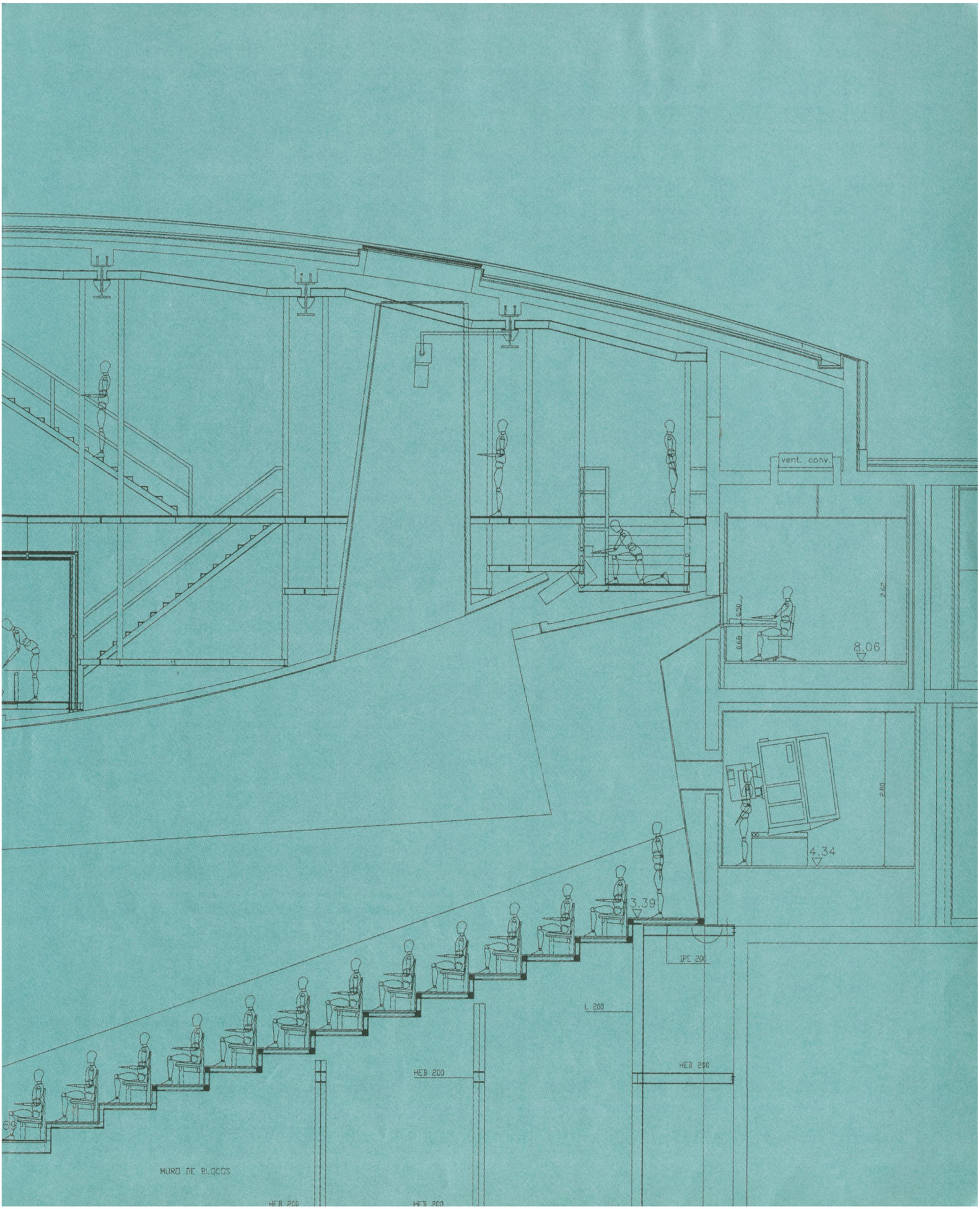
JOSÉ ANTONIO ALDRETE-HAAS

I first met Álvaro Siza in Mexico in 1992 where a group of friends and fellow architects had gathered to look at Luis Barragan's work. A year later I visited him in Oporto, Portugal. I toured Siza's sites in Portugal and then he invited me to visit a building he designed, the Museum for Contemporary Art in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, which was then just two weeks away from its inauguration. That trip was memorable in two ways. We flew a small single-engine plane from Oporto in the middle of a thunderstorm—an experience that left both of us speechless for the whole journey. Then there was the impression that Siza's work left on me—in particular the sensibility with which he handled such a geographically and culturally charged site. Siza's approach to a site is the subject of the following conversation. I asked Siza to illustrate his answers with the Museum of Serralves in Oporto—just being completed—and compare it to what he had done in Compostela. I thought the subject of locality, and thus difference, to be relevant at a time in which globalization seems to lead to homogeneity. Siza's reflections demonstrate a critical approach that calls for the renewal of cultures in which the increasing exchange of ideas and values can be of utmost importance.



