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Architecture as representation. Notes on Álvaro Siza's anthropomorphism

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Abstract

Although following in the wake of the Modern Movement tradition, Álvaro Siza Vieira's architectural research moves along the thin red line between abstraction and representation. The apparent arbitrariness of some of his compositions is primarily an expression of his attention to the perception of a moving subject that never translates into merely illusionistic devices. Yet, in the last two decades of the 20th century, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic presences began to haunt his designs and buildings. The keys to understanding this phase of Siza's creative trajectory reside in his metaphorical and analogical approach to design, testified by his texts, his hypertrophic graphic activity, his production as a designer and, most of all, as a sculptor. On one hand, his words and sketches reveal the tension and negotiation between architecture form and the human/animal body; on the other hand, his objects and sculptures result as intermediate moments of experimentation and clarification by responding the ergonomic demands through the semantic economy of *objet trouvé*. Through these two interests, Siza's architectural anthropomorphism is here analyzed in relationship with the visual and mental effects on the observers, interpreted as both an opportunity for a theatrical *architecture parlant* and as a transition towards a new grade of poetic abstraction.

Keywords

Álvaro Siza Vieira, Human Figure, Anthropomorphic Architecture, Zoomorphic Architecture, Sculpture and Architecture, Architectural Bestiary, Architecture as Representation

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One day Kandinsky had entered his studio and seen a beautiful painting: he was surprised, then went over and checked that it was his own painting, a landscape or a still life upside down. The representation disappeared as the essential framework in its forms, balance and colors remained.

(Siza 1998, 133)

Although there is no acceptable universal code, control of project development sometimes must be anchored to solid things, such as the shape of an animal or something organic. It is a control element like geometry: I'm not able to separate totally the world of geometry from the natural one.

(Siza quoted by Croset 1986, 15)

1.0 Introduction

The iconographical relationship between architecture and representation moves on two different levels. On one hand, drawings are generally used to understand building in both design and construction; on the other hand, a building can communicate itself by using shapes that negotiate the forms being experienced in both natural and social space. In 1886, Heinrich Wölfflin's *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture* introduced the concept that aesthetic judgement brought to bear on an artwork is profoundly influenced by the instinctive analogy between its apparent shape and the beholder's body. The physiognomic analogy, which was conceived to clarify a principle and not to imitate human faces (Wölfflin 1994), contributed to delineate the theory of *Einfühlung* or Empathy (Kirsten and Blower 2015), whose success has been recently endorsed by the discovery of mirroring mechanism in human brain (Freedberg and Gallese, 2007).

After a century-long tradition, "the interest in the semantic possibilities of architecture declined abruptly with the Modernism" in the late 20th century as a consequence of a diffused "aspiration at demonstrating the autonomy of architecture" (Forty 2004, 78) through the language of Rationalism which Manfredo Tafuri described the as a "not-

representational expression" (Tafari 1968).¹ In the post-war years, the impulse given by studies and critical architectural projects oriented to a new humanism through organic and regionalist approaches contributed to opening access to a figurative dimension that had been officially censored for decades.

In this context, a number of works of the Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza Vieira (1933), whose social, artistic and humanistic dimension has been largely recognized, discussed and awarded in the last decades, seem to offer an uncommon anthropomorphic and zoomorphic approach to both the architectural process and product. This work needs to be framed into the post-Modernist scenario and into his multi-faceted architectural and artistic practice.

It can be speculated that the almost 70-years-long architectural production of Alvaro Siza reflects an evolution of both his humanistic approach to social space and the design method he adopted to permeate his works with it. In the boundaries of this theoretical framework, this article intends to demonstrate that Siza's architecture, grounded on a post-war revision of industrial modernism canon, has been gradually progressing mainly through a metaphorical and analogical relationship between the architectural form and the human body. Somehow, after an initial stage of architectural formation and primary practice in which the historical and constructive problematics prevail, the human figures of his earliest portraits of his parents and travel sketches seem to have been transferred first into his buildings and then into his sculptures. As a consequence of this evolution, the formal results of his architectural works, developed mainly through his celebrated ball-pen lines sketches, seem to incessantly oscillate between abstraction and figuration, often involving the observers with their semantic ambiguity. In particular, a number of buildings Siza designed in the 1980s and 1990s reveal the presence of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements. These "figures" can be interpreted as the most visible effects of a sort of long incubation and elaboration period during which the "Rationalist" Siza of the heroic decades of the SAAL experience has

¹ Modernist architects were not immune to figurative attitudes, which were often attacked by critics, from Karel Teige's words against Le Corbusier's pyramidal

Mondaneum (Teige 1929) to Jacques Tati's moving-eyed La Villa Arpel in *Mon Oncle* (1958).

been turning into the “Poetic” Siza of the sculptures made of scraped pieces of wood and fluent enwrapping buildings.

Alvaro Siza is a complete and polyhedral figure, who has been practicing not only architecture but also drawing, sculpture and writing with continuity. Therefore, this hypothesis is here explored through a multifaceted approach to Siza’s work which is taking into account: his parallel formation as an artist and architect; his parallel complementary practice as a furniture and industrial designer as well as sculptor; his own statements about his design method in interviews and articles; some of the critical observations and conjectures expressed on his work by collaborators, colleagues, reviewers and historians; the author’s direct experience of some of the building Siza designed in Portugal, Spain, Germany and Italy as well the vision of some of his travel and design sketches, presentation drawings and models, and sculptures in exhibitions, museums, and archives; the survey of some of the above mentioned works through pictures, sketches from life and direct measuring.

2.0 Toward a humanistic architecture

Under Fernando Távora’s guide, Siza spent the first part of his career to master construction techniques as well to consolidate a critical approach to modernism through an active inquiry on the Portuguese architectural tradition (Frampton 2006, 14) and by deeply studying the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos, and Alvar Aalto (fig. 1). His architecture was first framed by the Portugal political context and then into the wider scenario of an architecture critical towards the Western Capitalist paradigm. While the 1970s experience of SAAL social housing favored his access to an important circuit of competitions and contracts for public buildings in Europe, his private assignments allowed him to develop his human scale formal poetics. Regardless to Siza’s poetic intentions, he has been defined as “the most genuine exponent of the architecture legacy of Modern Movement’s thought and principles,” (Moneo 2005, 167) resistant to labels (Curtis 2000) and produced work that encourage a multiplicity of interpretative and conflicting approaches. For example, Frampton’s (1985, 317) early framing of Siza’s works as “tight responses to the urban, land and marinescape of the Porto region,” as well “his



Fig. 1. Comparison between the facades of Adolf Loos’ Villa Muller in Prague and Álvaro Siza’s Carlos Ramos Pavillion in Oporto

deference towards local material, craftwork, and subtleties of local light,” painted him as a perfect exponent of the theory of Critical Regionalism. By focusing on Siza’s doubtful, intimate and tailored design process, Peter Testa (1987, 24) demonstrated the question was far more complex: “His works maintain an unstable and fluctuating relation with their surroundings and tradition, which disallows a single interpretation,” and somehow, “Siza’s architecture suggests the terms for its interpretation.” The intrinsic formal ambiguity of many of Siza’s works has allowed William Curtis (2000) to interpret them in the light of the Cubist experiences, highlighting the importance of the fourth dimension in his buildings. In particular, Robert Levitt (2006) has highlighted the role of the perception of a moving subject in the perspectival deformations of Siza’s post-1980s interiors. This interpretation of Siza’s *promenade architecturale* positions it as both a filter mediating the passage from the urban environment to the core of the building and a subversive device disrupting the structural and typological order, giving the building the archeological sense of a colonized ruin.

Álvaro Siza’s “humanistic” approach to architecture, recently celebrated in Roberto Cremascoli’s exhibition *Álvaro Siza. Inside the human being* in the MART of Rovereto (2014-15), is largely addressed to an open design process for as Siza states: “In the society in which we live, design without dialogue, without conflict and encounter, without doubt and conviction by turns, in our search for simultaneity and liberty, is unthinkable” (Siza quoted in Angelillo 1997, 28-29). This could be summarized in three central principles that guides Siza’s work:

1. participation, intended as an incessant and rigorous agency of negotiation between clients’ expectations and architect’s intents, largely practiced during the SAAL interventions;
2. continuity, in both historical and topographical terms, between the site and the new constructions, offering his architecture as an open work to both post-occupancy interventions and to future transformations and, at the same time, connoting the preexistences as archeological layers;

3. inclusion, intended as both the opportunity of moving freely through his buildings with the sensation of exploring and finding human-measured events, and the engagement of all the subjects and suggestions coming from the site.

