Houses of Work and Play: Alvaro Siza at FAUP (1985-1997) and Fernando Tavora’s School of Architecture at Guimaraes (2009-12)

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“To me, and to my occupation, hockey was a major influence: the game is so fast and demanding that it is impossible to separate previously defined strategy from improvisation. They must act in tandem, with the decisive support of wheels. In Architecture one can also resort to ‘flying wheels’ to deal with the complexity, the extent, and the accidents that every project entails: previous knowledge, perhaps experience and undoubtedly doubt — these are instruments continuously set against each other from the beginning, until synchronism, or a certain-operative instantaneousness are attained.”

—Alvaro Siza

“The being of art cannot be defined as an object of aesthetic consciousness, because, on the contrary, the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. It is part of the event of being that occurs in presentation, and belongs essentially to play as play... What we mean by truth here can best be defined again in terms of our concept of play. The weight of the things we encounter in understanding plays itself out in a linguistic event, a play of words playing around and about what is learnt. Language games exist where we as learners — and when do we cease to be that? — rise to the understanding of the world. Here it is worth recalling what we said about the nature of play, namely that the player’s actions should not be considered subjective actions, since it is, rather, the game itself that plays, for it draws the players into itself and thus becomes the actual subjectum of the playing... When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us... what we encounter in the experience of the beautiful and in understanding the meaning of tradition really has something of the truth of play about it.”

—Hans-Gedam Gammer

The final building of the great Portuguese architect Fernando Tavora, the School of Architecture at Guimarães, is arguably his most didactic, in the sense that it is designed as a place to teach architecture in, and to act as a lesson in itself. He protege, Alvaro Siza, famously built a new home for their alma mater. Previously known as ESBAP, (Escola Superior de Belas Artes do Porto) FAUP (the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto), relocated from the art school in the centre of Porto to be part of the University of Porto campus in the 1990s. It of the University of Porto, at the edge of a stone city, becomes part of the landscape of the interior of the architecture.

Set on a hillside, close to a road bridge at the mouth of the river Douro, the bridge seems to be part of the extended composition of FAUP; the school is a gateway to the Atlantic Ocean, and the world “beyond the luxury of academia”, Wilfried Wang suggests. An early design development plan—seemingly the primary site plan in fact—describes the generating geometric principles from which the project develops. Siza established two things simultaneously: a point from which he projects lines that “cente” parts of the composition beyond the site (actively just beyond the northern wall of the old villa garden); and at the same time he draws the scheme within the confines of a DIN Standard, Fibonacci sequence-driven, Golden Section ratio-a-paper size. In other words, the initial drawing establishes the project as an exercise; establishing architecture as a mode of creativity founded on proportion and geometry as an analogue of order, growing from the discipline of orthographic drawing. As in all surveying and thence design work, the site is ordered by being measured and drawn first of all. Decisions made at this stage, about what to exclude or include within a project, Siza seems to be saying more or less explicitly—and I happen to think he’s making this point (pretty much) very obviously—can generate a whole concept for a building project. In this case, the diagonal that bisects the Siza’s drawing establishes a theoretical point from which disparate parts of the architectural whole are related. One can’t see this “centre”, it is not a perceptual device or a visual panopticon, but once you know it exists, the uncanny sense of familiarity that relates the parts of the whole together, are explained. The point of origin is less important than the effect that it has in orienting everything outwards, beyond itself, which results in the tremendously liberating sense of the school throwing you out onto the horizon of the river and the sea. This sensation is both familiar and unfamiliar: there is sufficient sense of reciprocity between the various parts, and articulation of their differences, to establish a satisfying sense of identity and a sense of place, without this feeling introverted or totally safe. Architectural education, Siza seems to be suggesting, is a threshold between childhood and mature artistic freedom, and the school credibly seems to prepare generation after generation for the adventures of professional life.