Álvaro Siza, Main entrance, Museu de Serralves, Musea de Arte Contemporânea, Oporto. Photograph by Luis Ferreira Alves.

josé antonio aldrete-haas I'd like to begin our conversation by discussing your notable sensibility to both the geographic and cultural context of architecture, how it relates to your project at the Serralves Museum and, if relevant, to the museum at Santiago de Compostela, as well. How do you take culture and topography into account when you first approach a project?

álvaro siza When I begin a project, I feel the necessity above all to immerse myself in the atmosphere of the location. By that I mean its cultural medium, its landscape, its accumulation of architectures. Then, I begin instinctively—as opposed to analytically—to take a sort of stroll. Once the concept matures, the more analytic considerations can be brought in, to become more studied, more precise. For me, the first step is to explore the nature of the form and the organization of the space through the history of the specific city or region.

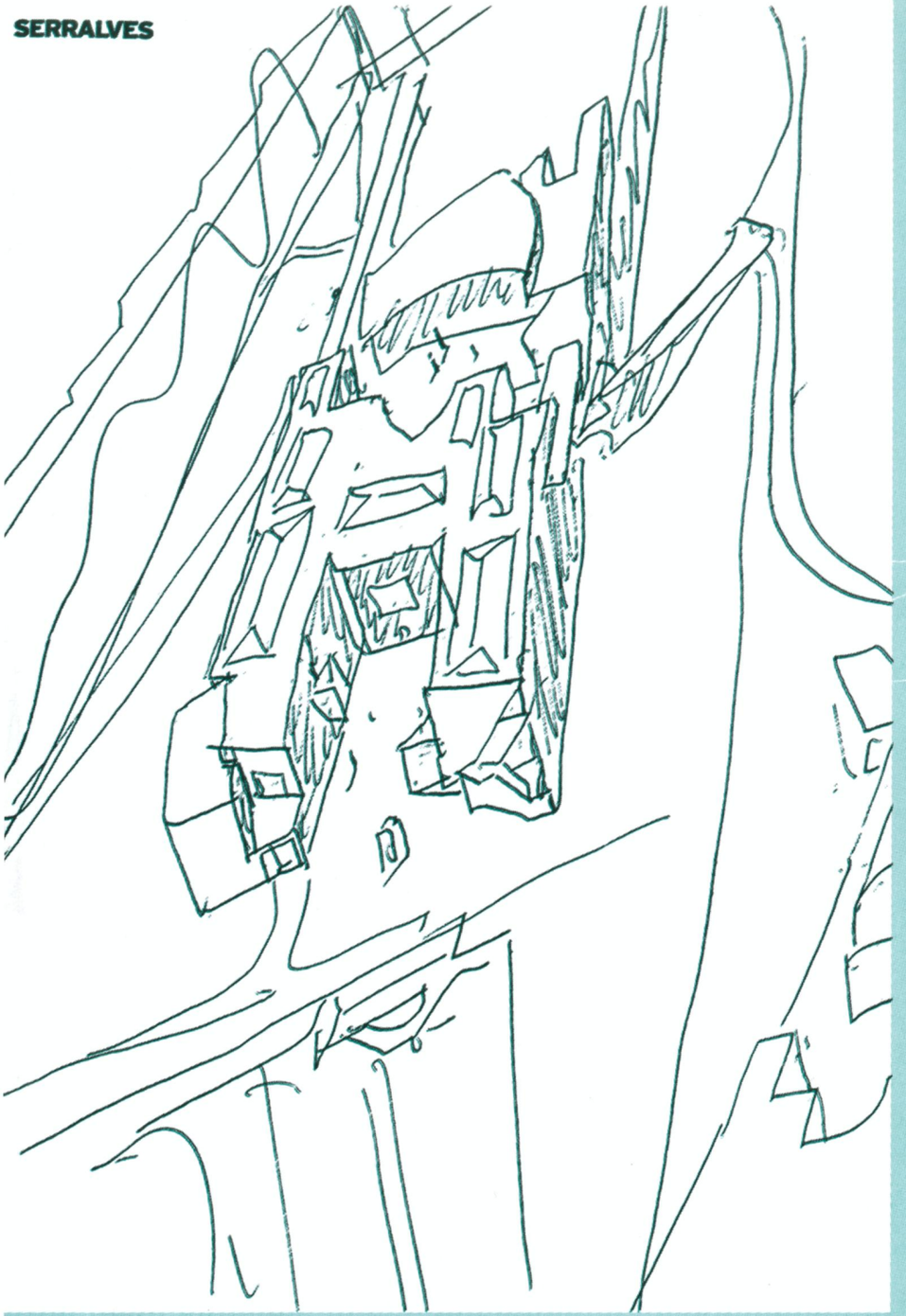
ja You speak of a "cultural dimension." Can you give a specific example of that? Or is culture the accumulation of everything?

