From here we attempt to contribute to the definition of the limits of this material.

However, we will not content ourselves with the presentation of images of the forms of the buildings; we would rather show the construction solutions that have made them possible. The presentation of the antecedents or critical benchmarks of the works must contribute to a greater understanding of the buildings.

This first issue is fundamentally dedicated to the publication of four recent works of the architect Alvaro Siza, some of which are still under construction. The selection is not random as Siza was one of the pioneers in the use of exposed concrete; he had already begun using it in the Boa Nova Tea House Restaurant and employed it again, masterfully, in the Leça da Palmeira swimming pools. And following a long period of time in which the presence of reinforced concrete is evident, because otherwise the forms of his buildings would not be possible, but without it showing on the surface of the faces, Siza begins a new period in which white concrete is the main support material of a significant number of buildings, very diverse in their functional mission and found in very different and distant places.

The way in which Siza uses exposed concrete has changed during this time. The architect himself admits this in the interview we publish. The concrete from Leça is more related to traditional methods of production, work with stone and adobe, while at present, a technically exact concrete is used, permitting the construction of large openings, yet it is compact, continuous... without fissures.

The four recent white concrete works represent, each in its own way, four lessons in architecture offered by Alvaro Siza, lessons which should not be missed. What better for the opening issue of an architecture magazine?
Álvaro Siza (1933) is the greatest Portuguese architect of our times. This was the opening statement in Peter Testa’s 1884 book dedicated to Álvaro Siza’s works. 25 years thereafter, we can fairly say without exaggeration that Álvaro Siza is indeed one of the greatest architects of our times. With designs built from Korea to Santiago de Compostela, Porto Alegre to Haya to Berlin, Siza has built a unique trajectory by linking a permanent experimental focus, of the sites, the programs or the construction methods, to an extraordinary lyric capacity.

Although his first professional designs date back to 1954, international recognition only came about in the 70s. This was followed by the impact of the Chiado design plan, in the 80s, and only thereafter did Siza become a national public figure. The most important aspect of Siza’s work, besides its absolute value, is certainly his contribution to architecture itself.

1. Speaking about a method

Siza categorically rejects the notion that his architecture may be subject to pre-determined rules. He is totally open to see the worldly signs that surrounds him and to portray what is real. To create from that which already exists. To “imagine de obvious”.

The motivation behind his decision to become an architect was eminently a creative one. Since Siza started his architecture course with field of references where Gaudi’s sculptures and works played an important role, he was afool to the main debate themes of the time like post-war and the 50s in Portugal.

His motto therefore came to be creation, the interpretation of reality which he would manage with a lyricism without precedents. Maybe for this reason Siza tends to systematically explore the capacity of a formal open system to establish relations. Siza says “my architecture does not have a preset language nor does it establish a language. It is the answer to a concrete problem, a situation in transformation where I become a participating party... we’ve outgrown the phase where language was seen as the solution to everything. A preset language, pure, beautiful, etc., does not interest me.”

What makes Siza tick is “an architectural proposal whose objective is to look deep into existing transformation venues, confrontations and pressures that make-up reality; a proposal that attempts to be more than a passive materialization that refuses to minimize said reality when analyzing individually each of its aspects. That proposal is not supported by a fixed image, it cannot follow a linear evolution. However, that proposal cannot be ambiguous, nor be restricted by a disciplinary speech, even when that may seem to be safest option. Each design must capture, with extreme precision, a precise moment of that fleeting image, in all its nuances. The better we are able to identify that fleeting quality of reality, the clearer will the design be. It is as vulnerable as true.” The formulation of this mental process, opposed to universal rules and ideas, exposes its total availability to the world and the understanding of architecture as a reality transformation process, the ephemera reality. For this reason he insists that “architecture is facing the growing problem of use and reference to models, [...] architects are not inventors. They work constantly with models which are in turn transformed to provide solutions to the problems they are faced with”.

For Siza “references are the tools used by the architect; it is all the experience that may be acknowledged and used as intelligently as possible within a given context.”

2. Location and subject-matter as a transformation process

Siza sees architecture as a transformation process, and rejects the notion of an architectural language based on a coherent architectural theory. On the contrary, his stand suggests the idea of a transformation process that operates in pre-existing situations and in models taken from the history of architecture, seen as an architectural culture. The tools are merely the available sources, imagination stimulus, references.

Álvaro Siza’s initial trajectory is clearly marked by successive openings associated to a reality whose incorporation and reflex in projects became evermore widespread and global. His initial works, between 1954 and 1969, have in common a set of constants that are clearly different to his later work. Although his initial designs were not considered to be homogenous, when it came to request, location type, site and surroundings, scale and theme they showed great continuity.

The scale of his first orders together with his perseverance and will to experiment made it possible for him to approach with a certain maturity subject-matters like questioning the operative character of forms, forcing these to loose their purely plastic display role. This way he was able to discover the answers to reality imposed requirements where forms are used to provide concrete solutions. ‘I define environment non-agres- sion and building preservation. My architecture contrasts with current architecture, however it acts within its fundamental logic immersed in the laws of the supporting fabric.”

Álvaro Siza’s first design, in 1954 at the start of his career in his own studio (this activity was carried out in parallel with his collaboration in Fernando Tavora’s studio, which lasted four years), was a set of four single-family homes built in Matosinhos. If at first sight the set seems to be rather vulgar, it is important
to remember that at the time artists were struggling to achieve a canonical modern architecture. So, using roof coverings, windows, balconies, eaves and porches of apparently traditional dimensions and forms was more then a mere resort to tradition. As he stated, "[he] became involved with the collective contemporary project: to avoid being a traditionalist and always keep in mind the roots".  

A composition with abstract meaning seems to characterise this set, from the point of view of articulation of the different volumes, pure and sculptured, apparent in the details of chamfer made joints with round edges joined to the wall, or as a sharp edge exposed with emphasis, playing between design linearity and the plasticity of the masses. This first work, announcing the Le Corbusier’s investigations being undertaken at that time with Ronchamp, is a symbol of Siza’s non-alignment and the search for the path that led to the idea that each project is a case on its own. This also coincides with the period, just before Portuguese regional architecture took off, when Távora projected the famous Ofir house.

