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Autor: Siza, Álvaro

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EXPERIENCE AND UNCERTAINTIES in conversation with ... Álvaro Siza

Our taxi driver already knows where to drop us off when we mention Álvaro Siza Vieira's name (doing our best to pronounce the address properly and only ending up with incomprehensibly mumbled syllables). At Rua do Aleixo a tiny steel door leads us to incredibly steep stairs and a deadly silent garden. We face a multistory building, white and bold, as if forgotten by time. Entering the house through the side entrance, we find ourselves on a dimly illuminated and entirely sober staircase—pure, white, unnamed doors on every floor, filled with concentrated silence. While waiting in the spacious entrance hall under the slight haze of cigarette smoke we hear Álvaro Siza's low voice behind stacks of models and paper. Heavy wooden chairs, stony floors and the warm, smooth Portuguese sunlight make it feel more like coming home than visiting an architecture office.

trans magazine (tm): Mr. Siza, over the last few decades you have established a diverse oeuvre, not only in Porto but internationally. Nevertheless, your projects always seem to be highly related to their specific sites. They speak of a deep understanding of landscape, city, its inhabitants and culture. How do you approach an architectural project, its space and locality?

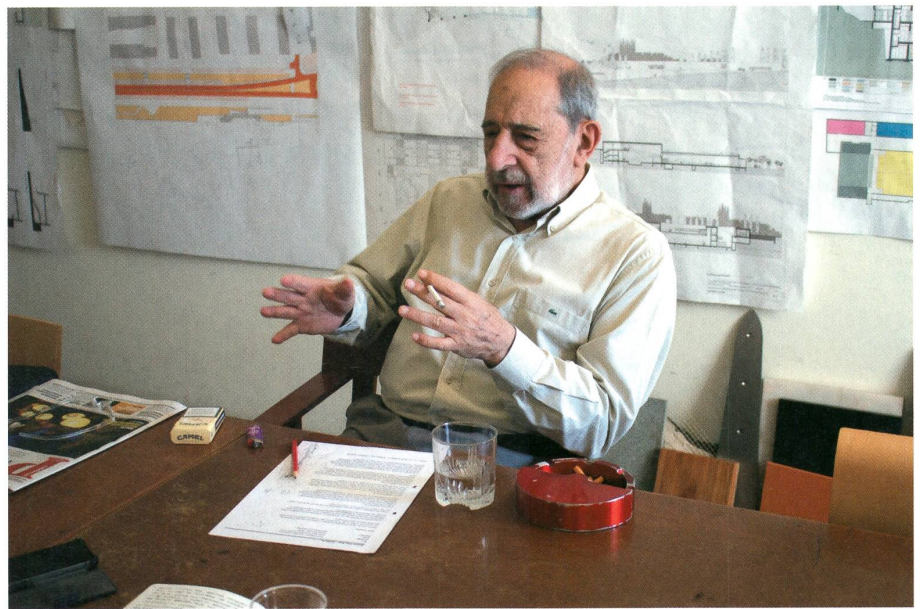
Álvaro Siza Vieira (as): (lights a cigarette using Samuel's 'stay calm and keep the swag' lighter) Usually there is a promoter, someone who wants to build the project. He comes to invite us; he wants to know the architects. He comes to me and says: I want to do this—would you accept? And if we have the time, and are interested in the project—or if we need money—we accept. This first meeting is important, because this person makes an impression on us. I usually ask for the problem or the objective, and for the site. We visit the site and ask a lot of questions to clarify what the objective is. Visiting the site gives us another

impression of the project. The further it is from my studio and my landscape, the more stimulating it is. That's why I also like working outside of Portugal. We need stimulation—ideas. The idea comes from the site, the landscape or the surrounding buildings. If we don't know the city, it can also come from the atmosphere, from the people that live there. I begin with sketches, even if they land in the garbage afterwards. For me, it's very important to have a materialised idea. It is important to make it appear as a real thing. I usually follow many different hypotheses and start to exclude one after the other. I can do this with very little information, based on the impressions I mentioned before. So I begin with sketches, because sketches are very quick and very intuitive. I start by making a model and sketches of the site, or photos eventually, but I don't like them that much because you have to concentrate too much on a surface. Subsequently, you lose the perception of the whole. With the sketch you can do this very quickly. I immediately engage with the topography and the landscape—the surroundings and the whole town. What's very important—is having more conversations with the people involved.