ás In terms of architecture, it is above all an accumulation, an assimilation of the forms that give a specific character to the site. It's difficult to define or describe, it's more of an atmosphere. There are no tools we can use to make such an analysis easier. But there are perhaps other ways to locate culture, other means with which to analyze it. It is also very important today to consider lifestyle—this other accumulation of activities, the gathering of various cultures into one place. My work in Holland, for example, was influenced by the enormous concentration of immigrants in that country. The process of taking that into consideration became very important to my perception of the site, to the knowledge I was able to obtain about that site—that country, where there is such a large and complex mix of societies and different ethnic groups.

ja How would that apply to the Serralves Museum in Oporto?

ás With Serralves, above all, it was the immense importance of the site—the park around it, the historic house, etcetera. Another huge consideration was the atmosphere of *fear* surrounding any kind of intervention on the site. In this case, it wasn't so much my own fear, but rather the fear of the client—which became almost paralyzing to me. But at the same time, the project was a great challenge both because of the irregular shape of the park—its borders—and because of how enormous the project itself was—14,000 square meters. We ran the risk of creating meaningless residual spaces, illegible spaces, spaces without form. From yet another point of view, the project required a precise definition of interior spaces that would be in constant harmony with the overall form of the site. And then for reasons of methodology, it was necessary to maintain a certain autonomy of space with respect to the exterior volumes of the structures, and then *their* relationships to the whole project.

In Santiago de Compostela, the situation was reversed. The museum sits along the street, not in the middle of a garden. So there, the problems came out of the relationship the building would have to its neighboring



Álvaro Siza, Drawing for the Museu de Serralves, Musea de Arte Contemporânea, Oporto.

structures, which are landmarks of tremendous historic and architectural value. The museum is situated at one end of a terraced garden that was built around the Convent of Santo Domingo de Bonaval. It is the garden that gives life to the convent and the church. It's agriculturally useful, as well as a place of repose. The path that runs through the terraces makes the shape of a fan surrounding the convent. And I took that as a starting point for the building. The building itself forms the edge of the fan. There I didn't have to worry about formless residual spaces. It was more a question of how to introduce volume into an order that was already established, having been constructed over the last 200 years or more.

ja Isn't there the same sort of relationship to a historic context at Serralves?