At the same time, this “humanistic” approach seems to have also a figurative counterpart that gives his built architecture the sense of a representation. To frame and understand this aspect, a series of his architectural designs from the late 1970s to the 2000s are here described and put in relationships with his way of sketching and drawing architecture, of talking and writing about architecture, and of making sculptures.

2.1 Architecture

The project for Casa Fernando Machado (1981) shows the early symptoms of a certain pleasure to play with the visual perception of its guests. Siza seems to have revised Le Corbusier’s terraced Maison Citrohen by tapering the box in plan and section in order to converge walls and ceiling to a geometric and perspectival center nearby the garden wall. In such a theatrical representation, the facade takes on the appearance of a face and, as a consequence, the solid parts of the terrace look like arms or animal members.

This is one of several of Siza’s designs which, although marked by the Rationalist look inherited from the 1930s workers’ *Siedlungen*, denote unpredictable anthropomorphic or zoomorphic intents (fig.2). Wilfried Wang (1988, 10) individuates animal references in the Fernando Machado House and in the “Sphinx-shaped auditorium” for the Cultural Centre in Sines (1982-85). In the Setúbal High-school, Madalena Cunha Matos (1998, 10) finds “a grim anthropomorphic face on the facade of a jutting staircase; a sea creature that delineates slowly, and at any moment could withdraw into its shell, blocking the access from inside”, while a possible analogy between Avelino Duarte House (1981-84) and an elephant is suggested by one of Siza’s design sketches.

The French architect Laurent Beaudouin (2008, 19) openly spoke of *bestiaire apprivoisé* (fig. 3) in relation to Siza’s work. As Beaudouin notes, “Some works

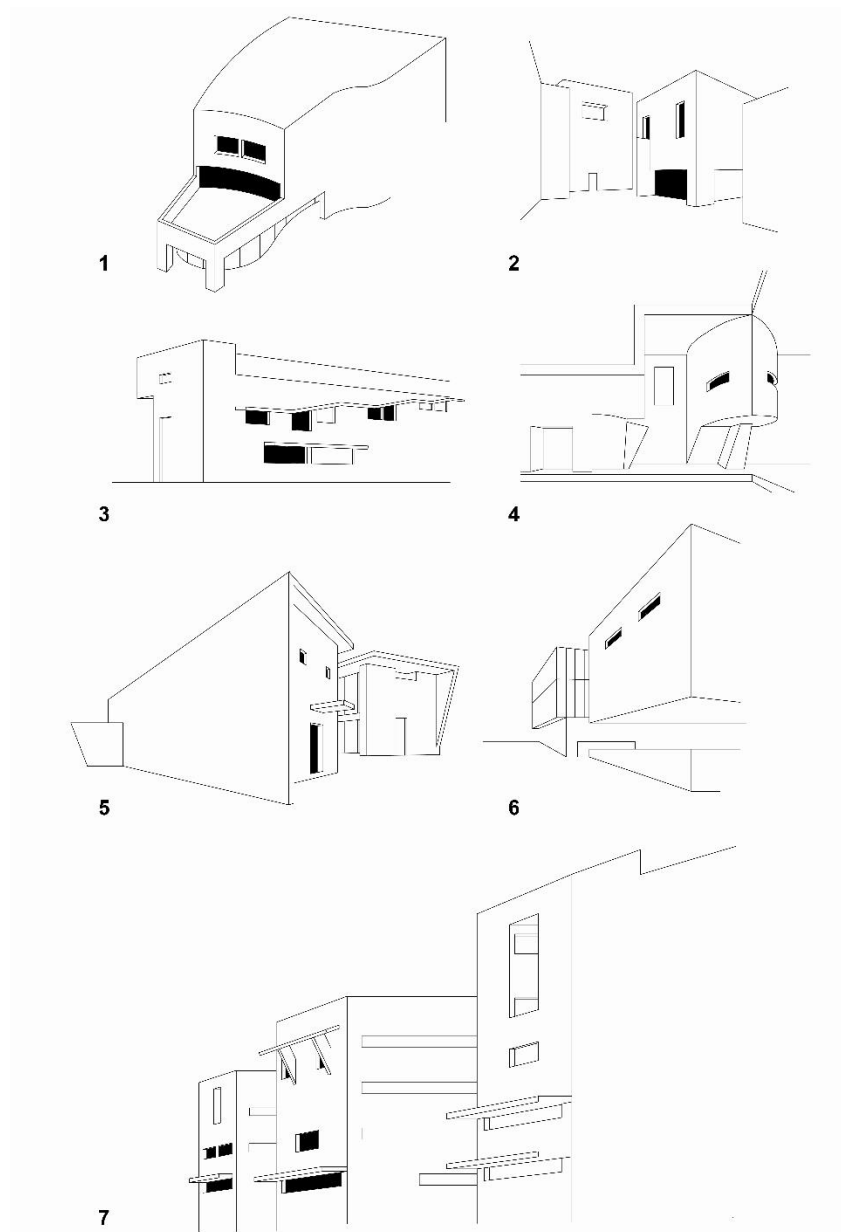


Fig. 2. Álvaro Siza's Architectural Faces: 1. Fernando Machado House; 2. Serralves Foundation; 3. Faculty of Information Sciences; 4. High School in Setubal; 5. Carlos Ramos Pavillion; 6. Amore Pacific Campus; 7. Faculty of Architecture (drawing by the author).

invite the discovery of unusual shapes, faces of friends and animals of all sorts, ducks, armadillos, giraffes, elephants, a whole bestiary inhabit its buildings to generate an enigmatic atmosphere, like animals that children tried to guess in *Images d'Epinal*." The long window of Borges & Irmão bank branch (1978-1986) increases the effect of suspension of the white box but its frames suggest a

cetacean baleen: "That's a white whale is lying in the center of Vila do Conde, his double curved body has only two sides instead of the four sides of a traditional building" (Beaudouin 2008, 19).

Examining other works by Siza, one could also add: a face in the housing project in Venice (1984); the

