

Desperately Seeking Siza

A conversation with Alvaro Siza Vieira

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Introduction

There is not much that is definitive about Alvaro Siza except for his favourite brand of Portuguese cigarettes. After a career to date of four decades of unbroken activity, he is now among the select group of most acclaimed master builders of our time; yet he has always remained remarkably modest both in his pronouncements about architecture and in the claims he makes for himself. While nobody would deny his extraordinary professional skill and while the ease he displays in projects of every scale is universally admired, Siza remains someone who does not put on airs about how unique he is. On the contrary, in his numerous interviews he continues to define his role emphatically as being that of someone who does no more than transform something that already exists. To quote his own words, 'Architects don't invent anything; they transform reality. They work continuously with models which they transform in response to the problems which they encounter'. The critical role in international architectural practice that is attributed to him is not expressed in any stated programme; his appeal lies more in his subtle approach to the trade, to his materials and to the social context of his work. One feature that is always present is a notion of frozen conflict. In practice this means a process in which all the elements, architectural and otherwise, are allotted their place in all their integrity, almost always in 'innocent' white or in the natural colour of the surrounding environment. This is true of the Bouça dwellings in Oporto where the little aisle that is so typical of the normal working class housing in Oporto is preserved with its proportions unchanged while at the same time a transformation has been introduced that makes the flats a pleasure to live in. The same goes for the apartment building that Siza designed in the Kreuzberg neighbourhood in Berlin where a typical gloomy tenement block has been turned into a once-off statement by the foreign 'author' and is imbued with his charisma. No matter what the project, Siza concentrates both on ensuring that the paradoxes inherent in the commission are given free play, while at the same time highlighting the frozen semblance of a consensus based on the local conventions he is confronted with. When these conventions suit him so, as for instance in the Punt en Komma project in The Hague, the result is small-scale context-based works that always seem to say 'yes' to the conditions that gave rise to them. In Berlin, however, the context and the point of departure have a negative historical content: here Siza's architecture would seem to say 'no', however much as a designer he would rather not admit it. Modernism functions here as a mask to express an infinite sadness, something that graffiti artists have in fact immortalised in the facade: bonjour tristesse. Those who have not had the chance to visit any of Siza's buildings, or who have only seen a few of them, will have to make do with Siza the critic if they want to come to a proper assessment of his critical approach. Siza himself will in any case not be of much help, concerned as he is with seeing that fine craftsmanship gets maximum play. Concern about what people think of his work has no place here. To put it concretely, Siza's concrete architecture is all that Siza cares about; Siza's echo is the domain of his admirers. If you want the architect, you'll come across him in the endearing interiors of the prospective occupants of his buildings, sometimes caught off his guard as he draws a Corbusier-type sketch; or else you'll see him travelling somewhere between here and eternity. But you'll rarely, if ever, see him in the

frontline of his own exegesis. All the same, we cannot say that Siza refuses to have anything at all to do with his fans. He has already given many interviews; in the lounge of a Maastricht hotel, enveloped in a cloud of schlager music, he was pleased to pass the time of night with us and to talk about the work of the architect and the role of criticism. We did not understand how so pragmatic a person as Siza, who takes the world as he sees it, could at the same time be such a great artist. He reminds one of Picasso who once said with apparent nonchalance, 'I don't seek, I find'. In the meantime he continues to astonish his public with these apparently random works. Right from the start we have to admit it: we are still none the wiser.

You have become quite famous in recent years and many people are thinking about your work, even people who haven't actually visited your buildings. Are you satisfied with the current discourse?

In people's criticism of my work I often recognise the mental process that I have gone through myself during the design stage. When that's the case, I'm delighted to have been understood, of course. It can also happen that critics notice things that on the whole I was not aware of myself when I was designing a building, but which with hindsight are very plausible. These are the criticisms that I learn the most from. But it happens just as often that I read pieces that seem to use my work only as a pretext to write something.

Your projects have been effusively described in masses of publications throughout the world. Your work is fairly often used as a sort of touchstone by critics who praise your approach as being exemplary. They discuss your work, your reputation, your method and your personal signature; doesn't this machinery of criticism have some impact on you?