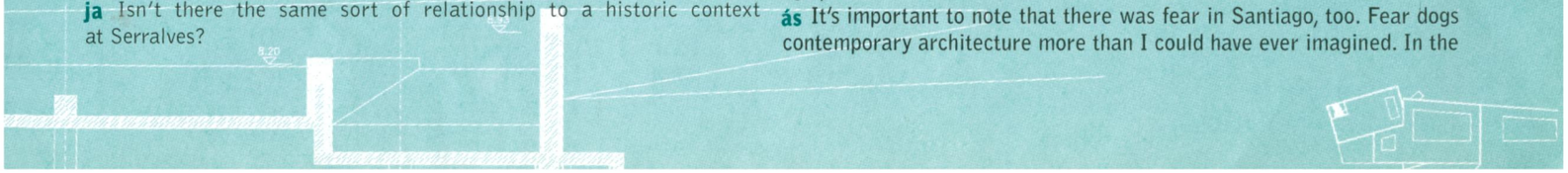
ás No, absolutely not. Serralves has been a museum since the 40s—not long after the construction of the house and the park. It was a classic Deco construction, complete with a fruit orchard. By the end of the 80s this landscape already seemed more casual and formless—more the result of the surrounding streets than any internal order. The structure had no conscious articulation to the park. There was no geometric order like there had been in Santiago. So because of the fear I mentioned, as well as the fact that the planning for the museum has changed drastically at various moments— became much larger—the building came to occupy the center of the site and thus had no direct impact on the external area. So in a way, Serralves was built out of fear. One of our strategies has been to suggest and realize only one primary gesture toward the border of the park and that border's relationship to the new construction. This border no longer has any geometrical organization; it's much more organic, curvy. So we've been working with a landscape architect as a kind of reply to the situation now created by the distance, or lack of visual rapport, between the house and the museum, and vice versa. With no obvious visual relationship—and responding, still, to fear—the memory of a relationship becomes even more important in order to create a sense of unity. That's why I decided to maintain one or two entrances leading directly from the garden's main gate, which is nowhere near the house. We made an arbor way from the gate and one of the cross paths leads right up to the museum. And, in sequence, another cross path angles off at 90 degrees and leads to the house. There is also a rotunda along the walkway that lies in the middle of the house, to the left, and the museum, to the right. And even though when you are at either the house or the museum you can't see the other, from the rotunda you are aware of the house and you can see the road that leads to the museum, which itself is partially hidden by the trees. So we have effectively created a new articulation between the two structures that also serves to give the right scale and dimension to the new site.

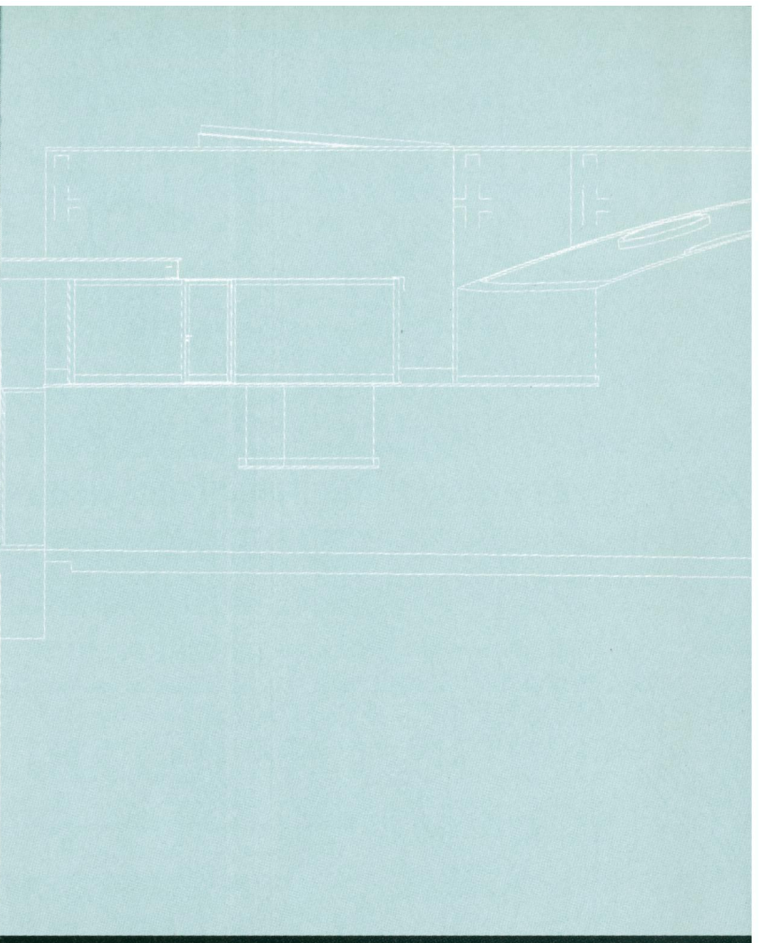
ja Are you saying it was *fear* that brought you to isolate the museum in the middle of the park and also establish a subtle visual relationship between the house and the museum?