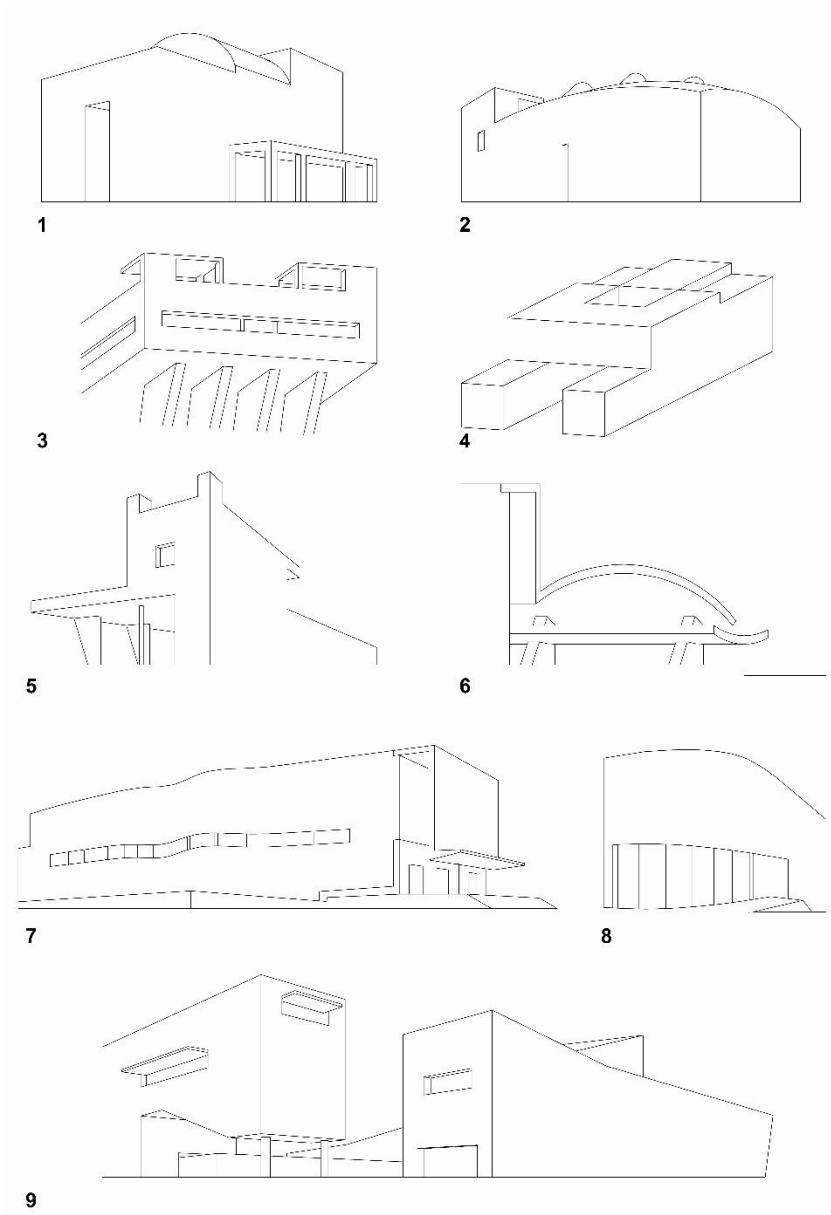


Fig. 3. Álvaro Siza's Architectural Bestiary: 1. Elephant/Duarte House; 2. Armadillo/Showroom in S. Donà; 3. Frog/Restaurant in Matosinhos; 4. Dog/Villa Colonnese; 5. Wolf/High School in Setubal; 6. Duck/Pavillion in Gondomar; 7. Dolphin/Library in Aveiro; 8. Whale/Banco Borges & Irmão; 9. Shepards/Cargalhero Foundation (drawing by the author).

dolphin-like shape of University of Aveiro Library (1988-94); the open jaws of the wolf-like restaurant in Setúbal High-school (1986-94); the truncated-cones on the scaled carapace of the showroom in San Donà di Piave (1992-); the smiling frog of the restaurant designed in Malagueira (1992), perhaps ironically quoting Villa Savoye; the dog-like posture of

one of the new residential buildings around Villa Colonnese near Vicenza (1998); the duck profiled concrete shell of the Multiuse Pavillion in Godomar (2001-2008).

The author's direct experience of Siza's buildings Oporto and Santiago de Compostela provided quite similar suggestions. When approaching from South

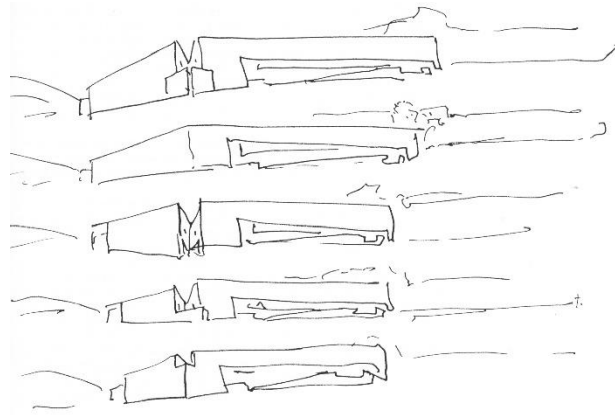


Fig. 4. Álvaro Siza, *Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea*, Santiago de Compostella, 1988-93, design sketches.

the Carlos Ramos Pavilion in Oporto, which is part of the first stage of the project for the new Faculty of Architecture (1984), one cannot but seeing a face in the left-wing front. Two square windows, a small canopy and a central door are here clearly disposed to configure a face looking at the landscape. Glimpsed through the garden trees, such a geometric face looks like the drawing of a child recalling the monsters of Bomarzo². The whole U-shaped body of the pavilion seems to be moving like a snake to turn the face toward a pre-existing villa nearby. Added to this, other faces can be recognized in the elevations of the ateliers built in the second stage of the project, whose window compositions look like an homage to Adolf Loos' white villas hybridized with some Le Corbusierian *fenêtres-en-longueur*. Siza's anthropomorphic intents are amplified by a careful use of the figure-ground relationship for the faces are before the services buildings' blank elevations.

Other figurative events accomplished by Siza can be found in Santiago de Compostela. Parts of the School of Information Science (1993-2000) can be interpreted as white cetacean bodies while a number of expressive faces can be discerned in the windows cut by the zigzagging concrete *brise-soleil*. Also, the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea offers a singular show. In the distance, while still approaching to the building, two foreshortened faces seem to

compete for a narrow triangular spot near the auditorium (fig. 4). After climbing the ramp to the upper terrace, two other faces appear by the entrance, which are supposed to ensure a dialogue with the homologous Baroque facade of the ancient monastery.

Such a figurative dualism (fig. 5) informs much of Siza's production. It may transform a *chaise longue* into a pair of sensuous marble blocks or it may involve a couple of nearby pilasters, as evidenced by Peter Testa (1987) in the Teixeira House and Carlos Siza House. Sometimes, it may involve entire buildings. For example, the two residential units in the Van der Venne Park, The Hague, show different characters because of different structures, materials and opacity. They seem to embody the manifesto of two antithetical ways of interpreting the architectural event, but at the same time, they suggest the idea of two people meeting and hugging.

Such an effect can be observed also in many of the court or patio buildings designed by Siza. His courtyards never follow the closed figure of the classic *hortus conclusus*. When enclosed by a continuous wall, the court is suspended on the ground, like the Municipal Library in Viana do Castelo (2001-2007) or overhanging a slope, like one of the designs for Villa Colonnese, likely inspired by Le Corbusier's Monastery of La Tourette. Otherwise, the

² In the fascinating Sacro Bosco at Bomarzo, which was created by the erudite Pierfrancesco (Vicino) Orsini and the Neapolitan architect Pirro Ligorio from 1552 to

1580, one of the most celebrated "monsters" is the huge face of an Ogre or Orc with a grotto behind it that can be accessed through its open mouth.

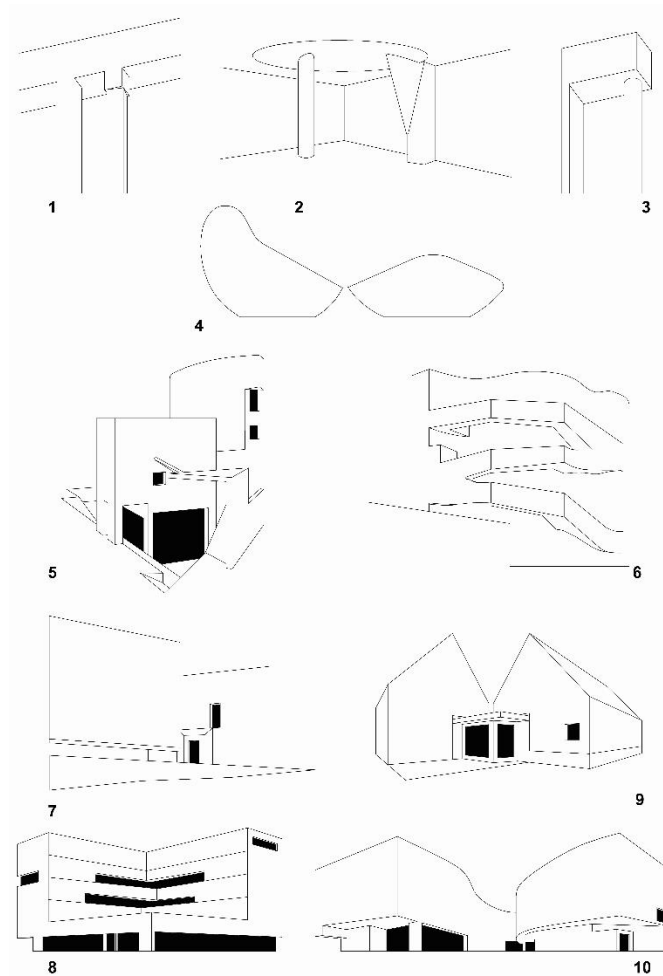


Fig. 5. Álvaro Siza's Architectural Dualities: 1. Carlos Siza House; 2. Teixeira House; 3. Water reservoir in Aveiro; 4. Chaise longue; 5. Two houses in Den Hague; 6. Iberé Camargo Fundacio; 7. Centro Gallego in Santiago; 8. Middellem-Dupont House; 9. Bizkaia Kutxa in Bilbao; 10. Mimesis Museum in Seoul (drawing by the author).

court is generally open. One of its sides can be missing, configuring a U-shape building (Hombroich Hall, Alicante Rectorate or Serralves Foundation) or it can be contained on two sides, configuring a L-shape building (Bizkaia Kutxa in Bilbao). In these cases, the shorter fronts of the bodies assume the aspect of faces, like in the Cargaleiro Foundation or the school at Setubal. Even when a courtyard is missing, Siza is generally interested in dissolving one or more building vertical edges, traditionally the more solid and refractory elements of architecture. As a consequence, the two resulting contiguous vertical surfaces may look like faces welcoming the guest, as in *Der Punkt und der Komma* in The Hague or in Van Middellem-Dupont House in Ostend.