At the Matosinhos Paroquial Centre, of 1956, a project of an important dimension for an architect at the start of his career, Siza worked on the concept of articulating three volumetrically different bodies exposed within a cloisteral space of seclusion and inwardness. The set’s configuration is informal without allowing the compositive rule to become too obvious. The formal, symbolic and functional sense of converging over the cloister’s space, is accentuated by the near-complete enclosure of this design’s outside walls.

In the Carneiro de Melo house, designed in 1957, from a relatively monolithic reference volume, broken up by Siza into successive parts, three clearly individualized bodies are created, according to their volume and coverings, to match a functional individuality. The entrance retreats into the centre going in the direction of the lounge, the west side lodges the bathrooms and staircase, the east side the bedrooms.

The Lordelo Corporation followed in 1960-1963. Situated inside the city of Oporto, an uncharacteristic area from an urban and architectural point of view, the construction imposes the image of being nearly totally enclosed over itself and its surroundings. The planimetric composition reveals a space articulation that shows both variety and richness, taking full advantage of the zenith light. However the outside image has a certain roughness. With a height of more than 10 meters the rough grey concrete walls hold very few windows. A real wall fortress differentiates the interior from the exterior; a physical difference of space organisation in direct opposition to the urban chaos. Its significant height is a clear symbol of the “cooperative” function of the building.

But it is in the Boa-Nova tea house, 1958-1962, where the personality of the author clearly emerges. Program, site and construction experimentation are articulated as project elements, as design tools used as part of an analytic process.

The Boa Nova tea house is a work in the domain of micro-geographical poetry. It explores the geographical dimension of the design-nature relation. The bulky and heavy presence of landscape and natural elements is translated into the construction design that seeks a rich dialogue capable of interpreting the complex reality, putting aside crystallised words and revealing in an admirable way the architecture of the house-landscape relation. The new problem was to portray an environment capable of suggesting and stimulating social use, creating a symbiosis between form and existential vitality, without ignoring the richness of new technologies and the “exploration of the imaginary new” created from variety, mutation and casualness. Thus, re-launching into modern Portuguese architecture the use of traditional materials, in an attempt to reconcile the intellectual with the sensual and the sensorial. The preoccupation with the site, leads to an open projecting method and an architectural design that is freely created based on the articulation and displacement of organically adapted building masses, thus adding value to the existing morphological potential.

The Boa Nova tea house was a novelty to Portuguese architecture since it met the expectations of a generation of architects. The massive presence of natural elements affected the whole design. The building emerges out of a concrete base broken up into plastered, thick and solid planes, lightened up by the oblique and moving angles of the coverings, where the lining and wooden lintels acquire an almost sculptural protagonism. The access path is orderly contained within walls and stairs, along which lays hidden the landscape. Only after having gone past the entrance hall and down the staircase do we became aware of the presence of the sea, the rocks and the scenery. From a composition point of view the relation with the natural elements becomes rather obsessive, with the building twisting and stretching over the site.

Three influences are eminent. Fernando Távora and his Ofir house, with white volumes without openings, the roofs, the chimney. Frank Lloyd Wright the balanced coverings and the way they cover the openings, and the design intensity of the wooden works. Alvar Aalto the will to organise, the materials and the spread out form of the constructions that fold-up without dramatics. Less obvious are the references to popular architecture, apparent in the materials and explorative composition of the construction elements, like the chimneys. Also apparent is a certain rustic charm not affected by any picturesque styling, an extension of some of Januário Godinho’s works, portraying a will to erupt and a refusal to surrender to populism.
Two elements marked the genesis of the project: the inner spaciousness, achieved with the interaction and modelling of the roofs and spaces, the functional articulation in the rooms facing the sea, with the toilets semi-buried surrounding the lounges like a rambling figure over which is built the upper entrance that leads to the upper lounges. The inner spaciousness results from the way in which the roofs are articulated and flow along the coverings’ inclination, providing a different dimension of the inner space. Thus the roofs’ wooden lining subtly runs away from the roof to capture the light coming in through zenith openings, which literally light up the whole distance.

The decisive nature-construction relation, a constant in each project, is also present in the Quinta da Conceição pool, 1958-1965. Inserted into a vast green park, holding it within long planes and high white walls, in a space of intimate qualities, that extends over echeloned levels, which organise the pathways along the platforms, in a proposal of great essentiality. The only necessarily covered spaces are situated along the walls, without disturbing the trees and nature that form part of this space of enchantment with paradoxically disturbing and tranquilising silence. Announcing the subsequent exhaustive and roughly sophisticated search of this author, the Quinta da Conceição swimming pool is a surprise since this work is essentially of a topographic nature. A design proposal aimed at containing the territory and not a voluntary altitude to create objects; this reveals the masterfulness of a creator of “objects-spaces-works” as art facts, insofar as it “builds” emotional environments with a “de natura” sensibility in the modulation of the land, understood as a pre-condition of architecture. 14

These elements were later implemented in the design of the municipal pool of Leça da Palmeira, 1961-1966. Situated between the beach and the seafort avenue, it shows the same natural elements of the Boa Nova restaurant: the sea, the beach, the rocks and the topography.

The construction has a linear form, running parallel to the avenue and the sea. Its location is such as to avoid obstructing the view; therefore its covering stands at the same height level of the avenue. The system of accesses constitutes an organised path as a result of the “apparent concrete” walls that prepare the visitor to the great emotion derived from the spectacular scenery experience.