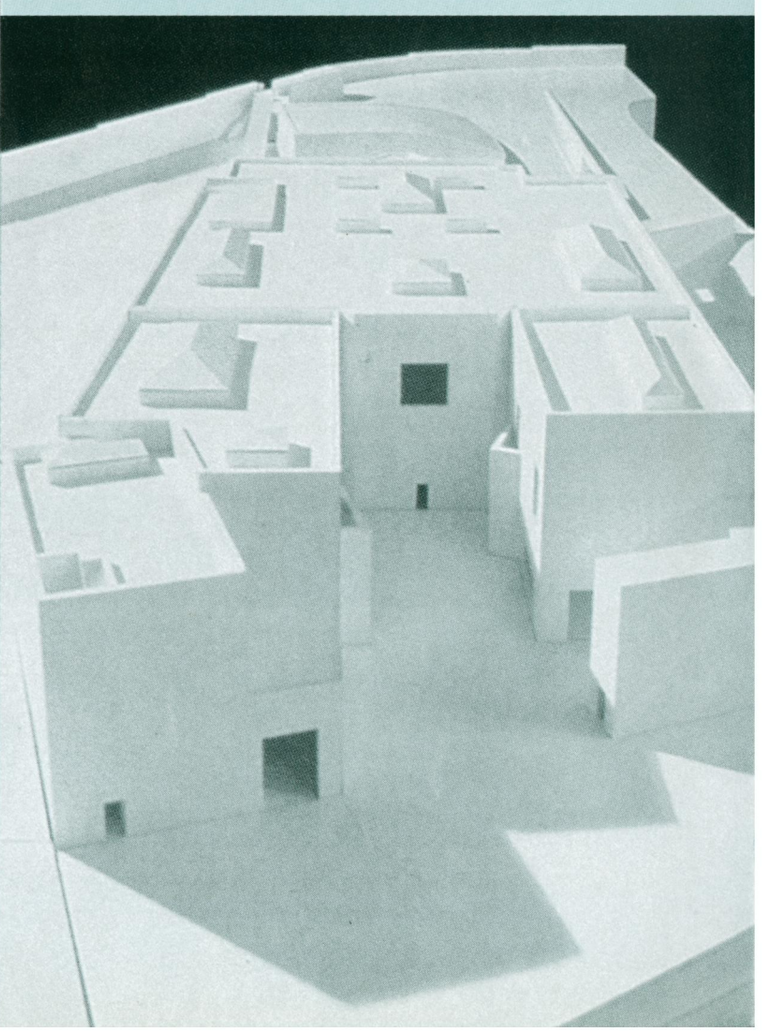
ás Well, not *my* fear. I call it fear, but I really mean abuse. When the plans for the museum were to make it only 4,000 square meters—which was the original idea and what I had recommended—I proposed that the museum be placed very near the house and articulated in response to the house. That created an uproar and wasn't approved. When the plans were changed and the museum grew to 14,000 square meters, I fought it for awhile but then I realized it was an impossible argument. And as the situating of the foundation fell to me, I also had to take into consideration the effect, the impact, of the museum's new scale.

ja Since we have already talked about how you articulate a building both in terms of Serralves and the Santiago de Compostela, I'd like you to talk about the materials you chose, and the solutions you came up with in terms of natural light, and other similar considerations.