2.2 Drawing

The association between human body and architectural form, in metaphorical, symbolic or simply formal terms, is central in the classical Western architecture (Frascari 1991; Drake 2000; Zöllner 2014; Sexton 2017). It is mainly due to the spread of Italian Renaissance culture as it was fueled by the critical readings of Latin manuscripts, primarily Vitruvius. Literates such as Leon Battista Alberti and architects such as Francesco di Giorgio contributed to set a proportional and analogical theory in which human body was intrinsically present throughout the conception of architecture as an implicit interface between universe and the man. At the same time, this

association was fueled by visual suggestions coming from the practice of drawing during their education as complete artists. Drawing was the central tool to educate themselves to composition rules, to collect a formal repertory, and to elaborate original solutions. Thus, the Renaissance architects' sheets and sketchbooks show commonly human figures drawn over or next to architectural motifs for proportional studies, rhetorical intentions, or just because of the cost and rarity of paper (Payne 2002).

After the Renaissance, Illuminist positions and the Industrial Revolution contributed to break this relationship by shifting the dominant metaphor from buildings being human bodies to instead conceive of human body as a machine and reducing it to a system of parameters and performances to optimize the labor efficiency (Zöllner 2014). In the 20th century, some architects began to reconsider the centrality of human body in the conception of architecture and environment as testified by the success of Le Corbusier's *Modulor*, the British picturesque revival promoted by Nikolaus Pevsner, or some of Team X's heretical proposals. Álvaro Siza Vieira is properly one of the exponents of this sort of post-war humanism in architecture. He matured his original idea of drawing in a period in which the "culture of design was being re-grounded on a renovated attention to the history and city, using the drawing as a moment of theoretical structuring reflection on the architectural practice, and not only as a mere instrument of professional transmission of the operational knowledge" (Moschini and Pietropaolo 2016, 17). As for other talented architects of the last decades, Siza's sketches have been appreciated outside their usual mission of either travel sketches explaining the topographical quality of a site or design sketches illustrating the evolution of the project. They have been published (Wang and Fleck 1988), inquired (Frampton 1991) and then exposed in specific exhibitions, like *Álvaro Siza. Viagem sem programa. Disegni e ritratti*, a collateral event of 2012 Biennale di Architettura in Venice, or the retrospective *Álvaro Siza in Italia 1976-2016* at the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome.

His graphic expressions are a consequence of his methodological inclusivity. In virtue of both his drawing speed and omnivorous curiosity, Álvaro Siza's sketches from life, rigorously drawn with a black ball-pen on A4-size white-sheets sketchbooks, show a rare combination of architecture pieces, environment elements, animal and human figures (fig. 6). Human figures appear often in his design sketches, too, as he occasionally records people passing by him or just recalls them back from memory. Although disproportionate or quickly outlined, these figures never look like anonymous bodies providing the design space with a visual reference (Colonnese 2016, 93). They may be old friends evoked by "an eye which remembers" (Curtis 2000, 24); people with whom he "spent a lot of time with and then [they] disappear" (Santos, 57); angels traced over the axonometric views as an allegory of a divine eye seeing everything; even horses traced keeping his eyes shut, to get back to his child days.

The architecture drawings Álvaro Siza makes to present his projects can be even more hermetic than his sketches. In visiting the 1995 exhibition *Alvaro Siza: opere e progetti* in S. Marino³, the author had his first impact with the difficulty to understand Siza's designs. The opportunity to study Siza's drawings in a larger format than usually accessible through publication in books or journals, and to patiently redraw some of them on a sketchbook, was the key to starting a deeper comprehension of the single projects and to reflect on how Siza represented them.

Siza's technical drawings generally resulted of orthogonal projections, delineated with continuous black lines on white paper. Neither color nor evident line thickness variation affect this sort of "scientific" representations. They are a pure result of a sequence of operations of projection and section according to the principles of Descriptive Geometry. When looking at plans and elevations of his designs, one is forced to formulate hypotheses to understand the spatial consequences of Siza's design. Only the formal and positional relationships between adjacent lines allow them to distinguish a staircase step from a tile junction and to build a mental image of the three-dimensional design space.

³ *Alvaro Siza. Opere e progetti*, Ancient Convent of S. Chiara, Republic of S. Marino, October 7 to November 26, 1995

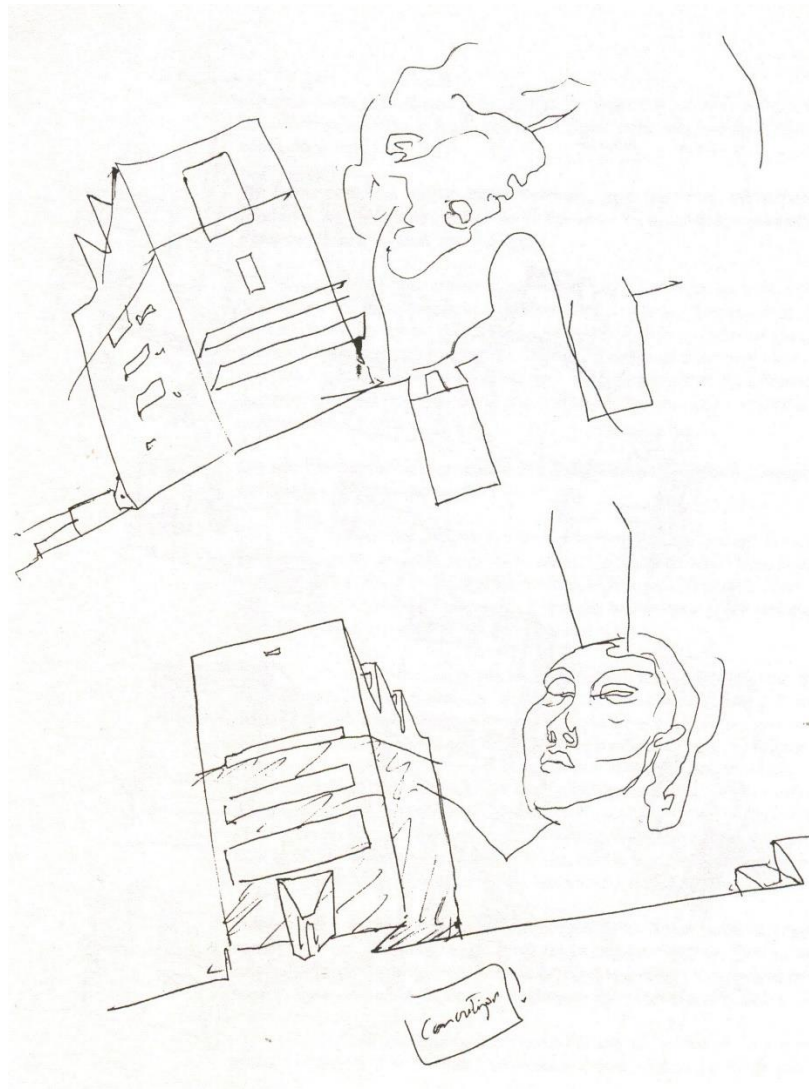


Fig. 6. Álvaro Siza, *Faculty of Architecture, Oporto, 1987-93*, design sketches.

This lack of visual hierarchy causes a visual ambiguity and a general difficulty to decipher the articulated spaces of his designs. Borrowing a definition from Aldo van Eyck,⁴ these drawings possess a *labyrinthine clarity* that seems designed not to illustrate or communicate the project – cardboard working models and wood *maquettes* expressly made for the exhibition were eventually designed to do this much

better (Angelillo 1995) – but rather to strictly represent the geometric image of the architectural bodies.

Human imagination possesses an impressive ability to recognize figures even in amorphous and abstract configurations. In these architectural drawings, geometrical and iconographical codes continually

⁴ In *The Child, the City and the Artist*, an unpublished manuscript written by the end of 1950s, Aldo Van Eyck wrote that “Labyrinthian clarity implies consecutive impression simultaneously sensed through repeated

experience. It implies that clarity of place articulation grows – should grow at least – in time. This kind of labyrinthian clarity is quite different from overall instantaneous clarity” (Van Eyck in Lammers 2012, 71).

interchange their roles, generating sudden figurations. While reading these abstract drawings, occasionally a group of lines may be interpreted as something else – a symbol, a face, an animal – and a figure seems to surface from the maze of lines, becoming a sort of visual pole or “pertinence” around which the exploration of design space gradually coagulates and proceeds.