The materials, concrete and wood, are treated with austere economy. All the joints are exposed and each material is entirely justified not only by its necessity but also by the will to continue a sort of micro-geography using apparent concrete to repel any mimicry, thus coming closer “in colour and texture” to the granite used in the surrounding areas. 15

From a composition point of view it’s the first design where the “pronounced taste for trace rigour” emerges in an obvious manner. 16; this taste for geometry would become a constant used as a control and articulation instrument to give dynamism to paths or adapt the shape to the topography. The integration in the enclosure, which characterised the first works, is maintained, however the field of relations and interaction were significantly strengthened, leading Siza to reflect on the urban space transformation conditions. This cycle reached its peak during the second decade of the 70s, with Évora’s Quinta da Malaguerra project, which was started in 1976 and the four Berlin Kreuzberg residential quarter design projects. The latter was the winner of the award that led to the creation of Siza’s first work outside Portugal. 17

3. The art of building with “economy to obtain quality” and splendour

Questioned on whether a certain fear of self-absorption could explain his asceticism and quasi Loosianos form contention Siza replied that he wished to come close to Adolf Loos since he “considered him to be the great master of economy in obtaining quality, one of his major objectives” 14. Loos indicates a safe beam, separated from the temporal and the date. It’s the idea of always replying to detail, to the context that functions as an absolutely rational common denominator: “The real reason behind a project does not have to be based on a previous limited model design. On the contrary, the encounter with new parameters, tensions, makes it possible to open up a wide range of ideas that are subject to the rational critic process.” Therefore, when he says that he does not see himself as imaginative person it’s because he considers that imagination implies inventing things never seen before and this concept is probably responsible for serious mistakes in architecture; the intended idea of inventing forms. “Today I define imagination as the ability to transform things already seen, a pillar, the traditional shape of a beam. This progressive and controlled development of shape, inside and outside the environment, is imagination and not the discovery of some non-existing thing. Thus, understanding inspiration as the re-elaboration and memory of recognisable things”. 18

An affirmation of his perseverant experimentation is the Ceremony Market of the Portuguese Pavilion, built on the “Pala” in 1998 an celebrated by all. This was a way of reinterpreting the elastic form of the “primordial stall” expressed in the nature of the concrete’s tension and compression. Extending a canopy of 67.5 metres between supports with 20 centimetre 20, membrane, Siza imagined and engineer Segadães Tavares made the calculations. The result was a covered area with more than three thousand square meters that challenged all the laws of physics and material resistance.

As Gregotti stated “the reason behind his international success and recognition by a cultural world that is totally
opposite to his as an highly talented architect it’s precisely the opposite, it is the fact that he believes in a hierarchy of values that are very different to the ones represented by grounds on which his architecture is founded. The reason behind his success is precisely this opposition: representing something that is completely different [...] not being interested in the accumulation of the masses’ communication capital, poetically interested in the economy of expression [...] in the demand imposed by necessary gestures [...] Distant from the architectural production processes of our times that want to form part of the globalisation of the markets and techniques, success as competitiveness. Siza architecture is totally different; it’s a project of critical dialogue, construction of a distance, a space where the best architecture of our times is built.”

For the purpose of "discovering [...] the singularity of the obvious".

Ana Tostões

1 Participated in Competitions for Venecia or Salzburg, works in Berlin or Haya, First Mies van Der Roha Award. In the 90’s at Paris with other awards he was awarded the Pritzker Prize Award.
2 See Peter Testa, the architecture of Álvaro Siza, Oporto, 1988 [1984].
4 Ana Tostões, Os Verdes Anos na Arquitectura Portuguesa, Oporto, 1997 p.
5 Peter Testa, op.cit.
8 Álvaro Siza, “Entretien avec Álvaro Siza”, op. cit.
9 Idem.
11 See Rogério Paulo Vieira de Almeida, op. cit.
12 The project and work’s form developed between 1958-1958/1960-1963 by Álvaro Siza together with António Mendes, Fernando Távora and Luis Botelho Dias. Emerged as the result of a tender elaborated at Fernando Távora’s offices.
16 Idem.
17 Rogério Paulo Vieira de Almeida, op. cit.
18 Arquitectura, interviewed by Sara de la Mata and Fernando Pierras
19 Idem.
question of which is better, but of expression and adaptation to the location, as well as of analysis of the existing means of construction from all points of view. The production of concrete must be carried out strictly and, in some cases, under certain conditions, good quality is not achieved.

EN BLANCO: We find elements of a high material quality (baseboards, wall faces and stairs carefully split up, ashlar work in exposed concrete, woodworks and panelling with a great richness of detail, etc.) that co-exist side-by-side in your works with smooth parameters, usually white, which provide a sense of cleanliness and immateriality and give an abstract character to the building. Could you please tell us how you use the presence and absence of materiality in your works?

ALVARO SIZA: It is somewhat similar to the painting process; you’ve got a number of colours and the tendency is to use them all. You’ve got many possibilities, a wide range of options from which you choose one.

In my opinion, there are many stimuli in architecture for the conquest of the form. It is more complex than painting or than the design of objects, but it also relies on a larger team.

There is no doubt about the importance of considering other kinds of jobs for the training of architects, as they are good complementary and irreplaceable exercises: design of objects, drawing, painting, sculpting, listening to music, watching films... there is a whole world of things which are related to architecture. Thus, those are the things that tell us the direction we must take. The development of a project is just like facing many different crossroads where, every single time, you must choose which way you go, with all the risks it entails.

EN BLANCO: There exist many different conceptual forms in which exposed concrete can be used. Sometimes, such as in Viana do Castelo Library, buildings are treated as a prism on which some planes are cut out, everything in exposed concrete. Some other times, they are volumes defined by curved surfaces, also made in concrete, as is the case of Panticosa and Cornellà, whereas the Iberê Camargo Museum displays rather sculptural shapes. What is the origin of these expressive systems?

ALVARO SIZA: As I was saying, architects need many stimuli to choose a direction. There are lots of motivating elements: trips, visits to architectural works, places with their own distinctive culture... Nowadays there are many possibilities of visiting and watching places and, consequently, of looking at them in detail, not through images. All those things unleash a mental exercise and result in the design experience.

Moreover, there is an impact associated with the first visit you make to the place where you’re going to build. For instance, Brazil transmitted a powerful energy to the first ideas for the Iberê Camargo Museum. My first impression of Brazil was space... watching it from the plane it seemed deserted. Rivers turn into seas... it conveys a sense of beauty, of work and exploration that you don’t feel if you are working in the city centre, where you do find other stimuli, but they are not the same.

Later on I thought of the place where it is built. It is a void that becomes narrower and narrower and, consequently, there was a lack of space in a place whose main characteristic is space. The front part of the building is virtually a continuation of the hillside. In addition, the vegetation, which is on quite a different scale in Brazil, becomes part of the project. In fact, I remember having written a text, a long time ago, in which I said I’d like to be an architect in Brazil because, even though I made bad designs, the thick vegetation would hide them... it is like the redemption from all sins. With the wonderful green mass on one side and the long horizontal line on the other, my intuition asked me to build those galleries and passages... They are an invitation to go out from the void.