ás It's important to note that there was fear in Santiago, too. Fear dogs contemporary architecture more than I could have ever imagined. In the







Álavaro Siza, Gallery interior, Museu de Serralves, Musea de Arte Contemporânea, Oporto. Photo by James Cant.

case of Santiago, the client wanted to build the museum inside the garden, which I opposed, insisting that it wasn't possible. A museum, a cultural center, has an important responsibility to the life of the city. It has to work in relationship to the beautiful historic buildings that lay around it. We had to bring it closer to the streets *and* juxtapose it to the façade of the convent. This was a great architectural challenge—a very creative problem that the people of the city eventually accepted. It was the mayor above all who gave us strong support for our approach. In a way, this discussion is an introduction to the issue of materials. I remember that when I began the museum, I had the idea of making it in white marble—for many reasons. One reason was that in Santiago, like all of the cities in northern Portugal and that part of Spain, including Galicia, it is traditional to build everything out of granite. Even the houses that were originally made of stucco have since been replaced with granite, destroying the historical patrimony. In old photographs and in leftover areas of Santiago, you can see how everything was once white. I also thought that there was a case to be made for introducing a non-local material to an exceptional building in an exceptional part of the city. We shouldn't be afraid of that. When a city is developed, or wants to renew its institutions, it makes an open city. And using non-local materials is in a way a reflection of that opening up, to communication, to context of exchange with history. This was my idea, but as you can imagine, everyone was

horrified by it. The fact is that I, myself—maybe even out of shyness or a certain sense of responsibility—abandoned the idea that I thought could have been a tour de force. Maybe it was a little too strong for the context, and so I opted for the traditional granite of Santiago. Introducing marble as a contradiction provokes two ideas: communication and a certain kind of newness. In the interior of the museum we used white marble from Greece. And for some reason the interior didn't create any controversy—not to mention the fact that there was a very strong argument for using the marble, which was actually cheaper than using local material. Rather symptomatic of our present time, isn't it?

