief as it is reflected through the received typologies of our time. While these last serve as a useful and even essential cognitive base for his work, they are never allowed to extend their influence beyond a certain limit. In this way, while the program may, at times, be all too directly and laconically accommodated (*pace* the occidental rationalist tradition), any allusion to mastery or aspiration toward a false sense of unity is rigorously denied. Looking at Siza's work, one is reminded of the Wittgensteinian aphorism, "What is torn must remain torn." Thus, as far as Siza is concerned, the categorical imperative for the late-modern architect must be the hypersensitive, multilayered reading of an emerging, unstable historical complex. As he likes to put it in the name of his Loosian ethos, "Architects don't invent anything, they transform reality." What he refers to as this "flittering image of reality" is a fluid spectrum that is constantly in the process of being created and re-created. It is, one might say, not only a changing physical condition but also an often abrasive, intersubjective situation, the fragile poetic fixity of which has to be fought for on every conceivable occasion. In fact, he is presently engaged in a headlong battle with road engineers who, at the eleventh hour, have decided to place a main auto-route along the banks of Portugal's River Douro, thereby depriving Siza's newly completed University of Porto architecture school of the river frontage to which it was entitled and for which it was expressly designed. The prestige of the Pritzker will surely prove helpful in waging this struggle.



Siza's exceptional strength has surely been the range of his commissions and concerns, passing with disarming and deceptive ease from an extremely sensitive addition to an old winegrower's house of 1971–73 in Moledo do Minho, where he personally fought against the client's advisers to have the existing but ill-kept vines maintained, to his continuing expansion of the town of Evora that has been under way since 1977. Building some 1,200 atrium dwellings for migrant workers within the disordered and ruined fabric of the Quinta da Malagueira quarter, Siza has realized a number of more or less parallel, low-rise terraces over the past fifteen years that are linked by an elevated concrete "aqueduct" carrying the main services (gas, water, power) to each longitudinal terrace. Here, Siza's "archaeological" interpretation of the site has a number of ramifications extending not only to the Mediterranean vernacular, which the court houses directly evoke in both plan and section, but also to two other referential types; first, the European *Zeilenbau* housing estates of the interwar period (a paradigm to which he had previously referred in his SAAL housing of 1975 in Bouca, during the so-called Portuguese Spring, following the revolt against the Salazar regime in 1974); and second, the Hippodamian, even Egyptian, residential tradition of loosely aligned *insulae*, yielding an antique urban pattern that is also indicated by the presence of the aqueduct.

