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GRAFFI

Grafie dell'Immaterialità

Architetture senza corpo

Frammenti, memorie e immaginazioni

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The Flickering Image. Representing Impermanence at Siza’s Piscina das Marés

WATER
IMPERMANENCE
THRESHOLD
TRACE
ERASURE

As the tide advances and retreats, the threshold between land and water is continuously redefined. The architecture built along this edge is shaped by the same dynamic processes. Through Álvaro Siza’s Piscina das Marés in Leça da Palmeira, this contribution approaches coastal architecture as a series of mutable traces. The sea acts as a co-author, altering the built form and challenging assumptions of permanence and control. Reshaped by erosion and time, the work discloses itself only in fragments. Siza’s idea of a ‘flickering image’ captures this partiality, namely the impossibility of fixing the project in a definitive representation. This condition is translated into a visual inquiry through digital collage, understood as a critical device. By selecting, subtracting and recomposing elements, the graphic work does not document the Pools but evokes their impermanence, interpreting the immaterial dimensions of architecture.



Unstable Thresholds

The threshold between land and water is not merely a geographical place, but a complex field of natural and man-made forces. Existing in a state of dynamic equilibrium, the coastline continuously advances and retreats along an indistinct boundary. Coastal architecture is therefore impossible to understand without the dimension of time, and resists any totalising reading. Rather than producing stable objects, it generates fragmented spatial configurations. In an attempt to conquer this boundary, coastal architecture challenges the cyclical power of tidal forces, almost always emerging defeated. This state of near-ruin lends coastal architecture an added quality: the geometric and material configuration of the built is gradually absorbed by use, erosion and time, turning from formal composition into lived situation, atmosphere, trace (Pallasmaa, 2023, p. X). This gradual transformation resists documentation. The coastal threshold cannot be surveyed once and held fixed, but must be returned to, re-read, and re-imagined across time. The scent of saltwater, the crash of waves, temperature and climate are as much elements of architecture as walls, doors and floors. What emerges is the need to experience spaces in a tangible way, prioritising sensory perception over formal unity. In this sense, the coastal threshold is already a fragment, only approached through partial images, memory and imagination.

Three Parallel Lines

These themes resonate with Critical Regionalism, a term used by Frampton to describe certain regional architectural practices emerging from the second half of the Twentieth Century (1980–1992). These architects rejected the universalising tendencies of globalised architecture by emphasising local contexts, without abandoning the language of modernity. Among the defining criteria of this vision, Frampton identifies a tectonic and tactile approach, attentive to topography, climate and light, and open to the reinterpretation of the vernacular. The Piscina das Marés (Tidal Pool), designed by Álvaro Siza in 1966, is an exceptional realisation of these principles. The complex – comprising two swimming pools, terraced areas, changing rooms and a bar – is situated in Matosinhos, a coastal town north of Porto and the architect’s birthplace. The intervention emerges through the interpretation of existing rock formations, reducing its presence to a series of traces. Siza reimagines the site with the aim of subordinating the built to the landscape. As he stated in 1980: “the paths already existed, the pool already existed, the walls are parallel to the granite wall of the avenue, from which they can scarcely be distinguished. Here and there small modifications secure the natural platform” (cited in Fleck, 1995, p. 25).

The intervention is nestled into the rock, set below street level. A low, long concrete wall running parallel to Avenida Marginal is the only visible sign of the complex from the road, where the view of the Atlantic is carefully preserved. The descent, enclosed on one side by the wall and on the other by the changing rooms, unfolds in a state of complete visual isolation. Only the sky is visible above, while the sound of the sea accompanies the transition towards the pools. Inside the changing rooms, dark wood and concrete finishes are enveloped in controlled darkness, marked by a single light source. The space evokes natural cavities, drawing the bather into an atmosphere of intimacy. Outside, one emerges into the intense light of the beach. A children’s pool, closer to the shore, is enclosed by a curved wall. The adult pool extends towards the sea, marked by low,

discontinuous walls set into the rocks. The concrete surfaces echo the colour of the stone in a softer hue, so that the traces of the intervention seem to emerge from the natural setting rather than impose upon it. In the right light, the water’s surface stretches almost indefinitely, dissolving the boundary between pool and ocean. The result is a composition of three parallel lines: “one where sea meets sky, one where sea meets shore, and then the long supporting wall of the Via Marginal” (Siza, cited in Fleck, 1995, p. 25). Every element belongs to both the natural and the built world, yet this dialogue is never fully legible. The project discloses itself in fragments (such as a wall emerging from rock or a concrete edge dissolving into the waterline), and withholds as much as it reveals.