In short, in every place you work, apart from what is already set, there are particular stimuli from each place and experience, even from each person you meet there. This is why it is so difficult to do everything exactly the same, because you have to resist many stimuli!!

Nevertheless, there are also architects who have always taken the same road, making different versions of the same project throughout their entire career. For me, this depends on the particular characteristics of a person: how he was brought up, in which environment, where he grew up, where he started his education... there are sublime examples of attempts to reach perfection in which the architect is permanently influenced by a limited world of objectives, but which he tries to perfect. The greatest architects are some times bold, and some times they perfect their ideas to the end. For example, Aldo Rossi. He’s got very precise, thoughtful ideas that are the result of profound reflections, but it cannot be said in any way that an architect repeats himself. He’s got the moral power of perfection that is lacking so often. There is a similar situation with Mies van der Rohe, but if we study the detail we’ll see a world of change and evolution, consistent, and with a very strong conviction.

EN BLANCO: Louis Kahn used to say that his main driving force was the material itself. If he decided that the Project was to be built in concrete, he designed it from the very beginning in a completely different way to the way he would if it were to be built in brick. In Álvaro Siza’s latter works we find a respect for the material, but also an autobiographical component.

ALVARO SIZA: The use and the expression of materials evolve, too. An iron structure from the 19th century is very different to what is being built today with the same material. This depends
on the material itself, on its capacity, its quality, its manufacture, on the technical means... It is very difficult for me to choose the material, because it is related to many different things and it is not just a matter of taste. Besides, and although unintentionally, the project begins long before starting it. It forms part of the personal life experience of the architect.

Actually, I’m amused to read how I am classified in the articles dealing with my work. In some of them, the Malagueira quarter in Évora has been described as neo-rationalist, in some others as vernacular, as expressionist... Of course, it’s got a bit of everything! It is impossible not to use certain aspects from the vernacular architecture as well as other elements acquired through the learning process, the relationship with the landscape, or simply from the desire to improve people’s lives. Regarding the Iberê Camargo Museum, I was told that I was strongly influenced by Lina Bo Bardi because of the exterior corridors. I can’t watch anything having spared a single thought to her, but it is true that I had met Lina Bo Bardi and was deeply impressed by her. I told the person I was speaking to that there was the possibility that both Lina and I could have been touched by her. I told the person I was speaking to that there was the possibility that both Lina and I could have been previously influenced by the Faneuil Factory, in Holland. Some others speak of the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright, with the Guggenheim...

Our brain is like a charger, a battery that receives much information, and the architect’s training involves the assimilation of information. Later, you reproduce what you have absorbed. It is like a subconscious that helps us when we need it without us even noticing it. Training consists of expanding that list, which must be assimilated to be ourselves. That charge is internalised when carrying out a project. If it is merely literary information, it doesn’t become operative.

EN BLANCO: In your designs, it seems that hand-drawing is a basic factor in the materialisation of the project, maybe even more than the material itself or any other aspect. However, new generations are losing the need to work by hand...

ALVARO SIZA: I think that drawing is a basic factor. Sometimes you can start with the most unreal drafts you could imagine. There are some first drafts of the Iberê Camargo Museum that are folly, but a necessary folly to initiate the project and to eliminate other possibilities. It is very important not to spend too much time in front of a blank sheet of paper because that void is disturbing. You can leave it like that, but you also have another option: scribbling on it and getting started...

Nowadays there are fantastic facilities to design projects. I only suspect it, because I don’t get to work with the computer. However, I also see a lot of people so obsessed with computers that they don’t see the world around them. Computers are complementary tools, like books are, but they don’t replace others. They bring many benefits, but if that implies losing other equally important tools, then the balance is lost.

In my office there is a lot of hand-drawing, but we also use many scale models. It is great for monitoring the project. Sketches are deceptive because when you start exploring solutions you don’t know the scale, the proportions yet; and that is why they must be completed by means of detailed drawings, scale models and... why not, with the computer. The more tools we use without rejecting others the better.

EN BLANCO: On some occasions you have said that the architect depends heavily on the changes that take place in the means of production and which determine the architectural thinking. There has been an evolution from a hand-craft to a more industrial culture. How has this affected your architecture?

ALVARO SIZA: Today, one of the biggest problems in architecture is that it is difficult to find clients who are interested in the quality of the work and, therefore, who look for a meticulous architect. That is actually the biggest difference between the most glorious period in modern architecture and today.

Not long ago, I had the chance of visiting the wonderful Maison Carrée, in Paris. It is absolutely fascinating from the moment you enter through the garden door until you have explored every single nook, every single space. For instance, if you pay close attention to the design and finish of the wardrobes you will be surprised by their size, as they are deep enough to allow a person in. Besides, the space available for every single object inside the wardrobe is perfectly designed and finished.

The architect’s job is basically to create spaces in which people can live comfortably, both physically and spiritually. Currently, architecture cannot reach its full potential because it lacks the necessary conditions. And it is not a matter of money; it is more a question of will. When you open a wardrobe in a modern house, it is empty because there is not an interest in the detail. That interest has shifted to the appearance, and the appearance exists, but it also ignores other things. Appearance is the result of a process, but it is not the starting point. However, many times it is seen as the starting point, mainly in the contests, because you have to make an impression. The intention of many people is to create a symbol, although that word becomes too profound for an image in those cases. This can mainly be found in the magazines. When you see a building in a publication, it may look wonderful, but when you visit it then you realise that it is a fake, and that a highly skilled photographer censored the worst parts of the building. You discover many defects that the photograph doesn’t show.

This neglect of details is boosted by the client, as it is he the first one who says “No, No... It is good as it is. We don’t need that much”, mainly if we are dealing with public works. There is a word revolving around this idea which has become rather common lately: elitist. That is the most appropriate word to break the architect’s determination and enthusiasm. When a
building is designed with care, and we take for granted that the client will demand this, we will always hear a word of criticism from him, saying "I’m not an elitist". We have got to the point where the word “good” is confused with the word “elitism”, and I think that there must be elitism; elitism for everyone.

