REFLECTIONS ON SIX DECADES OF SIZA

TOBY FRETTON

Siza's buildings are full of generous non-ritualistic lessons for architectural practice. The first-year studio at Porto School of Architecture shows how conventional building form and its relationship to surroundings can say extraordinary, experiential things. In the kindergarten at Penafiel the exterior moves with all the power and ingenuity of a Henry Moore sculpture. Its exterior forms and its interior functions and sequences are uneasily sensitive to a child's way of being. A new piece of city is made in Quinta da Malagueira in Évora with exceptional skill and conviction from just the form and imagery of infrastructure and row housing and their subtle relations to the surrounding terrain. Before these came the public swimming pool on the beach at Lagoa da Palmeira (below). The pool is formed between the rocks next to the sea and its boundaries are skilfully cut in concrete in a way that links them to a similarly made shipping dock seen across the bay. The state of mind that brings you to the pool is changed by descending below the road, through dark changing rooms to emerge more naked before entering the pool, where you co-exist with the creatures on the other side of the rocks in the polychromed sea. Through simple pleasures a massive holistic statement is made about architecture's capability to reconcile human folly and the need to live optimistically.

PIER VITTORIO AURELI

Quinta da Malagueira is perhaps the last great "social housing project". That is, it is the last great architectural contribution to the city in which architecture plays a fundamental role. In the last 40 years there has been a split between architecture as form and its political role. Not that architecture is no longer political: today it is more political than ever but rarely in an explicit or intentional way. What is unique about Quinta da Malagueira is that formal principles and political intentions seem to come together as one project. Conceived with exceptional momentum, it was built after the '74 revolution, when workers' councils addressed the condition of housing in Portugal as their main political priority. And just as the housing blocks built by the Social Democratic municipality in Vienna from 1919 to 1984 - the so-called "Red Vienna" - found their archetypal form in the architecture of the courtyard block (the "hof"), the political agenda of the SAAL brigades found its pertinent architectural resolution in Siza's architecture. In Quinta da Malagueira the memory of ancient Roman architecture and the Spartan logic of Modernist housing had their last desperate flirtations meeting. Indeed its most striking (and contradictory) formal qualities are its ritualistic spaces and abstract image. Think of the typological reference to the atrium and courtyard on the one hand, and the relentless simplicity of the settlement principle on the other.

PETER ST JOHN

It's difficult to describe the importance of Álvaro Siza's architecture in a few words because his work is so subtle and witty, and his interpretations have many layers of meaning. While his buildings always communicate with their context, they are so commanding of these matters as to achieve something else, abstract and deeply moving. Ultimately it is all about form, abstract and figurative, and in this he is masterful. I never tire of his work, despite the number of his projects and the scale of production. Unlike other famous architects, he's always doing things that are useful to society, showing how to do the most ordinary of buildings as well as the grand ones. His work has a sincerity that is hopeful, open-ended in its view of the world, capable of forming relationships with the most episodic or discontent situations. I'm talking about the interruptions, mistakes and banality in the city that we all ignore, but that in his hands can become the catalyst for a delicate web.

In our first substantial building for the New Art Gallery Walsall we were thinking about this. We wanted to make a building with an image that was both grand and unstable, that stood among the melancholic remains of the town's former industrial estate, talking to these disparate things and reflecting some of their dignity. This idea is in all our work. I like to think, and in this we were influenced by Álvaro Siza's example.

JONATHAN WOOLF

An introduction to Siza's work came unexpectedly when as a 19-year-old visiting Évora, I happened upon his patio mat housing, still under construction. Seeing this vast white orthogonal field extending out into the barren landscape and only partly inhabited, I was not sure what to make of it, so I bowed overweighed that something so vast could still be inhabitable. Returning last year with my own students that feeling came flooding back.

Siza's capacity to work meaningfully within a wide range of settings and building types is neither adolescent nor predictable. His gift for observation regarding the nature of a place, to absorb what may at first appear insignificant things here or there, and recast them into an emotionally resonant proposal of authenticity, this is part of his significant contribution to architecture today and one that still influences me. It is an approach that embraces doubt and remains radical. In 2004 in London he came to see my Brick Leaf House (below). I was struck by his energy and enthusiasm and asked how he moved between building private houses for the wealthy to making social housing: "Flying making houses for people for whom money is of no great consequence one is more able to make decisions on behalf of people who do not have such a say in what they can have."

KENNETH ST JOHN

Siza is a master and, considering myself an attentive apprentice, I'd admit to admiring at least three aspects of his aesthetic fluency:

- Site geometry: evidence of Siza's mastery emerged early with a pair of coastline projects, sited close together just outside Porto, the Box Nova tea house and the swimming pool at Leça. It's impossible to discuss these works without describing their sites: the architecture is inextricable from its situation. His poetic understanding of the environmental conditions only reveals itself through our spatial experience of the built reality.

- Line drawing: Siza thinks his projects out through drawing. Each drawing is a step in the thought process, a stage in the discovery of architectural form. Line drawings are his distinctive handwriting, swift and continuous, inclusive of passing thoughts and contemplative in their focused concentration. He turns a building over in his mind's eye, and examines little details from different perspectives. Drawing seems to help him see around corners.

- Supple volume: I've seen the church at Marco de Canaveses a couple of times. I've not yet been to Brazil or Korea, but I'd guess those three quite different works share something of the same surprising feeling of integration between internal volume and external form; the elbow bends circulation galleries in and out of the Camargo Foundation in Brazil, the bowing wall and long-cut window inside Marco de Canaveses, the tightly sweeping cut-out courtyard curves of the Minosa Museum in Korea. Siza's buildings invite us to move more alertly through space, keeping our eyes wide open all around.

WILLIAM MANN

Álvaro Siza's buildings have an economy of means, a nimble opportunism and a considered generosity. What is remarkable is that he has sustained a quality of reflection and eng, over six decades. His work is grounded in an understanding of the complex relation between people and buildings - the small gestures that invite occupation, the shifts of architectural culture.

In such a rich and engaging body of work, the social housing projects are easy to overlook - but rewarding to look into. It doesn't photograph particularly well but I was captivated by the Schlickstein housing in the Hague (below). It's crafted clever, economical and fantastically perceptive about living in the city, at a moment of profound change.

Évora is a very sophisticated bit of urbanism, in its relation to the topography to the existing informal settlements, structuring role of the services 'superspace'. He was commissioned separately for the houses and for the urban plan, and you feel his command of both scales. Really plan entirely composed of individual housing in the context of a heartily Marxist poli environment, in conditions of material scarcity, was so act of genial radicality a product of both his eminence and s