Siza is making a case I believe, in his insistence on publishing and re-publishing this site plan drawing, for the origin of design as disegno, and in particular for the primacy of the plan (as Alberti
suggested). Also, I’d suggest, for the fundamental role of geometry in unifying the visible and invisible aspects of architecture. This is, in effect, an argument for the primarily spatial character of architectural experience on the one hand, and for its fundamentally theoretical nature too. This unremarkable site plan drawing is strange but not obscure, it features as one of only six drawings of the FAUP project in the catalogue of the recent exhibition Álvaro Siza: in/discipline at Serralves Institute in Porto (19th September 2019 to 2nd February 2020). A version of this drawing is also for sale as a poster in the bookshop at FAUP, and has been since the building opened. As well as the significance of the site plan as a heuristic, analytical device, the sítio is not some disembodied field in Siza’s theory of pedagogy—if one can assume that this is what the drawings and the school are, I’d like to suggest they are. Site is earth, world, city; it is embodied and material, thick with tacit meaning, and latent communicative power: Siza seemingly cuts into what is in fact mounded-up, made ground at FAUP. An analogue of the rivet in the geology of Porto, albeit artfully faced with stone cladding, the piazzas in between the administration blocks and the studio houses is reminiscent of the granite wharfs in the quays of the old town. The long, lower structures to the north of the site house the pavilion in between the administration blocks and the studio houses, and imagine to make such a point playfully and with tact. The decorum of this mimetic creativity acts as an introduction to young architects to a not-so-secret world of imaginative possibilities; reminds us that all new architectural knowledge is one part of a living archive of ideas. A “project”, Siza claims, “is for the architect what the character of the novel is for an architect... but the project is a character with many authors, and it becomes intelligent only when it is dealt with like that, otherwise it becomes obsessive and impertinent. The project is the desire for intelligence.”

Despite the didactic elegance and precision of his prose, Álvar Siza insists that: “Here and there I read and heard that, as an architect, I lack a clear supporting theory. I agree.” Elsewhere, he contradicts the veracity of this assertion by insisting upon a theory of architecture that is exceptionally demanding, and somewhat paradoxical. “Architecture is the revelation of a hazily latent collective desire. This cannot be taught, but it is possible to learn to desire it.” He continues, “Therefore, architecture is risk and risk seeks impersonal desire and anonymity, from a merger of subjectivity and objectivity. In the last analysis, in a progressive distancing from the I. Architecture means commitment transformed into radical expression, in other words, a capacity to absorb the opposite and go beyond contradiction. To learn this requires teaching us to seek the Other within each of us.” He concludes, “Architecture is Art or it is not architecture.”

Despite Siza’s pretensions not to have “a clear supporting theory”, in his writing, and in particularly in his drawings and buildings, we are reminded of the ancient meaning of theory, which Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as a form of festive participation in his essay ‘What is Practice?’. Gadamer declares, “This is what the Greeks called theoria: to have been given away to something that in virtue of its overwhelming presence is accessible to all in common and that is distinguished in such a way that in contrast to all other goods it is not diminished by being shared and so is not an object of dispute like all other goods but actually gains through participation. In the end, this is the birth of the concept of reason: the more what is desirable is displayed for all in a way that is commingling to all, the more those involved discover themselves in this common reality: to that extent what is desirable needs to have read nor to have written theory in order to demonstrate it: and, just as paradoxically, art tends to both precede and yet to grow out of criticism – it is a form of discourse in itself, Siza’s architecture exhibits “Maturity and freshness, tradition and innovation, repetition and difference, continuity and contrast, discipline and freedom”, Carles Muro suggests, and this juxtaposition of opposites echoes...
Siza’s own declaration, cited by Muro in the Alvaro Siza: in/discipline catalogue: “Tradition is a challenge to innovation. It is made of successive grafts. I am a conservative and a traditionalist, that is to say, I move between conflicts, compromises, hybridisation, transformation.” Whilst Siza modestly claims to “lack a supporting theory”, this may be because his work (like Aalto’s) is a form of built architectural theory, a theory of participation where an imaginative architect, he claims: “draws what most impresses him and becomes, like all great creators, an ‘agent of cross fertilisation’ – the seed of transformation. What I mean by this”, Siza continues, further clarifying his professed non-theory, “is that by mastering proven models (the model is universal), he transforms them, as he introduces them into different, distorted realities, he also interbreeds them, uses them in a surprising and luminous way; strange objects that come to earth and then put down roots. The student building in Boston (1947) is an Aalto building and it is at the same time an American building.”