The Sea as Co-Author

The Pools are closely linked to tidal cycles, as suggested by the project’s name. Siza himself acknowledges the vulnerability of his architecture in the face of the ocean. Year after year, the sea intervenes as an unsolicited collaborator: “with the first high tides, the sea took away a little of the wall, corrected what wasn’t quite right” (Siza, cited in Fleck, 1995, p. 25). The work is never complete, but remains open to unpredictable transformation. Anticipating change is therefore a necessary act, one more relevant than ever. As Jonathan Hill writes: “A building designed, occupied and imagined as a ruin acknowledges the co-production of multiple authors, whether human, non-human or atmospheric, and is an appropriate model for architecture in an era of increasing climate change” (Hill, 2019, p. 301). To cope with the intensification of extreme events, architecture must be conceived as part of a broader ecosystem. The boundary between land and water is no longer a fixed line but a blurred liminal zone, capable of absorbing flooding as a variable already present at the design stage. Thus, the Pools exist in multiple states: empty, stormy, calm, overflowing, inaccessible. This condition is not merely ecological, but epistemological. An architecture conceived for impermanence resists the idea of a definitive image, and demands instead a form of representation equally open to change. The project operates as a fragment, a spatial configuration that cannot be stabilised in a single image. Siza is aware of this condition when he states that “each design is bound to catch, with the utmost rigour, a precise moment of a flickering image in all its shades, and the better you can recognise that flickering quality of reality, the clearer your design must emerge” (Siza, 1980). A single photograph cannot convey the emotional qualities, sensory stimuli and atmospheric conditions of a place so deeply rooted in its context. Any representation will be partial, not as a limitation, but as a condition. It is precisely in this gap between the real and the representable that the work of drawing begins.

IV. Drawing the Immaterial

To convey the intangible qualities of the Piscina das Marés, one needs to operate through memory and imagination rather than documentation. The aim is to detach the place from a specific moment in time, in favour of a less precise and more allegorical image. The medium of digital collage allows the selection and recomposition of visual elements, amplifying their emotional dimension. “Collage invigorates the experience of tactility and time”, writes Pallasmaa (2000, p. 80): two conditions essential to spatial understanding, yet resistant to technical representation

alone. The proposed image does not reconstruct the Pools but reinterprets them through subtraction and layering. Three photographs reassemble an ideal view of the complex, but it is the treatment of colour and texture that separates natural elements and renders them legible. The long wall provides a visual framework; the rocky mass is rendered in cold grey; the pool and the ocean share a continuous blue surface; the sky is a uniform field opening towards the horizon. Three lines mark the thresholds between these registers, echoing the composition Siza himself described. The architectural traces of the pool (walls, steps, edges) are deliberately removed through a cut-out, highlighting the fragmented nature of the boundary between land and water. Their absence, rendered in white, makes visible the minimal yet decisive presence of the built within the natural. A similar logic, though in a different medium, governs Chillida’s subtractive collages, in which “voids were inscribed in the top-most surface revealing layers beneath” (Shields, 2023, p. 44). In this sense, the collage functions as a *grafia*, a visual writing that interprets, re-elaborates and evokes the immaterial dimensions of architecture. It holds open the gap between the real and its representation, the same gap in which Siza’s architecture operates.

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Imagine

Three Parallel Lines. Piscina das Marés, Álvaro Siza Vieira, Leça da Palmeira, 1966. Three parallel lines mark the landscape’s thresholds, while the architectural traces of the Pool are removed through a cut-out. Their absence reveals the minimal yet decisive presence of the built within the natural.