No. Of course I keep up with it, that's just part of my work. But that doesn't mean that it is all of equal importance for my real work which is designing. A good example of this is Kenneth Frampton's criticism. I can use it a lot because he is very open to my way of working. That means that he goes to the cultural heart of the matter and doesn't get lost in a mass of details. In fact he is interested in my work because of its bearing on his own; it is therefore no distraction from his own preoccupations. It is rather the incomplete criticism of those critics who are determined to link my name with a notion of critical regionalism; I hate to say it, but one step further and you get something as suspect as regionalism. One mistake leads to another. Anyone who reads Kenneth Frampton's work properly and takes a proper look at my work, won't see any influence of a conservative regionalism on our methods. What we are trying to do is to look into the creative possibilities inherent in the tradition, but we often get put in the same pigeonhole as the conservative body of thought that for a lot of people has a sort of copyright on the word 'tradition'. Tradition is important when it contains moments of change, when it is not just outward form and when it also implies an idea of what goes on inside a building, of conflicts and a potential for innovation. Otherwise tradition just means being stuck in a rut.

We are particularly interested in how criticism invests certain sorts of architecture with cultural relevance. The reason we are asking you how you are affected by the interest in your work is because we are also curious to know how an architect responds to this process by which his/her architecture is generalised into a cultural

value that transcends the concrete object. Are you really able to use the insights produced by criticism in your actual designs?

Never directly. Although as a profession we are not isolated, there are still enormous gulfs between the different areas of knowledge in our society. All we can do is to read literature, listen to music, look at art and so forth. In the same way we also read criticism as a part of the contacts we need to survive in this world. Architectural criticism does not have any special status as a conveyor of ideas and I don't ever see myself reading a piece of criticism and using it as a point of departure for a new project. My task is to solve practical problems. There is of course a partial relation between these problems and the views of the critics, but they relate just as much to the views of many, many other people. *Are you saying that you are a pragmatist?* My attitude towards ideals is pragmatic. I belong to a critical movement that has become firmly established in Portugal since the Revolution of 1974. At the time I was really excited by the idea of social change. That does not however have to lead to a dogmatic architectural programme, or even to a working method that is based on a theory. I am a firm believer in praxis, and I don't have much time for the idea of the loner of genius who does everything all by himself. You need other people as well, at every level. *You've often said that. You don't invent anything; all you do is combine and transform something that exists already.* That's right. I work with provisional models that are constantly altered by force of circumstances. My designs as a whole comprise an experimental research programme that can never be planned in advance. I don't work within any theoretical framework nor do I offer a key as to how you should understand my work. What I am interested in is projects that anticipate new developments that one hardly has a name for yet and which exploit the potential of a specific place, the culture that prevails there and the resulting tensions and conflicts. I look for proposals that go beyond any passive notion of just giving material form to an idea, that, by trying to grasp all the facets simultaneously, refuse to impose limits on reality. The point, then, is always to avoid static images and a linear development in time. With every design you need to make a serious attempt to capture one concrete moment of a fleeting image in all its aspects. In concrete terms that means that a project begins for me as soon as I assess the situation on the site itself. That's when I try and size up the scope of the programme. I let all kinds of elements work on me; they may be vague but that doesn't mean they are any less important.

We detect quite a contradiction between this combination of Siza the architect with his unique style and Siza's modest working practice that resists being placed in any theoretical or ideological pigeonhole.

I've learnt to stop treating architecture as consisting of privileged forms and materials; that's the hallmark of the strictly disciplinary approach. I think it is more realistic to start with the problems of the people and their environment. About these, it's extremely difficult to make any generalisations. I work independently and at the same time I talk with the people I'm working for, particularly the occupants. Sometimes you have a difference of opinion; then you look for a solution together. I'd much rather do my utmost to incorporate the complexity of everyday life in my plans than to offer ready-made solutions and then pack my bags and go. And that remains true, regardless of the scale of the project. Whether you're dealing with a small dwelling, or a part of a city, there is no difference in its importance, nor in the quality of the experience; nor can there be any difference in method. Everyday life is equally

complex at all levels. It is a matter of innumerable fragments that attract your attention to a greater or lesser degree. As an architect I want to design a space that captures these fragments.

Even so you are and continue to be a specialist who is called in to help. You are also what people call a top architect and, if only because your career has been such a success, you acquire the status of an authority and this makes it difficult to communicate on an equal footing with your clients during the design process. On top of that you are also under pressure from the laws of the market which means that you are constantly working against the clock. How do you deal with that?