I begin to reduce the doubts about what I have to do. It is one of my very basic convictions. Doubt is a fundamental part of us. You have to remove the doubts and concentrate on the uncertain items. That's when the first rigorous drawings are made. I propose different solutions just to exclude the uncertainties, until there is only one left I consider to be the least uncertain one.

tm: Are these first sketches of the landscape as well as material and construction, or are they more abstract?

as: Sketches and appointments are written, so they cannot be abstract. I begin with the idea,



the volume of the building which doesn't have to be very accurate.

tm: You once said that architects do not invent anything, they transform reality.

as: Yes, I think so. Architecture is always a problem of relations. The impressions you have from what already exists are very important in developing a new idea. What does being an architect mean? It's learning to see and to know things. Whether you like it or not, you have here (points to his head) a lot of things you've seen. When I began studying, Portugal was a very closed country. We didn't have many references, and there were very few possibilities for someone without a rich family to go traveling. Students had very little information, unless you were the son of an architect. It was completely different. Traveling has now become normal. And there's also the Internet. You have a lot of information all at once. You are not concentrated on the work of a single architect but you have the option to see that and that and that and that (waving around his cigarette and the swag-firelighter). We are not able to name the origin of an idea anymore. Everything is subconscious and it comes to help us when it is needed. It has happened that someone, some critic commented on the «reference» I used for a project. And sometimes I have to admit, yes, it is true, I never thought of that, but he's right. So it's part of a large complex of referencing. That's what being an architect is.

tm: Do you think we should also use references that are not of architectural projects?

as: Of course. There is a big relation between architecture and the things that you have seen. It's not by chance that many well-known directors studied architecture. A lot of them—Antonioni, Losey—were highly interested in architecture because they share a common

stimulus and references to different activities. Music, literature, ballet, ... I don't see these things as fragments (or independent fragments) with borders or specialities. Today, there is this obsession with specialisation. An architect not only knows about architecture. These human activities are a whole. (casually lights another cigarette)

tm: So architecture not only refers to architecture itself, but also to other disciplines, or even sub-disciplines. In a way geometry is one of those more universal phenomena that might be used in many different arts or, as you call them, human activities.

as: Yes. We studied geometry in school and it is evidently fundamental. I learnt it using pen and paper. Today you can use your computer, and it offers solutions for everything. The reason for the spacial complexity that architecture has today is because of the efficiency of computers.

tm: How do you apply the principles of geometry to architecture?

as: I usually use geometry—modulation, axes—to control the development of the project. I use it to avoid monstrosities.

tm: So not in the beginning of a designing process; you use it while designing.

as: Yes. I use an almost instinctive approach. I'm always giving much space to imagination; free imagination. And this imagination is accompanied by the control of geometry for me. I don't use computers personally—it's just too late for me. I get dispassionate with them. Everybody uses computers in my office except two others who are also in my age. You know, I am used to putting an idea onto paper in a second (energetically sketches on a piece of paper). When I sit next to my collaborator in

front of a computer and say «try this, try this, try this,» it takes a lot of time. I have to wait and they tell me «It's difficult, you have to wait.» And then it comes, and we wait again. And I ask: «what's going on?» And they say «It takes time». But of course it is my own limitation. It doesn't matter, I have twenty of them. (laughing)

tm: So it is not about the tool in a design process, it is about the clarity of thinking.

as: Yes. But in the beginning it is very seldom that the ideas are clear. That's why the role of doubts is very important. Because when you think an idea is clear it is evident that you put aside many other ideas you could have had. You put aside a lot of research you could have done. Step by step, we have to gain clear control of the project we have developed. But it is not immediate. You have to try this, and this, and this; you have to put things aside, aside, aside. But all the things you put out will influence you as well. Sometimes you are not conscious of it, but since you set it aside, it stays in your mind as well.