2.3. Words

According to Adrian Forty (2004), the language is not a mere supplement to the reality of buildings but it plays an active role in structuring the experience of them. A building is designed and developed through a combination of texts and drawings, and texts – from the city-guide to the elitist critic’s review – are fundamental to access its layered meanings (Markus and Cameron 2001). There is a constant use of metaphor in architectural design as it can be a critical tool in negotiating the design stages and the description of the functioning and experiencing of a building inside the design team as well as communicating those intentions external to the team (Caballero 2013). Although the use of metaphors describing a project is not necessarily the same as endorsing its use during the design stages, it constitutes an important evidence about the way an architect thinks when designing. Thus, it is significant to discover that the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic presences in Siza’s architecture have a literary corresponding in the language and metaphors that in the same years he has been adopting to describe his works.

For example, Siza (quoted in Angelillo 1997, 192) claimed the tower marking the Mario Bahia House (1983) “developed by degrees, its lift stretching out like a neck. The house-patio, suitably laid out as wide as possible on the only possible terrace, stretches its legs down to the river, stairs like toes, steps like breaths, windows like eyes (...)” Elsewhere he explained that “at times the project takes life of its own. It turns then into a capricious animal, with restless legs and apprehensive eyes. If its metamorphosis is not understood, or its needs are satisfied more than essential, it becomes a monster.

If everything in it is clear and beautiful, is fixed, it becomes ridiculous. If it is too forced, it stops breathing and dies” (Siza quoted in Angelillo 1997, 51).

Thus, the animal is a sort of a-priori organism which is asked to explore the forest of alternatives, to open a path to the architect and, at the same time, to gradually transform into something “specific” to be able to respond to all of the program’s demands.

Possibly, this direct metaphorical description of the design as an animal is co-authored with his friend Eduardo Souto De Moura. Souto de Moura, who was a co-worker of Siza from 1974 to 1978, defined his *modus operandi* as an “animal vocation” (Souto de Moura 2003, 61): at the beginning there are only “quick nervous sketches, angels without sex or place, animals without anatomy and out of scale”. Getting in touch with the site generally states that “the animal is still very weak; one needs to feel its pulse and to discover the tone of the intervention; the sounds, the gestures are still disconnected, as an orchestra behind the closed curtain before opening the scene”. During the geometric drawing stage, when forms and proportions are converted into materials and measures, “the problem is to find the right scale, is to know whether [the animal] can be as grey as a Soutinho’s cat or rather it can be as striped as a Malesia tiger” (Souto de Moura 2003, 61).

Souto de Moura also specifies that “the analogy with the animals is not figurative but rather intimate: one is searching for the naturalness, the still posture, the animal deportment”. These examples suggest that the animal metaphors are generally adopted to describe the process and not to orient the final shape of product. However, such an unsolicited statement seems to betray an attitude to consider the figurative potential of this design approach.

2.4. Sculptures

Just after the World War II, the young Álvaro Siza was aspiring to be admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts and to become a sculptor. At that time, he used to draw animals from life and do portraits of his family members⁵. In particular, his master Isolino Vaz

⁵ The practice of drawing from life is currently considered a basic requirement for first-year students

of Architecture in Oporto, who gather embarrassed around nude models in the drawing classroom, under

trained him also to draw “closed and open boxes, horses and cats” (Siza 1995, 18). The vision of Gaudi’s works in Barcelona convinced him to orient his artistic studies towards architecture. “I was not interested in architecture,” Siza confessed once, “but it looked like sculpture, or painting, or so it was. (...). I had my first hunch that perhaps architecture interested me more than anything else, that was within my reach, it was enough to put at stake windows, doors, baseboards, hardware, ceramic tiles or stone tiles, gutters and downpipes” (Siza quoted in Angelillo 1997, 123-25).

Since the beginning, Siza placed himself openly among “those who persevere in looking the territories of Architecture and the (other) Arts – especially the sculpture, but also painting, or music – for an original indestructible relationship” (Siza quoted in Angelillo 1997, 43-44). With the sculpture, “the link is very direct and very clear, although quite ambiguous (...). The architect works subject to certain strong constraints. Economy, function and possibly tastes, or even the whims of his client (...), but I also believe that at some point he should be free. (...) At that moment of freedom (...), I believe that the mental processes and methods of architects and sculptors are very close (...), at that moment lies the greater identification with Sculptors” (Siza 1995, 42-45).

Anyway, for decades, Siza applied only a part of his original sculptural vocation to occasional furniture pieces, such as those for the Miranda Santos House (Gazzaniga and Souto de Moura 1994), as well to architectural complements, such as for the Faculty of Architecture in Oporto. In the 1980s, some of these pieces originally conceived as unique craftworks for a specific site were gradually adapted for an industrial design production under the request of small factories, (Angelillo 1995). This resulted in giving Siza the opportunity to understand the logic involved in industrial production. The attitude to work with elements that have a direct functional and physical relationship with human body probably increased his attention to figuration. From the late 1980s onwards, Siza’s aptitude to anthropomorphic figuration slowly shifted from architecture to designing furniture and complements. The cross he designed for the Marco de Canaveses church as a transfiguration of Christ’s

body is paradigmatic of his compositional process. In preliminary sketches, the overlapping volumes composition with undefined edges tried to accommodate the slight inclination of the body hanging from the nails. In the built version, the design has been simplified but at the intersection of horizontal and vertical rods a small T-knot remained to “magically” evoke the Saviour’s face.

Besides his chaise-longue in marble, the water reservoir of the university campus in Aveiro (1988-89) is the key episode of the maturation of Siza as a sculptor. It was intended to be an urban scale sculpture involving tectonic and a-tectonic concepts. Through the design sketches, one can appreciate the transition from a self-referential industrial-design-like object to an assemblage of different objects. Its three elementary geometry objects – cube, cylinder and parallelepiped – seem to allude symbolically to point, line and surface, the fundamental institutions of representation as well as to three leftovers from cuts in the wood, which already reveal his parallel activity as a sculptor.

This sculptural attitude came to maturation after 1995, when his architectural appointments started to annoy him: “The exercise of architecture is offering less and less pleasure opportunities (...). So I’m tempted to return to sculpture – *jeu magnifique des formés sous la lumière* – accompanied by others who do not give up the pleasure of creating, even if it occupies their Saturdays and Sundays” (Siza quoted in Croset 1999, 21). With the help of a loving bunch of artisans and young people, Álvaro Siza started a parallel activity as a sculptor in spare time and on weekends. In 1998, he exhibited 17 sculptures accompanied by 55 drawings, first in a Madrid gallery⁶ and then throughout Europe. Observing those works in the 1999 exhibition *Alvaro Siza. Scultura. Il piacere del lavoro* in AAM Gallery, Milan, the author was quite astonished. The expectation was to find abstract works in the wake of the Iberian tradition founded by Jorge Oteiza Enbil or Eduardo Chillida: something like an abstract reduced model of his buildings emphasizing the play of light on surfaces. On the contrary, most of these early sculptures are an unpredictable assemblage of ready-made objects, wooden scrapes and only new sculpted pieces.

the light diffused from the crest skylights of Siza’s building.

⁶ *Escultura. El placer de trabajar*, Museo Colecciones ICO, Madrid, 12.11.1998 – 10.01.1999.