Apart from that mix-up between the architect and the client, there is also a cultural evidence. We live in a time of constant change and rapid evolution towards specialisation, and we have left behind the craft heritage. For me, this is really a cultural shock difficult to overcome, and even more difficult to recover from.

IN THE ORBIT OF ALVARO SIZA
(THE CHRONICLE OF AN IMPOSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT)

On the occasion of the publication of the first issue of the magazine EN BLANCO, dedicated to the latest production of Alvaro Siza Viera, I have before me the task of placing this architect in his context. A welcome task resulting from the admiration and respect I have for Mr. Siza, and tremendous task resulting from the respect and admiration I have for his work.

Much has already been written about Siza Viera, much of great depth and on a more solid base of knowledge than my own. However, there is, without a doubt, much left to write and analyse about a professional career and a figure which undeniably unites all necessary aspects in complexity and variety so that those willing to seriously investigate continue to provide us with surprising conclusions and revealing results. Facing the enormity of the task with which I am confronted, and the doubt as to whether I am capable of bringing it to a successful conclusion, I decided to begin by rereading all of the articles, texts, introductions, interviews, prefaces and conclusions that I have in my library about Mr. Siza (which are many, thanks to the special interest I have had since my time as a student, following his career and the development of Portuguese architecture in general), trying to find a space of action or perhaps a lifeboat which would allow me to decorously finish this assignment.

Having arrived at this point, my article, out of necessity, is transformed into an explanation, or a long and unsolicited excuse as to why I am unable to successfully complete the task of providing a context for the figure of Mr. Siza, in all of his dimensions.

Firstly, I would have considered discussing the relationships, the student to teacher relationship established between Alvaro Siza and Fernando Tavora, or the teacher to student relationship which exists with Eduardo Souto de Moura. However, these questions have already been addressed by the architects themselves and are already profusely described in depth in the publications of Antonio Esposito and Giovanni Leoni, and Luiz Trigueiros, undoubtedly very complete works on the three protagonists, which I recommend to those interested in understanding the subject in greater depth.

Next, I would perhaps have tried to write a coherent summary about the time and again mentioned “school of Porto”, but personally I find it difficult to approach the subject after having listened to Eduardo Souto de Moura deny the validity of the term on several occasions (at least regarding the importance placed on it in recent years), reducing, or perhaps extending its meaning and consequences to the exchange of ideas and the natural process of mutual influences that has involved and still involves the relationships of friendship and respect between the architects often included as a reference or root of said school. In addition, I have always found it difficult to stop thinking that there are private interests, possibly inclusive, possibly reductionist, in the determination to provide the term “school of Porto” with durability and consistency from outside of the circle referenced. It is possible, some time ago, that this name had a raison d’être or a necessary synthetic or relatively useful purpose, but I believe that time has diluted its function, transforming it from noun to easy epithet with no substratum to describe.

I also considered beginning with a greater backward movement in time, commenting on what had occurred during the first Portuguese architecture conference held in 1948, and the consequences of its critical stance which faced the pre-established postures of the conference by the authoritarian regime of Salazar. I could have also made reference to the Inquirer à Arquitectura Regional Portuguesa, which under the direction of Francisco Keil do Amaral included the participation of Fernando Tavora among other architects, and its already widely commented consequences. This research, collected in a publication of three magnificent volumes, was shown to me by Professor Rui Braz for the first time in the orbit of Alvaro Siza.

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(THE CHRONICLE OF AN IMPOSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT)

Upon the occasion of the publication of the first issue of the magazine EN BLANCO, dedicated to the latest production of Alvaro Siza Viera, I have before me the task of placing this architect in his context. A welcome task resulting from the admiration and respect I have for Mr. Siza, and tremendous task resulting from the respect and admiration I have for his work.

Much has already been written about Siza Viera, much of great depth and on a more solid base of knowledge than my own. However, there is, without a doubt, much left to write and analyse about a professional career and a figure which undeniably unites all necessary aspects in complexity and variety so that those willing to seriously investigate continue to provide us with surprising conclusions and revealing results. Facing the enormity of the task with which I am confronted, and the doubt as to whether I am capable of bringing it to a successful conclusion, I decided to begin by rereading all of the articles, texts, introductions, interviews, prefaces and conclusions that I have in my library about Mr. Siza (which are many, thanks to the special interest I have had since my time as a student, following his career and the development of Portuguese architecture in general), trying to find a space of action or perhaps a lifeboat which would allow me to decorously finish this assignment.

Having arrived at this point, my article, out of necessity, is transformed into an explanation, or a long and unsolicited excuse as to why I am unable to successfully complete the task of providing a context for the figure of Mr. Siza, in all of his dimensions.

Firstly, I would have considered discussing the relationships, the student to teacher relationship established between Alvaro Siza and Fernando Tavora, or the teacher to student relationship which exists with Eduardo Souto de Moura. However, these questions have already been addressed by the architects themselves and are already profusely described in depth in the publications of Antonio Esposito and Giovanni Leoni, and Luiz Trigueiros, undoubtedly very complete works on the three protagonists, which I recommend to those interested in understanding the subject in greater depth.

Next, I would perhaps have tried to write a coherent summary about the time and again mentioned “school of Porto”, but personally I find it difficult to approach the subject after having listened to Eduardo Souto de Moura deny the validity of the term on several occasions (at least regarding the importance placed on it in recent years), reducing, or perhaps extending its meaning and consequences to the exchange of ideas and the natural process of mutual influences that has involved and still involves the relationships of friendship and respect between the architects often included as a reference or root of said school. In addition, I have always found it difficult to stop thinking that there are private interests, possibly inclusive, possibly reductionist, in the determination to provide the term “school of Porto” with durability and consistency from outside of the circle referenced. It is possible, some time ago, that this name had a raison d’être or a necessary synthetic or relatively useful purpose, but I believe that time has diluted its function, transforming it from noun to easy epithet with no substratum to describe.

I also considered beginning with a greater backward movement in time, commenting on what had occurred during the first Portuguese architecture conference held in 1948, and the consequences of its critical stance which faced the pre-established postures of the conference by the authoritarian regime of Salazar. I could have also made reference to the Inquirer à Arquitectura Regional Portuguesa, which under the direction of Francisco Keil do Amaral included the participation of Fernando Tavora among other architects, and its already widely commented consequences. This research, collected in a publication of three magnificent volumes, was shown to me by Professor Rui Braz for the first time in the orbit of Alvaro Siza.