My contention is that at FAUP Siza seized the opportunity to embody his theoretical intuitions, in particular regarding the mimetic character of the architectural imagination, and that he sought to make this manifest in a spatial, and specifically spatially dramatic manner. At the western end of the site new students are introduced to the campus through a sort of open ruin of a portal. Externally, it is painted white like the rest of the architecture of the school, but is painted red inside (in imitation of a 19th century villa situated at the eastern end of the complex). Matriculating students pass through this gateway as a right of passage en masse, at the Architects’ Christening party each September, at the start of the new school year. Domestic scales abound within a taught civic framework; in the garden of the old villa the Carlos Ramos Pavilion (named after a former professor of Siza’s) unifies further a strong sense of historical and spatial continuity between older and newer designs. The “4th wall” of which is framed by a public garden loggia, an XXXXXX of fundamental construction principles: rough hewn stone columns tied to timber beams by twine, supporting vegetal growth. A minimal primitive gazebo; architecture year zero. Architectural history is recast as a matter of generations evolving from a familial past, the students occupying this background condition seemingly naturally, as if – in the pavilion building particularly – they have co-opted an existing structure, and made their home in it, in an act of audacious creative re-appropriation. The school becomes their home, Siza’s architecture their inheritance.

Rafael Moneo suggests that Siza has arranged his buildings at FAUP like characters on a stage, in a form of narrative post-modern architecture. The project is at once a portrait of the city and of its architecture, and its architects. Siza depicts FAUP’s famous architectural professors in the facades of the studio houses, linking architectural character to physiognomy in a profoundly erudite riff on Beaux-Arts theory. FAUP drips with the feel and sensations of Porto, it’s a profoundly exciting and strange place to visit, and works very well in all weathers. Even the plant room chimney is a lesson; a miniature, humorous footnote commemorating Aldo Rossi’s drawings of monumental industrial structures. The message is unmistakable: Read Architecture; Become aware of it; Dream of it; Love it; Quote from it; Steal it; Make it your own. Above all, the task remains “today”, Siza suggests, “to rediscover the magical strangeness, the singularity of obvious things.”
Tavora had less land and less money at Guimaraes, and was building a new school; and so his project is not as biographical as Siza's, nor is it necessarily a portrait of a city, but it is also a seriously playful and urban building. Tavora inherited a modern site, one dominated by cars, sat above a car park. His task was not to confine the city to a mythical landscape, but to also leave a sort of concrete one. Students learn about the emboldened, reciprocal character of spatiality and ground at Guimaraes, in an artificial, highly orchestrated interior world.

You enter up some steps, across a concrete bridge, above a scrappy inner-city area, to the end of which, rising before you, a long slender steeple rises past you. Its暨 locks and lettered halls are situated to your left as you enter the building, and a cafe welcomes you across the hallway, opening onto a small stone court beyond. Everything is, rather, so you feel immediately accustomed to the architecture. It is in summadie as to be almost banal—un-threatening, hospitable, almost exhilarating. Yet your eyes are drawn towards the culmination of the long hallway, at the end of which, rising before you, a long campus edge car park, beneath a thin porch held symmetrically at its corners. The ground plane, which is made up of an orange linoleum, rises and bathed in light falling from above. You are projected up towards the history of the architect's oeuvre. It is a sort of archetype of a room for learning, an artificial, highly orchestrated interior world.

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The ground plane, which is made up of an orange linoleum, rises suddenly in a bump, jumping from the bosal to the surmou in one jump cut. This little trick almost ups you up the act: the descent is进程中, physically challenging, frankly odd. White halsteles walls enclose a staircase, which gently and resolutely upwards, mastering the void beneath, and bathed in light falling from above. One is projected towards the floors above as if the ground below is being drawn up in an earthquake. It feels like being in a centrifugal force field, shot out of a cannon, across the hallway, opening onto a small stone court beyond. Everything is, rather, so you feel immediately accustomed to the architecture. It is in summadie as to be almost banal—un-threatening, hospitable, almost exhilarating. Yet your eyes are drawn towards the culmination of the long hallway, at the end of which, rising before you, a long campus edge car park, beneath a thin porch held symmetrically at its corners. The ground plane, which is made up of an orange linoleum, rises and bathed in light falling from above. You are projected up towards the history of the architect's oeuvre. It is a sort of archetype of a room for learning, an artificial, highly orchestrated interior world.

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