tm: You were speaking of the influence of the Internet and the enormous amount of references we have today. Would you say it is more important to know how to choose which reference is valuable?

as: It's not a question of choosing. It comes to your work naturally. It is all in your mind and some suggestions come from your subconscious. It's not a process of choosing. The more you visit, the more you experiment, the more efficient your thoughts about the project will be. Visiting other cities is very important for your architecture but also for your personality.

tm: So the process of designing is somehow driven by intuition.

as: But intuition comes with knowledge. What you call intuition is based on knowledge that is so plural that it is mixed in your subconscious. When I say architects do not invent, I mean that what is an invention, what is new, has many connections.

tm: It is a composition of what you already know.

as: It is a concentration, of what I already know and what I am learning day by day. When I visit architecture I try not to categorise it; this building is interesting because of this aspect or this aspect. Of course there are things that impress me more than others, but there are many details you didn't note and you'll remember anyway.

tm: How do we learn from our own projects?

as: Of course, the experiences we gather have an important influence on the way we think about architecture. But I do not think that experience is the most important part. On the other hand, a lack of experience leads to stronger stimulus or, let's say, appetite. There is a balance between experience and the appropriation of the new. When you begin practicing in the field of architecture you're of course lacking experience. But it is not the only way to enlarge your idea of what architecture is.

tm: Regarding your oeuvre one of your early projects was the Boa Nova Restaurant which was built in the late 50s. In the mid-60s, you were commissioned to design the Leca da Palmeira Swimming Pool. Both projects are located at the coastline of Matosinhos near Porto—along the Avenida da Liberdade. After the fall of the Salazar regime in 1974, the country assimilated to Europe and the Western world, which evoked profound changes not only in terms of politics but also in terms of economy. Within this process of reorganising and repositioning the country, many large scale projects were abandoned. One of these is your master plan for the Avenida da Liberdade from 1973 which has not been finalized. You are talking about an equivalency between experience and curiosity. Prior to this you also mentioned the increasing tendency towards specialisation which leads to the question of how the way of gathering experience has changed within the last few decades.

as: This is a very interesting point in our conversation regarding your previous questions, because when I made my first project—the tea house—I was twenty-five. So I didn't have any experience. I had only built three small houses in smaller towns. But I had no experience. I hadn't even finished studying. In that time this was possible. There wasn't much bureaucracy, there were less declarations, less regulations—for good and for bad. But what I could do was to talk to the workers, the craftsmen. They were all great artisans. At the end of the 50s,

there was still a lot handcraft in Portugal. We could go to the construction site and speak to the carpenter—he taught me many things. That's what's missing today with this bureaucratic system and the established hierarchies and borders. I first noticed this problem in Berlin when I visited a site (in the 80s, ed.) and tried to speak to the workers on site. He just told me that they would build this differently in Berlin. So I had to explain and finally he agreed with me. As I went back to the office, the construction manager called me, furious. He told me that talking to the workers is prohibited. Things have changed. And today, many times you do not have any contact with the workers, because they are organized in teams, contracted by the owner.

When I made the Boa Nova, you could also visit the works easily. I had a very good carpenter. I could speak to him so I began with what I wished to do and we tried to find solutions together. There was no problem with my lack of experience because we had this human connection. Everybody liked what he was doing—that seemed very important. Then I made the Swimming Pool. For the arrangement of the coastal road, it was the mayor who came to me. It was also the beginning of tourism in the north of Portugal. It was not only the road but also the surrounding terrain which was completely free at the time. So I made a plan with proposals for these empty areas. It was a lot about landscaping. But then there was a strong change in Portugal, the revolution in 1974, so this mayor wasn't in charge anymore. The beginning of the new democratic regime was very confusing. The next mayor didn't consider the plan, they forgot the plan. Instead, they covered the empty spaces with buildings—a very bad master plan, bad architecture, a disaster. When I go there it makes me sad. Much later—in the 80s, I think—a mayor came to me to commission the arrangement of the road and the immediate surrounding. But that was very limited. Now it is even worse. It has gone wild. (cigarette)

tm: When talking about those different steps in your career, I wonder whether you sometimes visit your own projects. Are you interested in the impact your finished works have? For example the Tea House?