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I have also ruled out an attempt to create a human, personal or biographical approximation of Álvaro Siza, as this task has already been undertaken by some of his friends, such as Alexandre Alves Costa or gathered in one of the numerous existing interviews. I also believe that the opportunity to provide anecdotes, some well-lived personally in my years of work in Porto, along with others collected second-hand, could have a certain value of human approximation (or an approximation to the "myth") when verbally recounted, but transcribed here they would clearly achieve, at most, the value of gossip, inappropriate for an architecture magazine that endeavours to be serious. The only possible direction for biographical treatment would be to discuss the consequences of the autobiographic component of the work of Siza, as done by Vittorio Gregotti.

Another possibility, essential because of the inherent way in which he sees the world and the way in which he understands architecture, would have been to reflect on the drawings of Álvaro Siza. Not only speak of the repeatedly addressed existing relationship between the drawings and the project substratum, but also of the continuous need to draw, drawings created with a continuous stroke, the complicity in the "competition" of drawings to closed eyes, or the travel journals, a document which includes his portraits of numerous architects and friends, or his additions to buildings as icons or signs of luxury.

Likewise, I ruled out commenting on the influences or references architects such as Le Corbusier, Wright, Adolf Loos and fundamentally Alvar Aalto have established in their work, a subject which can be found in articles by Kenneth Frampton and other theorists. I was enormously tempted by the last aspect of the reinterpretation made by Siza regarding some of the mechanisms of Aalto, especially the subject of skylights; a subject that, in contrast, I have had on my mind for several years, and one that I find particularly exemplary. And even though a suggestive title for a possible essay comes to mind ("Alvar o(n) Alvaro!") I am afraid that the whole subject is too "comprido" to make a superficial approximation. Perhaps, some day, someone (maybe even Álvaro Siza himself) will write with foundation about this interesting subject.

I could have also spoken of the influence that Álvaro Siza has had and still has on Portuguese architecture (and architecture beyond the Portuguese borders). There are several aspects which can be discussed.

The first aspect would address the irritating fact that, at times, some fellow architects have had the poor habit of copying certain material aspects or "language" of Siza’s work and incorporating them indiscriminately, without analysis or reinterpretation, into their projects and buildings. The transmission of knowledge cannot and should not be calligraphic, and the substratum on which the architectonic process is based should not be reduced to a poorly understood mimesis of elements converted into a decontextualised imaginary. It is evident that these actions will never constitute an added value in and of themselves, nor do they reinforce the thesis of the existence of a "school" inherited from the work of Álvaro Siza.

The second, in contrast to the first and of a positive nature, would address the influence that Siza, as well as other architects, have established as teachers, as an "intense reference" of the architecture of the north of Portugal. Numerous architects (of nearly all backgrounds imaginable) that have trained collaborating in his studios, establishing work standards and a way to approach the trade which affects both the attitudes and the physical aspect of the project’s graphic documents (perhaps it is here where the famous "School of Porto" exists). Fortunately, we can observe how this fact has not been able to affect the independent thinking and opening of new ways that stand out among the most recent generations of Portuguese architects, and have helped to establish standards of quality and self-imposed standards of excellence.

Lastly, it is worth pointing out that, in spite of the cultural reference and international projection that Álvaro Siza unquestionably gives to the Portuguese society (I remember his constant presence in the daily newspapers during my years in Portugal), his figure and his work are the result of conditions and a evolution so personal and vast that they can hardly be considered responsible for an architectonic tendency.

To attempt to summarise the trajectory and the evolutions produced throughout the career of Álvaro Siza is a task already undertaken by experts such as William Curtis, and Alexandre Alves Costa. To proceed to contextualise the works presented in this issue, and put them into relation with his past works, would possibly be the only way in which I could confront this article. Thus, to speak of the transformation in the constructive processes, the use of concrete, the substitution of certain materials maintaining the formal preceding degree of abstraction, the "lightness" of heavy objects, the differences in the contacts with the terrain, and the differences in the structural uses that exist between the examples presented here, in short, the coincidences and divergences produced from the use of white concrete in many of Álvaro Siza’s most recent works, are the last reason for his presence as an object of analysis in this new thematic publication. Fortunately, I will allow others, who are better prepared than I, to carry out this task.

To finish this impossible journey, I am only left pointing out that Mr. Siza has once again; as he does each time I turn to him, surprised and fascinated me, redrawing himself and his architecture.

R. Merí de la Maza

1 Álvaro Joaquim Melo Siza Vieira, architect. Born in Matosinhos, Portugal in 1933.
4 Founder of Blau Editorial and editor of the monographs of the three architects.

5 It is essential to mention Professor Carlos Ramos, director of the School of Architecture (ESBAP) between the years 1948 and 1967, who promoted the critical and creative spirit of the students bringing them to go beyond the usual limits of that time.

6 Research on the state of traditional Portuguese architecture carried out by the National Syndicate of Portuguese Architects between the years 1955 and 1960, under the presidency of the architect Francisco Reis da Amaral, with the participation of the following architects: Alfredo da Mata Antunes, António Azevedo Sanches, António Menezes, António Pinto de Freitas, Arnaldo Araújo, Artur Vieira Martins, Carlos Carvalho Dias, Celestino de Castro, Fernando Távora, Fernando Torres, Francisco Reis da Amaral, Francisco da Silva Dias, Frederico George, João José Malato, José Huerfano Lobo, Nuno Testonino Pereira, Octavio L. Filgueiras and Rui Pimentel.


9 In reference to a comment made by Eduardo Souto in the interview with Ana Tzabalbeascoa published in the newspaper EL PAIS on 30 June 2007.


12 Álvaro Siza in Matosinhos. Conference pronounced by Alexandre Alves Costa at the Matosinhos Town Hall on 18 April 1994. Collected in a publication with the same name.


17 Álvaro Siza in Matosinhos. Conference pronounced by Alexandre Alves Costa at the Matosinhos Town Hall on 18 April 1994. Collected in a publication with the same name.


19 In reference to a comment made by Eduardo Souto in the interview with Ana Tzabalbeascoa published in the newspaper EL PAIS on 30 June 2007.