It's true that the current system of financing projects only allows for an extremely short period to think about both the commission and the programme. The investors have for a long time been aware of the fact that communication costs money. Add to that the computerisation of our profession; the computer has made an enormous contribution to the ideology of efficiency, without it always being so obvious that this claim is justified in practice. But no matter what machinery you devise there are quite simply no short cuts one can take in the process of finding solutions for architectural problems. Not only that but in our age it is more essential than ever to insist on having that time. Social, technological and economic developments occur so fast that to give anything like an adequate answer to architectural questions one needs all the time and energy at one's disposal. The architect needs this period of time not so much to produce a design, but much more for the almost unconscious analysis of all the facets of the commission. Every commission needs ideas to bring it to life and ideas take time to ripen. It's as simple as that. The wealth of mutual relations between all the different aspects, for instance, the precise articulation of the spaces, that's something that doesn't just happen by itself. When money plays too big a role what you get is a poverty in these relations. A good architect works slowly.

The way you put it makes it sound very anonymous: you never seem to feel the need to point out where Siza, the artist leaves his mark and why and when he does so. You describe an extremely complex process requiring so much sorting out that one might think you were a cog in a wheel rather than a really brilliant designer. 'Desperately seeking Siza!' Where's the symbolic dimension, where's the architect who's got his own tale to tell?

The same is true here too, either a symbolic dimension emerges of its own course or it doesn't come at all. In some situations you have an opportunity to develop a symbolic level and in others you don't. And I have to admit that the symbolic dimension is something I really don't bother about at all.

Okay, with that attitude you can maybe make your small contribution to tradition, but you seem unwilling to admit the fact that you also have your own signature, that you are both artist and architect. It's not that your heart's not in the conversation, but when you come to talk about your work you seem to underestimate your position enormously. How do you view the ambiguity on the one hand of your position as a modest participant in a lengthy process and on the other your role as a unique designer who is capable of presenting us with an architectural event of the first order?

Once again the answer lies in the method. Although I work with existing conditions, I'm apparently also the person who has the sensitivity to add something to them that is exceptional. It is of course not a case of a mechanical reproduction of something that's already there, but of transforming it so subtly that it becomes quite literally a unique construct. What I am able to do is to seize hold of something that's already in the air, and which requires concerted efforts to crystallise into a theme I can actually make something of. You may succeed in catching it, but your work doesn't end there; you will constantly have to measure your basic assumptions up against the place and moment in time you are working in. What I mean by this is that understanding duration is not a matter of scientific knowledge nor of history; it requires a great many other faculties that are by no means so easy to define.

How can you do that if you're thinking about the future of a building? The way you talk about your working method you seem acutely sensitive to the present use of a project, but when it comes to imagining what your building might be like in fifty years' time, one would think a vision of the future based on pure daring would be more to the point than one based on sensitivity.

If we have to solve a problem, then today's needs are obviously much more important than those of tomorrow. All architecture that assumes the opposite is insensitive. All the same, I still need to do all I can to situate the building in a context of change and not treat it as something static. Knowledge and information are not enough; intuition also plays a role. That fits in very well with the notion of the architect as a creative artist. You have to try and obtain as precise a picture as possible of all the facets of your project, so that your solution is also as flexible as possible. Taking a couple of variables and coming up with a static solution is not the right way to do things. Precision requires an interdisciplinary approach on many fronts; no work is ever autonomous, if you think how many matters are involved. That's also why time is so indispensable; the less time you allow yourself the more your solutions are oversimplified.

A strange ambiguity also seems to emerge in your line of argument. On one hand you talk about the sensitivity a designer needs and the importance of intuition and on the other hand you appear to want to emphasise the aspect of scientific knowledge.

They are two sides of the same coin. When I'm working on a project in a city I am unfamiliar with, my own experience is not enough. I will have to make a deeper exploration of construction methods, technology, the future use of the buildings and goodness knows what else. So I need plenty of facts. That's the aspect of acquiring knowledge, then. Equally important, however, is a good appreciation of the culture and atmosphere of a situation. One's analytical equipment is hopelessly inadequate for such a task. Once again it's sensitivity that counts. One's handling of the different aspects of a commission has then itself a multifaceted character. It is not enough to have all the facts at one's disposal. The first impression is just as important, not in any self-indulgent sense, but already with a view to a potential building. The basic outline comes very quickly; then one has to fill it in with concrete information.

Let's link up your notions about the architect's approach to his work with your ideas about the status of architecture. According to your working method as you've just described it, your architecture can never not be 'of its time', seeing that you take the

present moment and the context as your points of departure. On the other hand your architecture can hardly be described as belonging to this time. It is not without reason that it has frequently been regarded as having a sort of immunity to time. It is architecture as it really is, that is simply there; it is an architecture of presence. In that respect it does not belong to this time, which is one of ephemeral materials, of speed and the conquest of physical space by virtual space. Is there a contradiction there?