Fig. 7. Álvaro Siza's sculptures from 1990s (Cross for the church in Marco de Canaveses; Crianca Y), 2000s (elaborated from his sketch) and 2008 (from PIMAR catalogue). (digital elaboration by the author)

Moreover, they are generally representations of human and animal bodies standing, meeting or embracing (fig. 7). Not only Siza's early works as a sculptor are literally made of processing waste but they are mainly addressed to those elements that are left or lost in the passage from his freehand drawings to the construction: the enigmatic figures crowding his design sketches but connaturally secondary to the architecture. From this point of view, the sculptures can be interpreted as an instinctive complement to his architectural research but in the following years, this sort of ludic activity has turned into something more structured and organized. Due to growing

commercial appointments (Castanheira 2008), Siza's sculptural practice seems to have been gradually refocused to designing specific sculptures in wood or stone. It is worth mentioning that in the last decade Siza has also been designing abstract sculptures. The geometrically carved cube as a garden installation for the PIMAR (2008) or the recent sculpture *Evasão* exhibited to the 2018 Venice Biennale of Architecture, which can be eventually compared to actual micro-architectures, could demonstrate not only the continuous subterranean relationship between all of his expressions and media, but that his

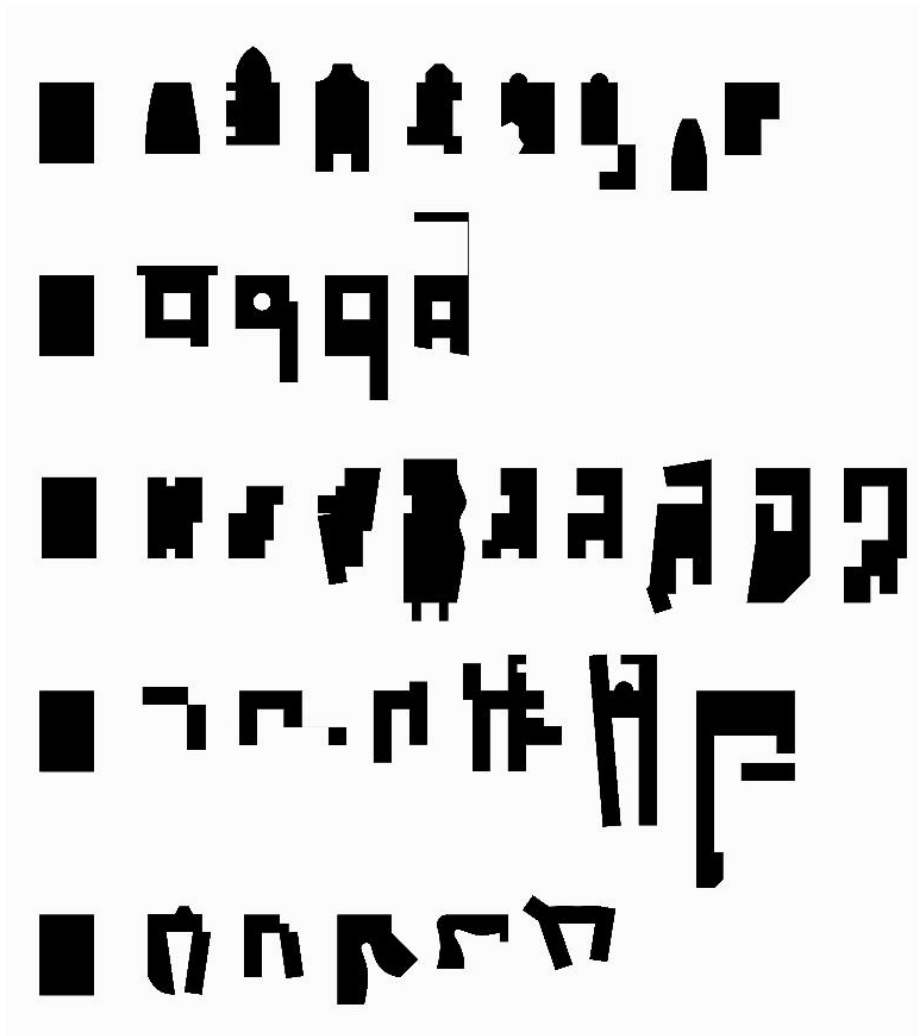


Fig. 8. Abacus of plans of Álvaro Siza's designs associated according to operations of addition, subtraction and rotation(drawing by the author).

sculptural vocation has also furtherly evolved, beyond his figurative attitude.

3.0 Considerations

Since 1970s, most of Siza's projects look like – and have been interpreted as – the result of a sequence of geometrical operations affecting a primordial

square or cube (fig. 8). By subtracting and adding parts to it, the architect organizes the functional and distribution aspects of his projects⁷, but a fundamental moment comes just later, when he “moves” them. By shifting, rotating and deforming the configuration, Siza eventually “animates” the project: he puts in scene an architecture that appears to be in a sort of virtual motion as well as orchestrates its exploration along a *promenade architecturale*.

⁷ Sometimes the effect of subtracting looks more like either a cut or an erosion while the effect of adding looks more like either an intersection or a merging.

Such a design strategy, which is obviously much more complex and much less linear than this brief report may suggest, results not only of a critical approach to physical and functional context but also of his critical speculation on the building type. It can be traced back to a general design trend to lean on univocal figures to later corrupt and corrode them, in order to achieve incomplete fragments invoking observer's intervention to make sense. For example, in several buildings designed by Siza, the *promenade architecturale* generally features triangular and polygonal rooms alluding to the presence of specific visual cones as well as small-size irregular articulations alluding to spontaneous works made by pseudo-settler on ancient abandoned ruins, as conjectured by Levit (2006).

This sort of "participative aesthetic approach" procedure could be framed into the cubist tradition, in which "pictures combine fragments quoted or 'reality' with abstractions and ambiguity" (Curtis 2000, 28) but similarities can be found also with Dadaist approaches to give new meanings to common objects. The abstract facades of his buildings can find a parallel in the studies on optical illusions, in particular Gaetano Kanizsa's (1955) studies emphasizing the *pareidolia* as the human psyche aptitude to perceive a familiar pattern where none exists as well to complete broken figures by adding the missing parts. His buildings may look like ambiguous unfinished works waiting for a figuring gaze: they seem to invoke an imagination capable of grasping their virtual movement, the physiognomy of the elevations, the seduction of convex surfaces, the invisible relationships and to make intelligible a psychological, conceptual or symbolic content by a scheme or a memory (Di Napoli 2004, 321). In this hypothesis, Siza prompts for the observers' "active cooperation" or "interpretative action" (Eco 1995) to disclose their world of encrypted forms and processes (Hatch 2010). This appears to be the connotative role Siza entrusts to the figures he traces on his design sketches. They seem to play a part in some unwritten

plot during all the design stages. Street scenes, children playing, male and female bodies seeking for each other, austere silhouettes or angelic faces seem to be a fundamental part in a curious process of figuration.⁸ At first they are just filling the blank paper between the quick sketched lines, like strangers passing by and having a look to something that is yet to happen; then, slowly, they begin to stop, to settle down and to inhabit the space, occasionally shaping the architectural bodies with their forms and feelings.

From 1980s on, Siza began to indulge his figurative aptitude proposing occasional anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements in his architectures that address the perception of the building and produce several aesthetic consequences on the reception of the architecture. These include:

1. the windows – those eyes looking at people, those eyes one looks at the world by – set a rhetorical *mise-en-scène* of the vision itself (Levitt 2006), that *act of seeing* deeply studied by Wim Wenders⁹ (1992);
2. one may believe to be the first and only to "see" those faces: this experience may provide the visitors with the sense of a personal discovery, transforming them in a sort of co-founder of the place in their consciousness;
3. discovering faces or animals in a building can be like the game of recognizing objects in the shape of clouds, conveying a ludic, harmless and collective dimension to architectural experience;
4. the presence of faces looking at each-others on the exterior of buildings gives the urban space a sense of space of relationships;
5. those faces convey the idea of an identity between human body and architectural body. Consequently, exploring the building may be assumed as a sort of *Fantastic*

⁸ Di Napoli (2004, 338) has defined the process of figuration as a combination of figure and action: "the movement through which an *eidōs* becomes figure, that is the dynamic process of the figuring, synonymous to pretend and to model, whose original meaning indicates to confer a figure to what is amorphous, to that which lacks its own form."

⁹ Something more than an occasional affinity seems to exist between Siza's unframed sketches and the "unintentional" shootings of the protagonist of Wim Wenders' *Lisbon Stories* (1994): both of them intend not to frame or aestheticize the image in order to keep their innocent gaze alive and inclusive.

Voyage (Fleischer 1966) into a petrified body – like fissured and crumbling stone figures Siza occasionally sketched – looking for skeleton, organs and other anatomical analogies to confirm it.¹⁰

3.1 Architecture as a representation

Generally, anthropomorphic quality of Siza's building is never flaunted but calls the observers for a complementary connotative mission. Thus, the presence of a single front inferring a face can get the game started and let other parts be connoted as zoomorphic or anthropomorphic. For example, although the right front of the U-shape body of Carlos Ramos pavilion is not characterized anthropomorphically, it may be quite naturally interpreted as a silent face just by its proximity with the face on the left. This event also suggests that different faces correspond to different characters or gender. Moreover, their mutual position and the direction of their gaze can suggest also the representation of a human context, with sentiments and feelings involved. The two faces at the entrance of the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea seem to be embracing each-other through the wedge base. Moreover, the right face, with its enigmatic distorted prism suggesting a stretched mouth, looks like if it were trying to kiss its silent partner. At the same time, this analogical approach can also suggest an intertextual play with similar configurations, in the architectural field but also beyond. For example, when viewed from a distance, the atelier buildings look like guardians guided by a crested leader and aligned to protect the schoolyard. Not only each of them shows different characters – “one with close-set eyes, one glancing west, and one, a Cyclops, looking ahead” (Levitt 2006, 22) – but the whole of them can recall chess pieces or the Moai in the Easter Island.