Many questions arise when one is introduced to the personality and works of Álvaro Siza. Among these questions, it is fascinating to ask one’s self what gives his works the impression of passing through time without becoming obsolete. It is surprising to see old publications in which his works appear timeless, already classic, while the information and the projects surrounding them expire. This is only the prelude of what occurs when one visits his works, works able to be agreed upon by distant generations. Works in which international authors are seen reflected with values which could be accepted as antagonistic. A biography of a long journey riddled with awards, monographs and dedications which transform him into an indisputable cultural authority in a world of fleeting images which may very well be his opposite. Perhaps, in his architecture, recognition acquires its most complete significance as it is rooted in the nature of the obvious. The examination of the conflicts and pleasures of everyday life characterises architecture with respect to other arts. The necessary diversity is assumed to be a solution, not an ostentatious calligraphy. Creating a duality in which all of the resonances and stimuli comprise part of a whole with its own identity, linked to its environment. Achieving a fragile equilib-rium which allows the project to be free without becoming lost.

To emphasise the importance of the drawings in Siza’s works could seem cliché. However, it is not, as these drawings invented, or better yet, rediscovered, a method of approach to the project. They rescued the ancient wisdom of the pleasure of looking, overcoming the limits of reason, and overcoming sophisticated techniques which are also incorporated into the creative process. A tool which allows us to imagine the possible and that which still is impossible, which generates a contagious strength and illusion capable of motivating such incessant and tireless output. Successive iterations with extremely precise technical drawings approach the concrete of each situation and shape it into a tangible reality. A dialog arises in this way, between scientific knowledge and an evolving idea, which synthesises from an open and critical procedure.

We would have to relive an entire biography in order to shine light on and decipher the process of a creative intelligence, where reminiscence cultivated through years under a watchful eye fuses the imagination with memory and allows them to be confronted with the demands of a concrete context. It is possible that we are only left with the possibility to observe and enjoy his work with the same attitude, searching to discover a bridge which unites old knowledge with what must come.

F. Silvestre Navarro
MUNICIPAL LIBRARY OF VIANA DO CASTELO. PORTUGAL. 2001-2007

Design by: Álvaro Siza Vieira, Architect
Technical projects: Structures: João Maria Sobreira, Engineer / Electrical Installations and Security Systems: Alexandre Martins, Engineer / Plumbing and Drainage: Raquel Fernandes, Engineer / Mechanical Installations: Raul Bessa, Engineer
Contractor: Telhabel / Construction Director: Pedro Freitas, Engineer / Mr. João Alves
Client: Câmara Municipal de Viana do Castelo / Célia Pereira, Engineer / Isabel Rodrigues, Architect

The Municipal Council of Viana do Castelo intended to build a BM3-type library on the strip of land between River Lima and Marginal Avenue.

The building is part of the Plan for the Marginal of Viana, whose author is Prof. Fernando Távora. Furthermore, this Plan foresees the development of external spaces, and the construction of a multi-purpose hall and two buildings equipped with two office buildings, framing Liberdade Square and the monument to April 25th. The building area was agreed with Prof. Fernando Távora and the rest of the architects involved (Eduardo Souto de Moura, José Bernardo Távora and Adalberto Dias).

Located at the eastern end of the planned sequence of construction, the Library consists of an elevated volume of 45x45 m which includes a central opening of 20x20 m. This volume extends to the east on the ground floor, which is "L"-shaped and has a dwarf wall framing the riverside gardens.

The building programme follows the Services and Areas Proposal and the recommendations issued by the General Directorate for Book and Libraries (IPLB) regarding the National Network of Public Libraries, as well as other directives laid down by the Municipal Council and the POLIS Programme. The layout of the building is as follows:

Ground Floor (Level 0) - Public Facilities: Atrium, Information Desk, Bar, Storage room of Bar, Multi-purpose Room, Storage room, Toilets. - Staff facilities: Reception/Maintenance, Director’s office, Work rooms, Technical support services, Meeting room, Computer room, Staffroom, Toilets, Storage rooms.

1st Floor (Level 1) - Atrium, Reprographic Services, Toilets, Adults section, Children’s section.

The communication between the two floors is by means of two stair/lift cores, one of them for the public and the other for staff. There is also an external escape stair.

Public access to the library’s atrium is via the space defined by the elevated volume and its corresponding central opening, the ground floor being elevated 65 cm above ground level. The difference in height is overcome by a ramp with a gradient of four degrees.

Staff access is through the public Atrium and a covered space located on the east side of the Library, which is planned to be used as a staff car park. The P.T. and the boiler are next to this covered space.

The proposed architectural expression arises from the following conditions:
- Views over the river from many parts of the building, due to its elevated position, supported at both ends (East and West) by means of two "L"-shaped pillars, and from the built area on the ground floor.
- Orthogonality of the floor plan and elevation.
- Predominance of large horizontal openings, illuminated with spotlights.
- Sun protection or adequate orientation of the openings.
- Exposed concrete façade partially clad in stone, which forms the basis of the building.
- Volumetric definition intentionally subject to the dialogue garden/construction.

Structural Description: The Municipal Library of Viana do Castelo building has two floors which are structurally divided into two different areas:

The first one (zone 1) spreads in a continuous manner across the ground floor over the foundations, and the second area (zone 2) is supported by the former zone and by two "L"-shaped pillars, freeing space on the lower floor as it was envisaged in the project.

Foundations: The existing ground is characterised by its heterogeneous terrain, with stone blocks of different types over a rock layer that varies in depth from 10 m in the north of the site to 20 m in the south. For this reason, the foundations are built up indirectly by means of jet-grout columns covering micro-piles (Type IV) sealed to the rock. The predictable difficulty in carrying out piling works led us to choose this option.

The part of the building that rests on the ground is made up of slabs and walls with orthogonal mesh, resting on those columns in a continuous run along the walls. The "L"-shaped pillars from the elevated section stand on a reinforced concrete block anchored in groups of jet-grout columns and micro-piles.

Superstructure: There are two different situations to be considered:

Zone 1: solid or steel/concrete mixed slabs resting on reinforced concrete walls.
Zone 2: The structure here takes account of the existing openings and the exposed concrete finish, and it is made up of a structural steel framework covered with reinforced concrete.