There is always a conflict and that even increases as I get older. I have to be on my guard not to oversimplify things, but you can hardly deny that architecture is physical presence. There is of course a conflict between modernity and the stillness of my buildings, but there is no contradiction there. Architecture that is still has a definite potential for incorporating a historical dynamic. Only not at the level of illustration. It's hard however for me to point out what this attitude towards architecture consists of, because the dynamic I'm talking about is very difficult to capture in a static description. But the fact that I may have difficulties defining my position doesn't justify the frequent charge that creative architects like myself don't have the first clue what is going on in the world. In my view it is a question of developing a sort of knowledge that participates in the numerous forms of knowledge that are possible in our time.

You certainly pay some attention to dynamics but on top of that you talk more about the evolutionary aspects of a specific culture than about revolutionary developments in economics, technology, management expertise etc. In the world of these developments things no longer revolve around a concrete context or a historical situation but round an extra-contextual, extra-historical situation that changes so rapidly that you can no longer employ concepts such as continuity, tradition and evolution to describe it. You call the architecture that exploits this idea 'illustrative', but couldn't you imagine an architecture that might in fact be a more interesting commentary on just this phenomenon?

Yes, my own architecture. I think that the greater the speed of the process of modernisation, the more gradual and more motionless architecture will have to be. *Why?*

I feel like saying 'because'. That seems like the proper way to explain an idea like this.

Why do you think that the greater the speed the more important it becomes to stand still? To get peace and quiet?

No, that's not what I'm talking about. What I mean is that there are roughly two real attitudes one can adopt in the present situation. The first produces an architecture that appears to be inescapably caught up in the process of change. That is the ephemeral architecture I mentioned. The other attitude is one that produces a stable architecture. What I'm interested in is a stability that gives one the possibility of reflection, even of participating in change without immediately turning into a comet that whirls around randomly in the universe. As far as I'm concerned, when I think of architecture, I think primarily of stability, serenity and presence. You can't just plunge into the giddy whirl of events and still expect to have an architecture that is stable and motionless. You have to define your position in the midst of this glut of information. The more information I can assimilate, the more serene my architecture becomes. I think that

most architecture is not sufficiently motionless, because we aren't able to assimilate enough information. I mean that between the presence of things and the rapid changes taking place in the world there is a great deal of interaction. They aren't opposites.

What do you mean by that concretely? In New York, for instance, which is the realm of speed and change par excellence, would you erect a completely still building that would contrast with the speed of everything around it?

New York is proof of what I'm saying. Most of the buildings in Manhattan are extremely stable. There are few cities where the buildings at street level are so solidly and massively anchored. The frenzy in New York does not lie in the architecture, but in the intersections between the buildings, the traffic, the innumerable things going on, the mixture of cultures. The architecture forms a solid and static foundation for all that speed. The tops of the skyscrapers are narrow and fantastic, but lower down they are sturdy and unambiguous.

Is this a good example of what you mean by 'still' architecture?

Why not? These buildings have got something that makes them one with the ground; they are tight, they are consistent and they have their own autonomy. They are independent of each other. Their outlines are completely separate but that is just what makes them fascinating as a whole. The absence of any attempt to try and find some kind of urbanistic relationship is what gives the whole a very high degree of integrity. I don't see much future for architecture that deliberately tries to express the dynamics of modern life.

So you admire New York? But if we compare your solutions with those of New York - a pretty odd comparison from the point of view of function - it's difficult to understand what your admiration is based on.

It's okay in New York!

Is New York really okay, that's the question. You surely can't understand the stability of a specific architecture without immediately thinking of the social conditions where this stability occurs? Wouldn't it be a less forced comparison if you pictured New York as a neutral frame, a sort of basis for the frenzy of modern life and the grid system as a sort of silent matrix where money consumer goods and information can continue to flow with as little interruption as possible? Your architecture would seem to contain an implicit criticism of a world order like that, seeing that your buildings suggest a feeling for materials, for space and for human proportions. Your caution is really amazing. Surely you're not afraid of saying what you think about cultural questions? In the seventies you even worked for the SAAL, a highly critical programme of architectural renewal in Portugal. By taking a stand both verbally and in your architecture, you've made a crucial contribution to the cultural debate. Something like that is just what is lacking in the architecture of the big investors and speculators we think of when we think of Manhattan. If your architecture is used, with your tacit consent at least, as a model of one form of cultural resistance, or is at any rate described as a means of increasing people's sensitivity to architecture, you can hardly start eulogising the isotropic space of New York architecture and urban design, with its neutral uninterrupted floor areas.

Well, maybe I'm referring to other buildings. There are so many buildings in New York.