A parallel can be attempted with the coeval architectural research of John Hejduk. Between the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s, the American architect elaborated a number of architectural figures with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic features composing an architectural circus he used to move virtually from

one site/design to another (Vidler 1991). Paraphrasing what was said about his *Berlin Masque* (1983), “what is so striking (...) is not only the new representational and associational explicitness of these objects, but their extreme opacity, in terms of both perception and meaning” (Martins 1996, 40). Although in the wake of the Modern Movement tradition, Siza “always felt the need for a non-immediate or total link between internal and external as it was in its origins in Modern Movement ambition and practice of architecture” (Siza 1998, 33). Modern architects focused “on rarefaction, lightness and tried to reduce depth in an effort at neutrality in order to achieve through more direct contact between interior and exterior, ensured by a large plate of glass” (Morteo and Siza 1993, 26). As evidenced by Martins (1996, 40), “Protecting the interior from physical, visual, and psychic penetration is a structural condition of the mask that serves to create the aura and mystery” and the facades Siza designed are neither just a projection of the internal functions nor a transparent screen but a malleable narrative device to involve people's imagination. As still demonstrated by Detlef Martins (1996, 39-41), more than the “physiognomic studies of Lavater, and with them Ledoux's architectonic characters”, Hejduk's figures seem to follow the role of the “surrealist ink-blots and caricatures” in order to “engage the viewer in an open state of reflection and reverie”.

According to Rafael Moneo (2004, 204), in these cases “architecture is converted in some ‘*Characters in Search of an Author*’ (...). When standing in front of Siza's recent works, one has the impression to be watching at a drama or a comedy.” Siza's discreet anthropomorphism seems to have been finally conceived to represent human events, feelings, meetings, welcome, protection. Of course, this is not “animism” but rather “animation”, entertainment, theatre, drama.

3.2 Why these figures?

It is quite hard to label these figurative events as a mere *divertissement*, both for the previous career of the Portuguese architect and for the contemporary use of animal metaphors in his oral and written

¹⁰ Analogies could be found with the experience into the San Carlone statue near Arona as described by Aldo

Rossi in his *A Scientific Autobiography* (1984) as well Carlo Aymonino's *Colosso* design (1982-84).

descriptions as well the frequent overlapping of human figures and architecture pieces in his design sketches. Sometimes they might be only the consequence of the frequent choice of fragmenting the functional program into either an articulated building or several small and autonomous bodies which may correspond to the size of a single internal room and whose windows position may involuntarily turn a façade into a face. But the number of this figurative events and their recognition by so many different observers and critics strongly suggest they are the result of a precise strategy, or better, an evolution of a previous one. The reasons of the passage from a sort of abstract “open work” with hermetic figurative ambitions to an objective but discreet anthropomorphic and zoomorphic architecture by the end of 1970s can be only conjectural. One could mention the suggestions coming from the collaborations with young architects and the engagement in international competitions with many different colleagues; or the growing practice in designing pieces of furniture and architectural details which have the mission to directly engage the human body. The coeval attention to Adolf Loos’ architecture has been addressed as one of the keys. According to Wang (1988, 10), a specific interest in the “paradigmatic relation between anthropomorphic figure and building configuration” is likely to have inspired also a development of the façade into a sort of mask, with all the anthropomorphic implications. Not only Loos emphasized the private and public functions of the two sides of a wall, but some of Loos’ residences, like Maison Tzara in Paris or Villa Müller in Prague, show anthropomorphic configurations of windows and doors¹¹. Siza has also declared to be fond of the “inexplicable marvellous order in Loos’ walls”, where “everything seems to be casual, there is no luxury, there is something enigmatic about the way the various full and empty spaces appear” (Santos 2008, 35).

The formal maturity and serenity gained with Siza’s fifty and more years of design is likely to have legitimized the use of figures in apparently post-rationalist architecture, perhaps also with a light irony towards some rigorous followers of Modernism. This

also includes a gradual unbounding of his latent talent as a sculptor whose inclination, according to Frampton (2006, 42), is appreciable from the High-school in Setubal onwards.

An artistic suggestion might have come from the Portuguese author José Saramago and his 1978 collection entitled *Objecto Quase* (The Lives of Things). In particular, the events of the short story named *Coisas* (Things) take place in a city in which, day after day, little objects are disappearing, while more and more mysterious strangers are being occasionally encountered at the borders of city. Only at the end, after a growing atmosphere of suspect, repression and imminent war, the author explains that somehow, by absorbing the attention and sentiments from people, everyday objects are turning into “quasi-persons” who are rebelling to start a new civilization. Besides the political interpretation of the story as an allegory of the life under Salazar’s regime (as well the humoristic description of people living in buildings whose façade has mysteriously disappeared in the night-time), this story may have provided a further poetic support to Siza’s idea of considering his buildings as animals or persons and to let them express their moods and sentiments.

Anyway, this author thinks that it is also a consequence of the heterogeneous experiences that Charles Jenks (1977) gathered under the label of Post-modern. After a long suppression dictated by the Modernist positions, the Post-modern movement had the effect of restituting a centrality to history, representation, and Classicistic figures as well as readdressing the architects’ formal research around a renewed relationship between human body and architectural body.

3.3 Siza unbound

The activity of preparing and exhibiting sculptures is an experience that has also somehow marked Siza’s architectural production since the late 1990s. He recently confessed that this parallel career as a sculptor is exciting and tiring at the same time. “Sculpture exhibitions take me up a lot of time, and I

¹¹ The owl-shaped fireplace of the Semler Residence at 110 Klatovska Street, Pilsen, which is today under restoration, seems to confirm Loos’ figurative attitude.

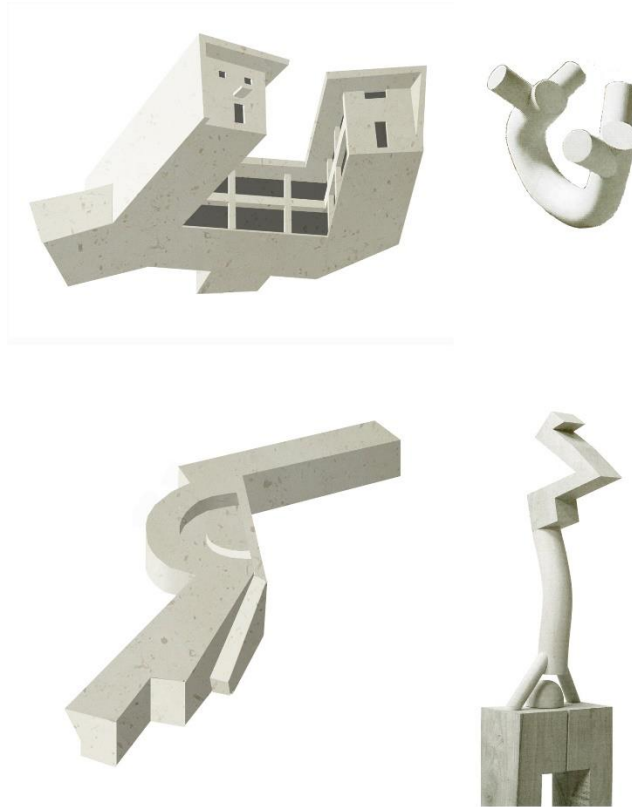


Fig. 9. Comparison between Álvaro Siza's architectures and sculptures: Carlos Ramos Pavilion vs *Criança X*; Faculty of Architecture vs *Pino* (digital elaboration by the author).

have generally done them on the insistence of others (...). It's complicated because it requires concentration and steals time from your architecture" (Santos 2008, 59). At the same time, this activity is supposed to influence both the way his designs and buildings are received and interpreted, and the evolution of his design process.

A parallel between Siza's architectures and sculptures can provide further clarifications about his past and recent architectures. As noted by Navarro Baldweg (quoted in Croset 1999, 39), Siza's small sculptures make "tangible the latent mechanisms that shape also his architecture" and eventually make it possible to review his buildings in the light of sculptures. For example, *Criança X* (Child X) seems a sort of plastic development of the Carlos Ramos Pavilion, while *Pino* or *Cadeira* evoke the Z-shape facility building of the Faculty of Architecture, perhaps revealing the hidden scheme of a body lying on the ground (fig. 9).