The adopted structural plan consists of a grid of interconnected beams at roof level that rest on zone 1 of the building and on two cross-shaped metal supports, which turn into two "L"s under the first floor and which, for architectural reasons, have one of their wings oriented in the least favourable direction, causing stresses on the outside of that wing.

This metal grid supports the Library’s first floor by means of ties. That floor is made up of a mixed structure of metal beams and reinforced concrete plates on both its upper and lower sides (exposed concrete).

Taking into account that the whole elevation should suffer the least possible strain, the stressed area of the cross-shaped supports is reinforced with Dywidag bars, whereas the mixed slabs from the suspended floor are post-tensioned.

Finally, the use of exposed concrete and white concrete, the particular characteristics of the work, the stereotomy design, the presence of metal structures, its proximity to the sea, the different concrete thicknesses, etc. requires a rigorous study of their composition and of the formwork. The building contractor’s remarkable collaboration in the direction and planning of the works, made it possible to reach a satisfactory outcome and with the required quality.
1. Specifications
Access to the complex is from the northeast and from the southeast of the site, through a slightly sloping space, surrounded by the multi-purpose hall and by a longitudinal volume, from where access to the different facilities is gained. The communication between the various spaces is via an entrance hall that connects the different facilities, the administration services and the restaurant.

2. Multi-purpose Hall
It has four grandstands, one of which is mobile and can be accessed at its upper level from the main hall. Under normal conditions, athletes enter through the main hall and go down to court level. Here we find a longitudinal block of changing rooms. In a second phase, a training hall will be built at one of the ends. In the case of important competitions, athletes, VIPs, press and medical services will access the hall from the southeast end of the building, at court level.

3. Aquatic Area
This area is accessed by descending one level from the main hall of the complex, reaching the changing rooms, toilets and saunas area. This zone is connected to the swimming pools through a corridor that articulates the aquatic facilities with the changing rooms and the general services of the complex. Public access to the swimming pools is via a second corridor, on the same level as the main hall, which continues into the indoor swimming pool space through a perimeter ramp.

4. Fitness Centre and Gymnasium
They have separate entrances from a vertical core, and share the changing rooms and the swimming pools facilities. This area is divided into two levels, connected between them to the changing rooms.

5. Car Park
There is a provisional car park that will be replaced in the second phase of construction by the one set out in the project.

Álvaro Siza, Architect
Porto, 16th November 2006
HPC – PANTICOSA HIGH PERFORMANCE CENTRE. HUESCA. SPAIN
(SPORTS HOTEL LOCATED AT PANTICOSA SPA. HUESCA. SPAIN)

Architectural design and external layout: Álvaro Siza
Project and construction co-ordinator: Matthias Heskamp
Collaborators: Ola Boman, Francisco Siqueira, Emília Sanchez-Hornemos, Natasha Vieiros, Verónica Martinez,
Kenji Araya, Tomoko Kawai, Saurab Malpani, Beatriz Tarazona, Ren Ito, Vânia Miranda, Álvaro Fonseca, Elisa
Toshi Martins, Andrea Araguas, Paula Nascimento
Specialised works: GOP – Gabinete de Organização e Projectos, Lda
HVAC: GET – Gestão de Energia Térmica – Raul Bessa, Engineer
Contractor: NOZAR/HINACO
Client: NOZAR

The plot for the construction of a Sports Hotel at Panticosa Spa, in Huesca, covers an area of 3,366 m and is located on the northwest side of the Spa, opposite to the main entrance to the complex. Once the development works are completed, the site perimeter will be fully surrounded by streets, which will adjoin the following elements: River Caldarés to the south-southeast, three extensive rows of trees running parallel to the street, and a meadow to the west, two villas to the north and a power station to the east. Finally, and on the other side of the river, there is the vast bulk of the Hotel Continental. The commissioned Base Scheme includes a Hotel for sportspeople with rooms, communal areas, spa and sports facilities. This latter item requires a great quantity and specificity of facilities, and is therefore a key aspect of the present project.

Scheme
The building is arranged on three basic levels: The ground/entrance floor houses the reception, restaurant, library, shop and lounge (elevation +0.50); the first floor comprises all the hotel’s bedrooms (+4.20), and the basement floor features the spa, changing rooms and gymnasiums (-4.20). The sports facilities level is arranged in platforms which reach ground floor level at the indoor swimming pool by means of ramp walkways. These sports facilities extend up to the hotel’s roof with a solarium and the outdoor swimming pool. Apart from the ramp walkways at the spa, there is another similar system which runs through the external spaces, from the entrance to the roof garden (+8.00). The rest of the vertical circulation within the building is provided by five stair cores, three of them with an adjacent lift and one of them with a service lift.

Architectural Expression
Taking into consideration the magnificent environment in which the building plot is located, this project pursues a high integration with the natural environment and aims at becoming a transition space between the mountains and the more urban elements of the Spa. The building blends with the landscape, minimising its presence on the upper part of the plot, and becoming more urban and bulky in the access area, close to the Hotel Continental.

The Sports Hotel, given the topographical characteristics of the site, can be overlooked from the walking paths on the mountainside and from the Spa’s hotels and facilities, from where the roof is a clearly visible element. Therefore, the roof garden becomes especially important, and the following varieties of plants are incorporated onto a gardened/heated flat roof: Poa pratensis, Poa trivialis, Festuca rubra commutata and Festuca ovina. The resulting appearance of the building is clearly integrated into the natural environment and, consequently, the built area is regained in the roof.

The building is protected from avalanches from the North and the South, creating a perfectly delimited site.

The property is accessed through a group of trees flanked by a wall which leads us to the Hotel reception. The entranceway is also the start of a sequence of external spaces that will take us up to the roof, where we will have a full view of the landscape. This external walkway and the one in the sports facilities area constitute the elements that articulate the whole spatial arrangement of the building.

Materials
The whole building will have an exposed concrete surface finish, poured in-situ, which will be separated from the supporting structure with cavity wall insulation. Thus, the aim is to achieve a homogeneous treatment for the whole building that strengthens its unity. All the building is fitted with sliding doors and windows which are finished in natural coloured aluminium on the exterior and in wood on the interior.