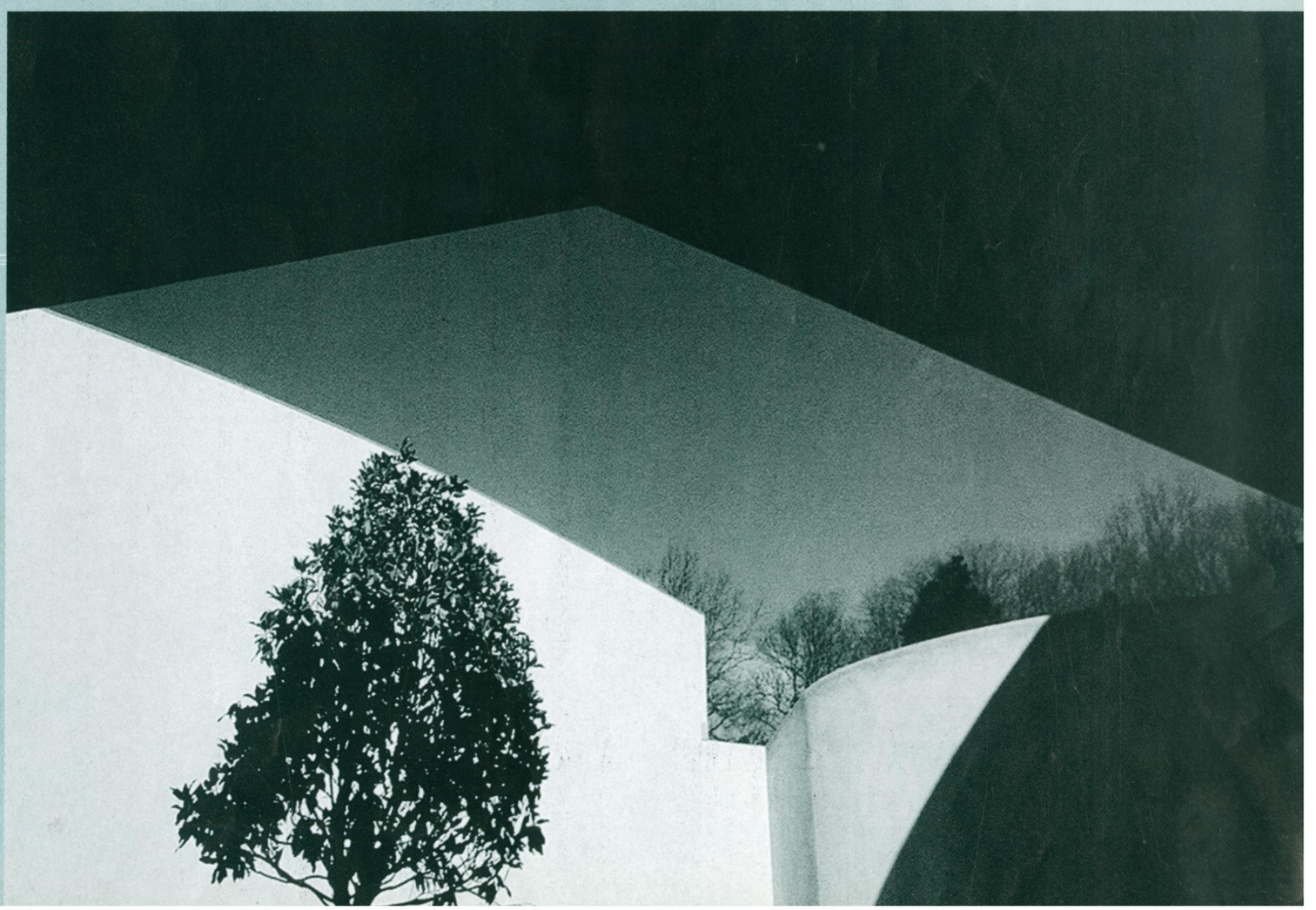
For the Serralves Museum, here in Oporto, I wanted to use granite as a base—an idea that did not come out of any particular relationship to the city. It had other connotations and references—even to the pavement around the house. And I thought of using yet another stone, probably a limestone for the upper level, making a very tall granite base of about two meters, sometimes even higher. In that way I could both support the structure and protect it from humidity and pedestrian traffic. In the upper parts I wanted a softer material, something fairly neutral, a white limestone. As usual, because of economic constraints, we didn't go with limestone and decided to use stucco instead. That didn't bother me, although I am concerned over the long term about how poorly public buildings are maintained in Portugal. Formally, however, I didn't have any problem with that combination of materials. Specifically, what we've decided to do is to make a frame of white marble around the windows on the same plane as the stucco. You only notice a slight change of texture but the marble serves to articulate the depth of the wall and give it a more precise geometry. We get a very defined opening at 45 degrees from the border of the stucco.

ja Isn't this also related to the light, which is so different in Santiago than in Oporto?

ás Well, actually, both cities have very similar climates: it rains a lot and there are many days without sun or wind; quite gray. I didn't anticipate any problem with respect to the light. I was more concerned with the formal perception of the building, because it's surrounded by all this vegetation, these trees. The building will never be seen in its totality—it will always appear as a fragment. And I wanted these fragments to have a very precise, keen line in contrast to the nature around it. This is very important, and we'll only really be able to appreciate it in 100 years because the trees are still too small today. The building is quite hard and strong in contrast to the softness of the trees, the leaves, the branches. It is this combination of light and shadow and reflection that I wanted to see through the whiteness of the building.

ja Could you reflect in general terms on the tendency toward homogeneity as opposed to diversity in architecture in a globalizing world?

ás In the process of globalization, I see only a few participants: Japan, the United States and Europe—not Latin America or Africa. So globalization still seems far from being a fact. But if globalization means the opening up of countries and regions then I believe it will be translated into greater autonomy as well as the reinforcement of tradition. In order for tradition to thrive, innovation is required. So I don't necessarily see a trend toward homogenization, even if such a process eventually incorporates those who are now excluded. I don't think people are changing much as a result of this trend; rather, they seem to be maintaining—even strengthening—traditional behaviors. People are the ones who make architecture, who build cities.



(right) Álvaro Siza, Museu de Serralves. Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Oporto. Photo by Luis Ferreira Alves.
(left) Álvaro Siza, Model, Museu de Serralves, Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Oporto.