While Siza's architectural forms are mainly conceived through excavations and deformations, his early sculptures are generally formed by pieces assembled together. His practice of associating and merging *objects trouvée* seems a sort of minimalist and poetic action of recycling scrapings, parallel to his way of considering the site of a project in an archeological key. In particular, "the pedestals are complementary figures that, before our eyes, mix with characters' body exercises" (Navarro Baldweg quoted in Croset 1999, 40). They are often necessary to complete the denotation of a figure but, at the same time, they are something different, belonging to another place or time. This process of composition performed by completing something old, broken and useless with a new piece designed to give a new sense of precarious completeness illustrates Siza's concept that architecture is "transforming the space in the same way in which we transform ourselves" (Siza quoted in Frampton 1986, 7) by taking single pieces and confronting them with 'the others'. Through this

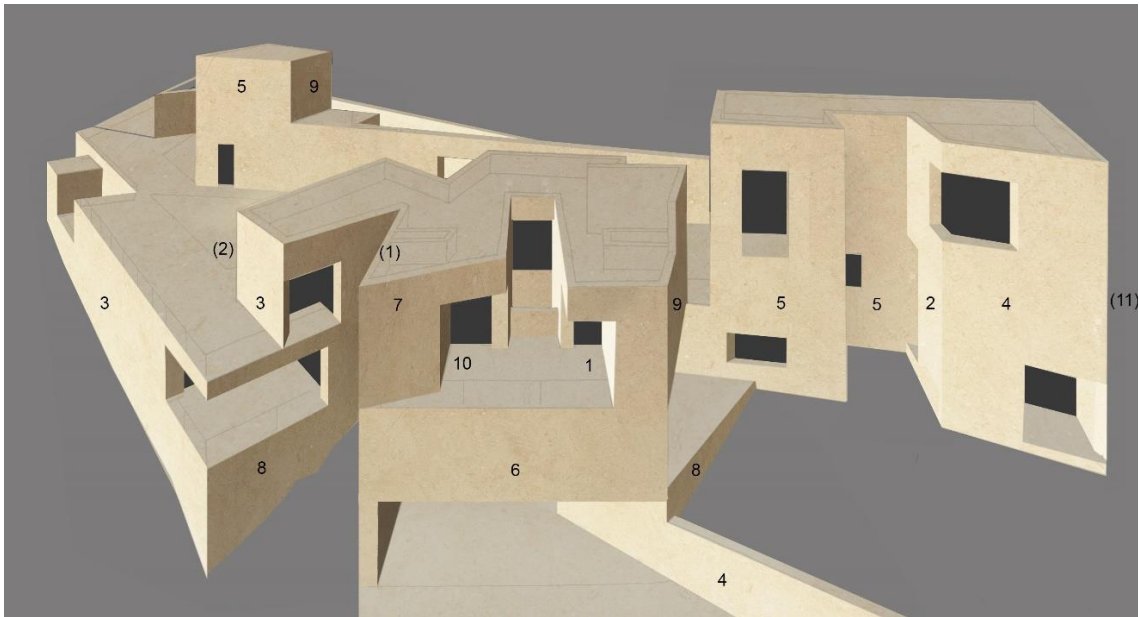


Fig. 10. Digital analysis of external surfaces orientation of Álvaro Siza's Villa in Palma de Maiorca, 2002-2007 (elaboration by the author).

frame, he entrusts to observer's imagination not only the anthropological or zoomorphic connotation but also the mission to connect past, present and future through a sort of poetic assemblage.

At the same time, a parallel between Siza's architectures and sculptures suggests that his formal research has definitely abandoned a figurative analogy with human and animal body to focus on a deeper level of abstraction. For example, the striking form of Fundação Iberê Camargo (1999-2007) building may evoke a multiple convex embrace between a feminine curved surface and a masculine edgy profile – while Bizkaia Kutxa in Bilbao seems an inverted, frigid version of the same. But this identification requires a strong connotative action by the observers.

One could suppose that somehow, from the mid-1990s onwards, Siza's figurative vocation has found a fulfilling expression in his sculptural production, emancipating the architectural research field from the crowd of animals, bodies and faces. Yet, on the contrary, his architectural research seems to have enjoyed the parallel experience of assembling and sculpting, perfecting his sculptural abstract approach to architecture.

The large villa Álvaro Siza designed in Palma de Mallorca (Souto de Moura, 2010) seems to confirm this sort of seducing equation. Surely, it can reveal some of the consequences of his presumed advanced sculptural abstract research. Like the Faculty of Architecture, the building program has been divided and reassembled in a series of white boxes connected by terraces onto the ground. To protect from the sea presence, windows have been removed from the exterior facades and oriented into narrow courts and loggias. But unlike the ateliers in Oporto, the characterization of the white boxes is here entrusted to different ways of cutting with a wide range of virtual drills and chisels. For example, Siza has virtually emptied a lodge in the middle of a block to confirm its mass value while has dug another along the vertical edge to make it look like a thunderbolt or a snake. Sometimes the excavation has been widened until the upper part of the block turned into a shed, ambiguously suggesting a composition of planes; sometimes block's edge has been preserved to suggest the image of a folded cardboard box. And the waterfront is not a still life: the plans reveal the external walls are oriented according at least to ten different alignments. Therefore, their marble-like surfaces absorb and reflect the sunlight with ten different shades simultaneously and visual effects of

welding and breaking of bodies multiply as long as sun moves in the sky (fig. 10).

Another evidence of this process can be found in the story of the design of the Mimesis Museum in Paju Book City, South Korea (1999-2008). The concrete building is reported to have been developed from an early sketch of a cat Siza made the first time he visited the site. Thus, “the Mimesis is a cat. A cat, all curled up and also open, that stretches and yawns. It’s all there. All you need to do is look and look again” (Castanheira, Siza, and Sung Kim 2008, 278). Of course, this narrative key is revealed by the designers mainly because the building does not look like a cat at all. Like the label hanging nearby an abstract artwork, the image of cat is offered to people as it can be used to associate further meanings to the building itself, as well to feed the legend about this designer. Finally, Mimesis is not only the name of the museum but also a Greek word meaning mimicry, imitation, and representation (of a cat, eventually). This story demonstrates that while the consolidated metaphorical identity between the architecture and animal is still present in Siza’s practice, the analogical identity, which had the consequence of producing occasional zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figurative events, has been apparently removed. Even the most recent abstract sculptural production seems to authorize such a conjecture.

4.0 Conclusions

Since his first works in 1950s, Álvaro Siza has been elaborating an organic and humanistic approach to architecture design in virtue of his continuous practice of drawing from life and sculpting as well thinking and writing by metaphors. By exploring the “cultural, social, and political agency” of architecture, he produced a fundamental critical contribute to the Rationalist approach and vocabulary and, indirectly, he melts together traditionally distinct fields of visual art practices.

In 1980s and 1990s, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures characterize Álvaro Siza’s architectural production. Their presence is not an iconic divertissement but rather the mark of a specific process involving both the design stages, as a compositional stratagem to anchor the design development to an organic shape-guide, and users’ imagination, as a surprising device to orientate the

reception of the site and a rhetoric stratagem to put in scene a fictive dimension of architecture. This demonstrates that not only Siza’s design process is aware of people’s attitude to figuration but implies he has made a sort of “secret deal” with that attitude. Thus, many of his buildings look like either animal protecting internal courts or persons meeting and embracing. The sudden epiphany of a façade looking like a face may give birth to a sort of abstract representation of dialogs, feelings and relationships. Visitors can mirror the architecture and read its body in analogy with their own body. By watching through a window/eye, observers may look like actors inserted into the scene to indicate the act of seeing itself. At the same time, observers looking from a distance may interpret people moving inside and outside buildings like materialized word and concepts passing from one to another. At a deeper level, these figurative events can be even considered as a representation of the design itself, made of “dialogs, conflicts and meetings.”

By the second half of 1990s, Siza’s parallel activity as a sculptor absorbed most of his figurative attitude, providing also new critical keys to his creative process. While the human and animal presences on his design sheets gradually migrated from buildings to his early sculptures, he began to experiment the opportunity of conceiving his buildings directly as an artwork. Although still conceiving the design stages through the animal metaphor, he evolved from his traditional design process, mainly based on sequences of subtractions, additions, rotations and deformations of typological schemes, to an architectural body’s characterizations as an abstract sculpture.

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