

Per forza di levare

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Per forza di levare

"Disciplines related to architecture have the knowledge as if it were from the origin immanent to acts (Plato)".

Producing and knowing are the same operation for disciplines that, by action, create bodies that did not exist before, thus becoming, according to Plato, nobler than the arts of Mimese, only producers of knowledge that are external to them. Architecture (or carpentry) is, for this reason, above painting or sculpture, although still below music, an art expression that has nothing to do with the hand.

Plato is, of course, the first philosophical reference that is invoked about the architecture of Álvaro Siza Vieira. For two reasons which, at its confluence, draw a rigorously peculiar projection attitude:

- In the first place, because purism and austerity that are usually referred to when speaking of this architecture, being properly formal characteristics and traces of a controversy against other currents of contemporary architecture, constitute primarily a tabula rasa attitude that aims to restore architecture to its place – such place, Plato says, can only be, in fact, the very first one because architectural knowledge is immanent to its productive process. Before there is a building, there is no architectural knowledge; it is essentially different from other knowledge and perhaps even prior to it in an ontological sense.
- Secondly, the architecture of Siza is obliged, in this search for origins, to proceed by elimination (and hostility to) of other forms of art and knowledge. It is an architecture that tends to be autistic.

Hubert Damisch once asked, "What has become of architecture as a thing of the spirit?"

The question – also of controversial intentions – has still platonic connotations. And it seems to contain an implicit answer to another question – this one, very well-known – formulated by Nietzsche on the sidelines of his writings: "How (or where) to classify architecture?" Damisch seems to answer, "In spirit". But inquiring what has become of this place of architecture, gives us to understand that the problem of the classification of the discipline remains open. If architecture is *cosa mentale*, how can it, at the same time, exist in fact, in the real world and in its engagements?

Perhaps it is worth it, to locate Siza Vieira and this issue, to go back 400 years – and briefly observe the case of another Portuguese architect who faced similar problems to those of today in a completely different culture: António Rodrigues, architect of King D. Sebastião, author of a Treaty of Architecture composed around 1570.

The book by António Rodrigues, a man trained in fortification architecture, is essentially a treatise on constructive geometry. It contains both the theory of the Orders (which was surprising for the time), as well as other aspects of Vitruvio's art. At that time, Portugal was going through an aftermath of the humanist culture, in which architecture had become in fact humanity, cultivated by kings, princes and nobles or illustrious clerics. The classical culture, exhibited in this context was imported, cosmopolitan and anti-Manueline (i.e., anti-traditional) and always mixed with literary culture.

The fundamental purpose of the Treaty of António Rodrigues was to ostensibly ignore this cultural context and formulate the bases for the autonomy of architecture in relation to literary culture – and (which is particularly important) to vitruvianism in its most literate aspect in the Renaissance (the theory of Orders) as a foreign culture and alien to architecture.

António Rodrigues sees architecture as the construction of a world, of a place of its own. The fact that this world is like the cosmic one (through various astrological and cosmological notes in the Treaty), a well-known characteristic of the Renaissance episteme, is particularly significant of this archetypal posture that gives architecture as the origin of all knowledge as immanent to the action of man in the world.

The architect of King Sebastião thus reunited an obscure bond with medieval architects and stonemasons (and the Manuelines, in particular the Arrudas), whose cultural hermeticism made them a kind of initiates of their own cult: construction. But at the same time, António Rodrigues humanized this culture, seeking that it, in its autonomy, could be shared by the elites of the time as a model of culture in general.

The situation in which Siza operates today is quite different from this. But the fundamental concern he expresses is the same as that of António Rodrigues: to return to the beginning. It is already significant that this principle is also for Siza that of modern architecture (Loos, Corbusier). António Rodrigues had no beginning to go back to, other than the beginning of the world. He assumes that it is necessary to look for the principles at the beginning of the new architecture. It is not about revivalism. It is a

clear understanding that the principle of architecture is a matter of place and not of history.

The origin of architecture is not in history, contrary to what all classicism advocated in its attempt to subordinate architectural knowledge to literary myth or, in our time, to historical science. On the contrary: the origin of history is in architecture – and it is not possible today to show it without returning to the same staunchly-historical that the first modernists assumed.

According to Argan, the Bauhaus' main philosophical wager would have been that, without architecture, it is impossible to "conceive man outside his original nature, in his background, in the function that makes him a member of a society".

