

THE RIGHT TO BEAUTY: INTERVIEW WITH ÁLVARO SIZA

PIERRE-ALAIN CROSET: Since this is a journal that deals with architecture and philosophy, let's talk about some more general issues. I would like to start with a fond memory, the first time we spoke at length, in the autumn of 1981, when you, Álvaro, were an invited professor at the EPFL in Lausanne. I had just started working with Vittorio Gregotti on the design of the new *Casabella* the previous summer: the first issue, published in March 1982, featured the project for the Quinta da Malagueira in Évora as the main project. When you design, there is always a story; when you draw, it is as if you are telling a story.

ÁLVARO SIZA: I remember that when the SAAL, in which I had worked for two years, was abolished, I was left without a job, because all those who had worked for the SAAL were subsequently marginalised. I received this invitation from the Mayor of Évora, a fantastic person; I accepted and went, although I did not know Évora very well, nor the site, an old abandoned agricultural estate. One of the aims of the general urban plan for Évora, drawn up by the architects in charge, including Nuno Portas, was to abolish the previous project, which included seven-storey buildings that blocked the view of the centre of Évora, yet a small part of which had already been built. It was a 25-hectare plot of land, slightly sloping, abandoned, with a watercourse that they wanted to preserve, which crossed the land diagonally, arriving very close to the centre of Évora, a centre that was well preserved, given that the Alentejo had a sparse population, and which still had its medieval wall. The aim was to build low-cost housing, mainly for members of the cooperative; the only guidelines were to design buildings of only two storeys, to ensure views of the historic centre, to keep costs down, of course, and to provide the necessary facilities for the residences. I made the first visit, of which there is a sketch published by *Casabella*, where I can be seen in the middle of the area, looking towards the ancient city. But in addition to the programme,

which included many seemingly identical houses, I was confronted with an abandoned building, and this worried me greatly. As architects always do, I wondered where to start and what to do, like writers who wonder how to begin when faced with a blank page and no idea what to write. I did not want to be in that void, and I tried to look for the differences.

ANDREA CANCLINI: You started looking for traces.

ÁS: Yes, I found a little undulation of the land, then the view towards the city, then a rock here, a rock there, a tree here, a tree there, little things, and then next to the area there was a road with small squatter buildings. Little, very little, but it was beginning to work: after all, that was the basis for starting on that blank sheet of paper. Then, as happens in SAAL projects, I started talking to the cooperativists, an old association of neighbours. In the meetings, the traditional typology was considered, not for its language, but for the organisation of the houses, which could evolve over time. The discussion was very lively, we talked about the equipment they needed, about the relationship with the city, and so we began to develop the project. The questions I wanted to start with were how to make the houses, how to associate and organise this sequence of 1,200 dwellings. The solution came from a visit I made to Pompeii: it was a revelation. I had to make the same number of dwellings as in the previous solution, and when I visited Pompeii, I saw these dense clusters of small houses, one or two storeys, following the undulations of the terrain. Then the starting point was that this abandoned area was no longer a desert: I had found the character of this place, which was no longer the emptiness it had seemed to me on my first visit.

AC: Your attention has always been directed towards the interior of the discipline of architecture, without ever attempting, as has often been done, to intellectualise the profession by seeking external references; or rather, for you, the intellectualisation of the profession has always been an effort directed towards the interior of the architectural project.

ÁS: There are so many who concentrate their work on theorising, sometimes this is done in the writing of project reports, so many are not even architects, not out of incompetence, but because of concentration; this is very common today, everywhere. I like to write, except that everything I have written is in direct relation to the project, but not as its structure.

AC: Sometimes writing say things that drawing cannot.

ÁS: Yes, there is a line of great theoretical critics of architecture. There is Bruno Zevi, there is Vittorio Gregotti, there is Kenneth Frampton, but basically there are only a few.

PAC: You have always cultivated relationships with the other arts: sculpture, visual arts, literature, poetry, but you have rarely spoken of your relationship with philosophy or philosophers, or whether you have read much philosophy.

ÁS: In Portuguese secondary school there was some teaching of philosophical disciplines, but it was not very strong, so it passed me by a bit.

MILOŠ ĆIPRANIĆ: In one conversation¹ you say that you have tried several times to read books on the history of philosophy and that you have never managed to finish any of them, always stopping with the ancient Greeks.