as: I can tell you, I didn't visit the Tea House for maybe twenty five years after its opening. It was opened in 1962, the project started in 1958. It took a lot of time. After years of neglect they asked me to rearrange the tea house. It was only refurbishment. As I entered the building I saw many things that I didn't like. The roof for instance. Whilst looking around I thought I have to remove that. And that. And that. And I have to change that also. I discovered that many changes had been made by another architect: the «young Álvaro Siza». I understood that, if I would change one thing, I would have to change everything. So I decided to do a very soft refurbishment. Recently, the

municipality, which owns the building, left the building empty for one year. So the building got robbed of the copper. They even took the tiles. Water entered the house and so on. Vandalism. But I managed to remake it. I spoke to old artisans about how to restore the wooden parts damaged by the water. The Swimming Pool is also badly cared for. And now they asked me to plan an intervention. The problem is not the swimming pool as it is. The problem is the beach bars with all the wild behavior! But they won't change this.

I am happy to fix those buildings but it is very annoying and difficult. It is difficult to work on a project that I worked on 50 years ago. So usually I do not visit projects after they have been finished. I am afraid of finding them badly changed. There seems to be no respect for the rights of a house. So I prefer not to go. Very few buildings are well cared for. Even the pavilion in Lisbon. It is empty and degraded. They didn't even decide what to use the building for. First there were governmental offices, then it was a cultural center, a museum. Then there was a private owner who wanted to use the building for his art collection. The government barred him from doing so—they wanted to have it for public use. Now it is empty. (cigarette)

tm: Portugal suffers from an ongoing economic crisis, whereas the eastern parts of Asia are booming. Your office has projects in China for example. Do you approach these new territories differently? And do you always take part in every project that is done in your office?

as: Of course. I design them. I have many people in my office, but I am the author. Its true, I hardly ever have projects in Portugal nowadays. Many architects went away, to Switzerland, or England, or France. Many others went to southeastern Asia. Many others emigrated. My projects in China, are in collaboration with a younger architect who has his office just on the other side of the river. (Carlos Castanheira, ed.) I will go there this afternoon (pointing to a project on the wall just behind us). This is our latest project in Asia. (Shihlien Chemical Plant, Jiangsou Province, China, ed.) The water is the reserve for a huge industrial park. They produce silica. So they asked me to do a design in the water. And I said ok, I will do this. It is an office building. An enormous industry. It is built very well. I went there seven times but since three years I've been avoiding going there. My colleague flies there every one and a half months. It is the only way to control the site. And the client is very good. The project is done in white concrete; very well executed. One more project in China is amazing. It is for the university in the same town. They bought a complete Bauhaus collection from Berlin. Now they need a building for this collection. They have everything: glasses, furniture, and so on. Original products. Imagine how much they paid. (lights another cigarette) I know that many times



China is very difficult because they do not respect the projects. They change them. But my experience is completely different. Everything is projected in Porto, then Castanheira goes there many times. They are interested in the project so they won't change it. Everything is good because the owners are good.

tm: So you still know the owners personally?

as: Yes, of course. They treat us like kings. When I arrive, I go to the Hotel with Castanheira who always accompanies me. And at the reception they say to me: «Mr. Siza, you have a masseur waiting.» They know that I have problems with my back and send a masseur. (laughs) I am already joking around.

Álvaro Siza, born 1933, in Matosinhos, a small coastal town near Porto. He graduated in architecture in 1955, at the former School of Fine Arts of the University of Porto, the current FAUP – Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto. He completed his first built work (four houses in Matosinhos) even before ending his studies in 1954, the same year that he first opened his private practice in Porto.

The conversation was held in his office in Porto, and was conducted by Samuel Aebersold and Sibil Hofer for trans Magazin.