What António Rodrigues, a Renaissance man, looked for in the cosmos and its laws, what Gropius, a Modernism man (that is, of radical neoclassicism), looked for in the primordial volumes, Siza, a man of today, seeks in the roots of modern architecture.

But neither António Rodrigues sought a symbolic architecture, nor Gropius a Cubist style, nor Siza a neomodern style. They all searched and search, rather, a place.

Siza's procedure is, however, very specific in this context. Loos' idea that architecture exists only in the tombs is the desperate conception of those who feel that it is necessary to evacuate from architecture all references (including any practical utility) to be able to find it again. This idea was taken up by a contemporary architect – Aldo Rossi – who added the Monument (and the prison, the hospital, the school), buildings in which the abstract constructive order programmatically overlaps any sociological, functional, or geographical-cultural orders or "imperatives".

This controversial position is based on political assumptions very characteristic of the 1970s, but also comes in the continuity of Loos' radical neoclassicism, whose affinities with Boullée are evident.

Siza's architecture (particularly his most recent) shows another position (more difficult and more consequential): the origin of the architecture is not in the program, but in itself; it is intrinsic to the very act of designing.

To discuss this idea, I briefly return to another example of architectural classicism: the evolution of the concept of solidity.

Until the second half of the 18th century, the solidity of a building was not conceived or evaluated as it would be today. Also in 1777, the Luso-Brazilian theorist Matias Ayres wrote on the subject some brilliant and absolutely exemplary pages of the old Renaissance way of addressing the problem: a solid building is not one that can technically support the vicissitudes of time and geography; architectural solidity is a concept that is both technical and artistic, which is evaluated not in the light of practical *performances*, but of architectural culture, with reference to buildings already built, that is, the *corpus* of architecture. As Vitruvius's translator, Danielle Barbaro, writes in 1556, "In architecture, it is not enough that things be true; it is also necessary that they conform", that is, be consistent with the architecture in its specificity.

Only after around 1740 did solidity begin to be seen as a functional issue, with the reference to Gothic as an expression of this search for legitimizing principles of the new theory outside classical architectural culture. Then, in the 19th century, came all the theories about iron and glass, later those of concrete, plastic, aluminum, steel, electronics...

Siza's most recent buildings (house in Ovar, for example) were not looking for anything outside architecture. They are beautiful because so were the works of Loos, Corbusier, Gropius, Aalto...

Architectural utility does not justify form, nor is formal investment an aesthetic utility supplement. Functionalism emerges as an ideology that dismisses architecture, making it dependent on something that is strange to it: not practical utility, of course, but the idea that functional imperatives can be considered separately from the architectural way of solving them.

Architectural thinking is either topological or not; utility and beauty can only be conceived from a place (topology is the wisdom of place). What is this place?

Unlike the work of art, which is a place in the Francocastelian sense (i.e., a symbolic place, with its own characteristics, where various influences or texts are consnated and annulled, as Kristeva would say), works of architecture are places at the same time real and symbolic; in addition, they occupy and transform other places, equally belonging to the real world and the world of ideologies and culture.

As theories and arts of memory tend to prove, no knowledge is fixable without the architecture of a place, without a topology of real objects that allow to fix memory. Even if these objects belong to nature (trees, rocks, etc.), the operation of giving them an order to which one can cling to what is to be recorded in memory is always an architectural operation. The first human gesture is to identify the place. Without this gesture there is no identity of the Subject, or possibility of Logos. No natural place exists as place (conceptual, place-for-me) without architecture.

The way an architectural object establishes the place (and settles in place, by the same operation) can perhaps be schemed with the help of some operative categories:

- a) monumentality, that is, the symbolic relationship of the building with its physical involvement, architecture to the machine of rationality creates consciousness, memory, stories, symbols.
- b) ipseity, that is, the relationship between the architectural object and architectural culture in general.

These are the categories that define architecture as an originating place.

But history of Western architecture also obliges us to consider it in relation to the subservience of the architectural object in relation to the places (real/symbolic) where this relationship (*genius locci*) is established; it can be understood according to three other categories:

- c) place (immediate involvement);
- d) territory (regional involvement);
- e) tradition (local architectural habits and cultures).