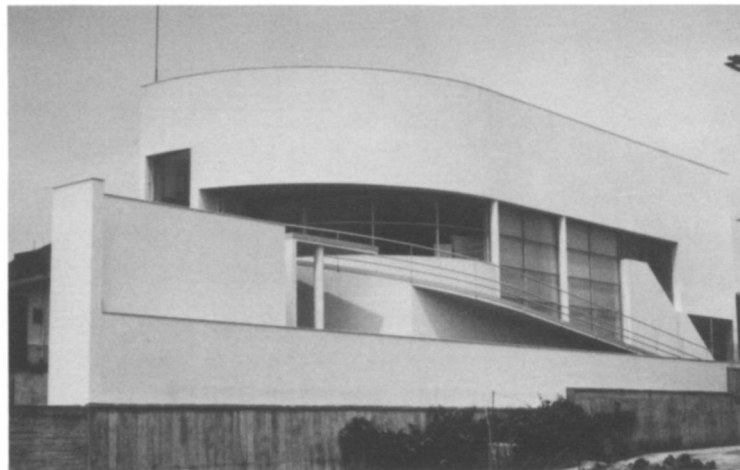
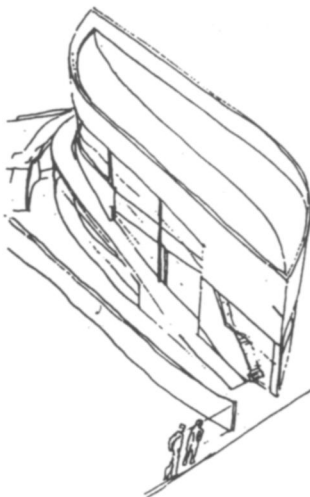
Finally, one must mention the paradoxical evocation of ruin that invariably permeates Siza's collective housing. He attempts to fuse the new intervention with the partially ruined, ever-changing context of its surroundings, all the while subtly inviting the occupants to modify their own dwellings in accordance with a vital tradition that we may now see extending from the Islamic souk to the Latin American barrio. As he once remarked, "The problem is to form a whole with ruins." Thus here, as in his extemporary housing solutions for Berlin in the late 1970s, Siza has sought to reassemble the urban fabric in such a way as to harmonize the various heterogeneous traces of its fragmentary past. From an urbanistic standpoint, Siza's Berlin experience seems to have been decisive, for while the one work that he realized there was somehow disappointing, he nonetheless demonstrated his unique urban in-fill method in a number of other projects whose critical potential surely remains exemplary. I have in mind, in the first instance, his 1976 proposal for the Fränkelufer, wherein a relatively random series of small apartment buildings were supposed to re-articulate the remains of a bombed-out block in such a way as to liberate the traces of the restrictive dwelling courts that used to lie behind the now partially ruined prewar Berlin frontage. This potential for establishing a critical interaction between the new and the ruined was even more economically indicated in his Kottbusser Damm project of 1980, where, instead of the feasible restoration of a bombed-out frontage to its former scenographic unity, Siza proposed a six-story insertion, roughly triangular in plan, that would both partially reestablish the frontage and assert its disjunctive coexistence with the continuous back development.

Above: Alvaro Siza Vieira, Dwelling Unit Variations, Quinta da Malagueira housing, Evora, Portugal, 1977–to date, pen and ink

As Siza likes to put it, "Architects don't invent anything, they transform reality"

Much water has passed under the bridge since Siza's ultimately abortive proposals for Berlin. Now, many realizations later, he is surely at the height of his powers. The familiar "chamber pieces" that have studded the last twenty years of his practice — from his notorious "bombed-out" Beires house of 1973–76 in Póvoa de Varzim, which so provocatively resynthesized many modern tropes with vernacular form, to the Pinto and Sotto Maior Bank of 1971–74 in Oliveira de Azemeis — demonstrated how reworked traces drawn from Alvar Aalto, Erich Mendelsohn, Mart Stam, and Hans Scharoun could be forged into a new contextual unity, full of life and movement. The poetic plasticity of his work has become even more subtle and dynamic in recent years, from the prize-winning Borges and Irmão Bank III, built in Vila do Conde in 1982, to his equally brilliant *Raumplan* exercise, the Duarte house in Ovar, finally realized at the end of 1985. As with many architects, it is either feast or famine. Now, commissions for one large building after another land on his desk from every quarter, with the result that a new frustration emerges: namely the difficulty of having too much work. With a meteorological station in Barcelona that might just be done in time for the Olympics, a large furniture factory for Vitra near Basel, and his long-ripening cultural complex for Santiago de Compostela (situated right next to the cathedral), he now enters a new phase of activity, one that we look forward to with the greatest pleasure and expectancy. Thus we have every reason to say, along with his well-deserved Pritzker, "Viva Siza, master architect!"

1. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity — An Incomplete Project," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 3–15.
2. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1930).
3. This quote is taken from an unpublished study of Siza's work, to which I am greatly indebted: Peter Testa, "Thresholds, Working Paper No. 4," in *The Architecture of Alvaro Siza* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Architecture, Program in History, Theory and Criticism, 1984), p. 161.



Above: Alvaro Siza Vieira, Borges and Irmão Bank III, Vila do Conde, Portugal, 1982 (left: pen and ink)