Surely we were talking specifically about the 'upward trend of thought', about downtown and midtown Manhattan?

That is only a partial and biased notion of New York.

Okay then, let's talk about the New York grid system then. That's something you find everywhere. The grid is the condition for a serene and autonomous architecture which is what you admire. But at the same time the grid is a model for an emphatically economically-based way of thinking. How can I maximise the profits I can make from my plot of land? In terms of logistics and infrastructure, how can I organise my affairs most advantageously? The architecture that pushes its way upward to the sky is therefore not devoid of economic aspirations, and the cultural aspirations that pertain to them. There is surely sufficient evidence there for you to form a judgement about what is wrong with this city.

The grid pattern may well be a good one for the economic order, but you also get it in ancient Egypt and in many other cultures as well. So I would never think of it as being synonymous with capitalist management. It's much more than that.

So you view everything in its specific context. New York has a tradition of profiteering. Portugal has other traditions again. You argue that you must check out what the main themes are in each situation in order to exploit them. The question remains, how do you propose to propagate a tradition like that and still maintain your critical attitude?

I respond to the tradition in a way that is dynamic, every bit as dynamic as the tradition itself is. If I want to capture the feeling of a city then I really do mean the whole city. And that also means the influence on the city of its history. In my case it's not just a case of looking for the roots but also for how all the trends that developed from these roots also converge. Ergo: cosmopolitanism is contained within the tradition.

But at what point, then, can your architecture function as an instrument of criticism? In the course of working out your programme? If your architecture tends towards stillness, how can that stillness be interpreted as cultural criticism when at the same time you state that every place has to be appreciated on its own terms? Or to put it more concretely, if you were asked to build a prison in a country that had an extremely repressive tradition in designing prison cells, what would you do? Or to take a less emotionally charged example, a law court?

Probably I wouldn't build a prison at all. I very much like working on projects where plenty of participation is involved, but I'd sooner not even begin on something like that. Even though there are growing demands for making prisons more humane by giving them a new character, it remains an impossible commission. A prison's purpose remains that of housing criminals, not ordinary people. That's not something I want to have anything to do with. It is true that there are prisons whose typology is

extremely interesting but the commission to design a prison is always so tied up with the functional requirement of controlling people that it becomes a monstrosity. The only function that actually plays a role there is that of control; every building that has only one function is in fact a monstrosity. The relation of a building to its function needs to be much less schematic and formal if you want to produce good architecture. A law court building offers more possibilities, but there too, speaking personally, I think there is too strict a link with function. The might of the law is invariably obliged to inspire a sense of awe in people and a specific typology goes with it. If you really want to break with that, you shouldn't take on the commission in the first place. That's why I really like designing dwellings, because there isn't such a high degree of specialisation of the spaces with them. If you have an idea of history as changing very rapidly, you will go to great lengths in your detailing to ascribe specific functions to specific spaces. But if you have more respect for time, you can afford to be much less specialised and still give the spaces an appropriate character. That's how it has been done in European cities through the ages, with countless houses from previous centuries still being lived in. It's the relation between the function, the character and the representation of the institution that interests me. I don't feel so comfortable with too strict a definition of function.

What sort of possibilities do you have if you are reluctant to be too tied down by functions?

There was a time when architects worked hard to redefine the programme. In the sixties and seventies they tried to expand their area of action. Just as in recent years architects have become much less concerned with the life inside their buildings, so less and less attention is being paid to the rewriting of the programme. The concern for materials and for the process of construction is also on the decline. Or else the mode of construction often seems to have been chosen completely arbitrarily. I think that this faith in the treatment of form in complete isolation is one of the worst things in the design process at the present time. Equally bad is the almost triumphant acceptance of the separating out of the different areas of knowledge. This total specialisation in all areas of our work creates a void that explains much of the emptiness you find in present-day architecture.

Can architecture escape this trend?

That won't be easy. The whole system of production is based on it. Architecture doesn't have many weapons to deal with it. You can of course produce isolated projects and these can serve as an example. But in general architectural design is powerless to do anything against it. The problem is much too big.

Now you are accepting specialisation as something inevitable; as though you are confirming the very thing that you criticise. Surely you're something more than just a specialist?

Yes, you have a responsibility to take a stand there. It is a cultural question that everybody has to deal with in his or her own field of activity. Architecture too can adopt a critical position in this respect. You can look for a certain kind of work or else you can refuse it; you can stop collaborating with certain architects. With other people

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and in other areas that are not strictly professional all kinds of things are possible. I think there are some grounds for hope there.

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