It has already been noted with some surprise and dismay (by Nuno Portas) that Siza Vieira's architecture has been abandoning since the mid-1970s the reference to places, territories, and traditions, progressively fortifying itself in its monumentality and ipseity.

There is no reason for surprise and dismay. In fact, the reference to *genius locci*, seen from a certain time by modern architectural culture (notably Kenneth Frampton) as a kind of panacea for the degradation of traditional references of the city, territory, and architecture itself, is a defensive position, depriving architecture of its autonomy. Moreover, it is particularly vulnerable in our time of intense cultural and imagery internationalization and the rise of architectural currents committed to returning to the classical references of architecture or to concerns about its formal beauty.

To those who proclaim the autonomy of architectural beauty (confusing this with the autonomy of architecture, which is a very different thing), it is difficult to respond with the place, and the so-called postmodern position of disinvesting the place in favor of symbolism, Siza's architecture turns inward, to its place, which is that of architecture.

Siza's cultural and architectural commitment is thus a characteristic attitude of the periods of revolution in history of architecture – comparable, in Portuguese tradition, to those that rose paradigmatic buildings, such as the church of São João da Foz, in Oporto, begun in 1527, the church of Conceição in Tomar (founded perhaps in 1550), the church of Santa Engrácia in Lisbon (begun in 1682).

The history of the foundation of these three temples identifies them as new places where architectural monumentality and ipseity affect the entire built environment, the surrounding landscape and the ideologies and mentalities of the time. A replica of St. Peter of Rome in one of Raphael's projects, situated on the westernmost edge of Christendom (in the case of the Church in Oporto), a royal mausoleum dominating the town of Tomar from the top of a hill and its pure classical language indifferent to the past (Conceição), a "fortress of faith", as Father António Vieira called it, and a huge symbol of Portuguese nationalism and the will for architectural change (Santa Engrácia); the architecture of these three buildings is presented as a device of rationalization and symbolism by the superb passivity of its own characteristics.

In platonic tradition, Siza seems to understand that the path of this monumentality and ipseity can only be, in our days, the *forza di levare* with which Michelangelo identified sculpture as opposed to painting.

The first impulse of the recent Sizian architecture is not to do it. In an interesting observation, Damisch wrote that there is a law of extremism inherent in architecture that makes it tend toward uncontrolled and the catastrophe it tends toward is that of an implosion by fractionation and minimalization or that of a controlled explosion aimed at disorder (the housing in The Hague, for example).



I sometimes feel that Siza is, in every project, on the verge of stopping designing. But, from intervention to intervention, projects resurface: the new pavilions of the Faculty of Architecture of Oporto are volumes subjected to sharp blows from the axe of the concept, fractured volumes that stand in the ultimate margin of disorder or ruin that they constantly deny (deny by affirming) by their white evanescence. It is this tension on the edge of catastrophe that gives them their extraordinary strength as symptoms of what can not be there, while affirmative remnants of the ruin of architecture.

Siza affirms the ontological and tectonic primacy of architecture against all temptations: against design he affirms drawing; his architecture refuses to be a product of the market or subject to marketing. The Faculty of Architecture of Oporto is not a product-well-presented... against expression and symbolism (the literary version of architecture), it opts for the dryness of architectural reason: against the site, the territory and tradition (against sociology and geography); it chooses the monument facing itself; and finally, against functionality as ideology (against empiricism), it conceives compressed spaces, difficult stairs (and scales), material fragilities.

Siza's architecture evacuates all non-architectural references from itself in an obsessive polemical persistence. This impulse to liberate the essence of the act and the architectural place is extremely risky – and it is not certain that it does not sometimes result in a metaphysics of the project that gives to see the essential aporia of architecture: the architectural idea has to degrade in the real to be possible as architecture, but in doing so, yields to the insistences of what is no longer architecture (be it sociology, literature or the Arts). Refusing or postponing this degradation by subtraction of references, Siza is right on the verge of doing what Hegel considered to be the announcement of the death of Art (as Cerveira Pinto recently observed): transforming it into a "pure object of reflection". In the case of architecture, this is the denial of its specificity. The extremes truly touch each other...

I do not know, however, whether there is another safer way to impose this impossible evidence of architecture as an original place. In fact, it may be necessary to do each work as if it were the first after the Flood. The world – and the architecture that shapes it – is too old.