ÁS: Well, first, it is a shortcoming of mine, which I can explain a little in the following way. As I said, in high school here in Portugal there is philosophy as a subject, but when I took the course at the right time, it was very... how shall I put it... not well curated. The teaching was much more related to mathematics or Portuguese than to philosophy, and when the teacher went through the history of philosophy, it always ended in the eighteenth, early nineteenth century. There was no time to go further. So, I have very little training in that aspect, and perhaps that's why I've never been deeply interested in it. When I talk about the Greeks, it is not deep knowledge, but it is a proximity to the richness and so many mentions of Greek art and Greek philosophy throughout history that is almost irresistible. But it is not really deep knowledge.

AC: What about poetry, literature or music?

ÁS: Yes, poetry, literature and even music obviously have a lot to do with architecture. In philosophy, however, there is a need for a structured construction of knowledge. In my personal self-education, there is my poor philosophical training, and when the architectural debate touches on

¹ Á. Siza, J. M. Hernández León, *Una conversación*, Abada Editores, Madrid, 2021.

philosophical issues, I feel a kind of inadequacy. I feel closer to disciplines that belong to the same family as architecture, that share the same means, the same tools of work, of implementation, activities that are very close, like music. Music has rhythm.

AC: And symmetry, and harmony.

ÁS: And rest, silence, noise: all characteristics that also inhabit architectural space. Then the reference is automatic, it comes without thinking, a functional relationship is established in my mind. The same thing happens in cinema: for example, in terms of paths, as in architecture, directors also do long tracking shots, and then a pause, it's the same. Or you go under a low ceiling and immediately find a high one, or vice versa; all this is found in architecture, and it is also found in music.

MĆ: Architecture and music can be considered sisters; you love jazz, has this music genre influenced your architectural practice? Do you listen to jazz when you are designing, planning or thinking about a particular object?

ÁS: When I draw, no, I don't listen to music in the office, like many people do in front of the computer with headphones, it would be a Babel, when I work, I don't listen to music because there are always so many demands: the drawing, the telephone, visits, interviews...! There is no room for music. But at night, at home, yes, I listen to a lot of music, and a lot of jazz, because jazz has this combination that is very important for us architects, and that is that it has a great spontaneity and freshness, but also a solid structure. It is not by chance that today jazz has conquered the whole world and has become universal. Brazilian music, for example, with its links to Africa and slavery, arrived here in Portugal as a mixture with a great and irresistible vocation to express itself; when jazz recognised these qualities, Jobim did the other way round and looked for them in jazz. I still listen to Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and others.

SNEŽANA VESNIĆ: What does architectural concept mean to you? How would you define it?

ÁS: It is the result of analysing and studying all the problems involved in the project.

PETAR BOJANIĆ: I would like to ask you a question about the problem of innovation. In the text “Projecting” you write that no one “ever invents or copies” anything. In the text the verb invent is put in quotation marks, which is very significant. If architects do not invent, but only transform reality, emphasising the role of tradition as a challenge, how can we think or create the new in architecture?

ÁS: With the exception of a few very special historical moments, innovation comes from what exists, from attention to what exists, and is transformed; what exists is not just a form, but a force in the dynamics of society, and therefore comes from what exists, or something in between what exists.

AC: It is precisely about accepting the objectivity of reality in your projects, the necessity that this reality imposes on you; it is a dialectical relationship, if you like, with innovation or originality, which is always a dialogue between necessity and creation. This ability to maintain the complexity of reality in the project seems to me to be a fundamental datum of your activity.

ÁS: Yes, imagination in a vacuum is not in my capacity, I think I have no imagination. I have this attention to reality, to what exists, to history, to the past. For me it is more a need than anything else, because otherwise I am inactive.

PAC: There is a dimension of dynamism in your drawings, in your sketches. You said earlier that you are always transforming, and so your drawing is always in motion. You often use sketches to imagine stories, and they are sketches of architecture and landscape, always populated by figures, people, angels, animals, plants.

ÁS: What distinguishes the sketch from other means of expression is that it is so important to me, more important than to other architects, because it is very quick, it is done in seconds, and it is very elastic, and it is always possible to modify it, and therefore both in certain initial phases and throughout the project, sometimes even during the construction, the sketch allows me to accompany what I think in reaction to what happens, what I experience. The sketch is very quick and always retains its function, like a support, ideally until the last stone of a building is laid. The

computer, which dominates architectural practice today, fragments the process: it is very fast, but it is slow, actually. I remember spending a few months at Harvard, where there was a discipline dedicated to studying the possibilities and the evolution of the use of computers, always with this idea of invention. But in the end, this variability or flexibility is perhaps already present in the sketch.

AYA JAZAIERLY: Frampton, referring to a conversation with you, congratulated you on a project telling you that you must be very happy, and you replied: “How can I be happy if Europe has no project?”

ÁS: True, and it is even more true today. I remember this conversation that took place a long time ago, and today it is even worse. Architecture in Europe is suffering from a campaign that tends to make architecture something useless, inconvenient, traditionally reserved for people, but which no longer counts for anything. The architect is portrayed as a capricious, inconvenient and useless professional. It’s terrible, and you don’t see any reaction from architects, either individually or from the professional associations, everyone in Europe is in this state. In Portugal, there are no copyrights, there is no direct control or authority over construction; the last straw is that, by law, all public works are decided by competition between contractors, not between architects, so it is the contractors who make the choice: faced with this situation, we do not see the necessary reaction from the professional boards of architects.

PAC: If you are trained as an architect and love architecture, you cannot just work on projects. An architect must also go to the places of power, in politics, in real estate, in commissioning. Think of Nuno Portas, who was also an important minister in Portugal: an architect can also act at high decision-making levels and defend the value of architecture.

ÁS: Access to politics is difficult, because politics is only accessible through parties, and even there, this idea of architects as capricious, used to working for popes and kings, forgetting everything that allowed for the expansion of modern architecture, which has nothing to do with that, but has to do with social housing.

MĆ: In the text “On Education,” you define architecture as a collective art, while elsewhere you describe the creative process as an act of

depersonalisation. If architecture is a collective art and creation is an act of depersonalisation, then the position of the architect in relation to the project he is working on is very complex.

ÁS: Yes, it is complex, but the architect is potentially very capable, because today it is necessarily interdisciplinary work: the architect cannot dominate everything, in terms of the complexity of the construction, because if they do, there will be no time for architecture. They nevertheless, have a very important role to play, which has to do with the whole process, it has to do with all this complexity, it has to do with coordination, with the fact of collaborating and debating with others, with specialists, with all those who have to do with the construction, with approval. This is the nourishment of the architect, who, one could say, has a great deal of freedom despite reduced general knowledge. I think it is this complexity of the disciplinary environment that gives the architect the nourishment for invention.

PAC: Which brings us back to the cinema, or the conductor.

AC: And perhaps it is this lack of specialisation that allows this freedom.

ÁS: Yes, what is important is that the architect is the specialist of not being a specialist, it is the basis of this need for specialisation and design put together, it is a liberation other than spontaneous or offered freedom, it is a constructed liberation, through all relationships. The ultimate meaning or reason for being an architect, I believe, is beauty. All these specialisations do not deal with beauty: beauty is not something that comes down from heaven, beauty comes from construction and the articulation of needs, this is the bread and butter of architecture today. The need for quality from the point of view of comfort, maintenance, etc., comes from these different disciplines, but the rendering, what unites all this in the most complete, coordinated and correct form, that is the task of architecture.

MĆ: In the foreword to a book about the impact of the built environment on the mental health and well-being of children and young people,² you mention the issue of “the right to beauty.” You argue that beauty is

² P. Strecht, *Uma certa harmonia: notas sobre arquitetura, urbanismo e saúde mental infanto-juvenil*, Assirio & Alvim, Lisboa, 2001.

not about luxury, but about functionality. You also mention Plato in this foreword. You believe that the beauty of architectural forms is a quality that should be available to everyone. Everyone has a right to beauty.

ÁS: Yes, what I mean is that I combine beauty with functionality. I say that beauty is the ultimate in functionality, they are not opposites. There are people who think that beauty is something extra, that it is somehow a luxury, and that is not the case. I often think about what it was like to talk about modern architecture in the twenties and thirties, in its development, in its awakening, in what was the main theme that was portrayed, which was social housing, quality architecture for everyone, including beauty, because it is beautiful architecture. In a city like Berlin today, the most important part in terms of quality is social housing, with architects like Mies van der Rohe, Gropius and the great Bruno Taut, who built more than all the others put together. So this idea, which is very much in the air today, that architects are expensive and that they are an unnecessary luxury, is historically untrue: it's not just a mistake, it's a lie.

Interview conducted by Andrea Canclini, Aya Jazaierly, Miloš Čipranić, Petar Bojanić, Pierre-Alain Croset, and Snežana Vesnić.