

Álvaro Siza's First Encounter with Alvar Aalto

Implications, Immediate and Yonder

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This paper delves into the use of references in architecture. By being particularly open about this often controversial subject, Álvaro Siza proposes fascinating and important materials for reflection. This paper parses two takes on his use of references as particularly posited by theorists William Curtis in 1994 and Peter Testa a decade before him. It expands on the seminal relevance of Siza's first encounter with Alvar Aalto. It argues the implications of the event, both immediate and yonder, highlighting, through Siza's own words, clues to underlying processes in his (re)collection of references as an instrument of work. It readdresses Siza's use of references in light of the complexities of the phenomena at play.

This paper portrays a fragment of an ongoing research into Álvaro Siza's modus pensandi and modus faciendi.

- 1 See Davide Trabucco, <https://conformi.tumblr.com/archive>
- 2 Peter Testa, "The Architecture of Alvaro Siza," Master Thesis, MIT, 1984, 42.
- 3 William Curtis, "Álvaro Siza: An Architecture of Edges (1994)," *El Croquis* 68/69+95 Álvaro Siza, ed., Richard C Levene and Fernando Márquez Cecilia (2000), 36.
- 4 Siza, *idem.*, 39.

Siza's Addressing of References

Pairings of *referencee/reference* abound in aesthetic theory, whether the first are confirmed by the latter or merely speculated by the proponents of said pairings. Both instances are true about the works of Álvaro Siza. For an immediate display, one needs look no further than Davide Trabucco's Tumblr-turned-Instagram, *conformi [le forme non appartengono a nessuno]*, a massive digital inventory of 45-degree-angle split screens, the resulting ensemble both finite comment and within a medium for broader public commentary. Siza appears as a *referencer* in several such isosceles triangles — notably Aalto/Siza — and, at times, as *referencee* and *referencee* — the Siza/Siza pairing.¹

Architectural theory and critique have long remarked on Siza's use of references, an irrefutable and idiosyncratic aspect of his. With 'Álvaro Siza: an architecture of edges' of 1994, William Curtis addresses the use of references, confirmed or speculated, while contextualizing the matter and its implications for Siza's particular architectural expression — fittingly accompanied by iconographic materials in pairs: Oud/Siza, Aalto/Siza, Wright/Siza, Siza/Siza, but also Le Corbusier/Le Corbusier and Picasso/Braque. Similarly, Peter Testa's thesis of 1984, "The Architecture of Alvaro Siza," proposes a few pairings, with the benefit of the Portuguese architect's own words garnered to an "account of a theoretical framework which could inform Siza's practice."² While considerable time has elapsed since Curtis and Testa penned these essays, Siza's use of and take on references remains so coherent that these and other similar inquiries are still relevant.

Particular to Siza is not only the unique way in which references are manipulated *through* him, but also the absence of a significant effort to avoid the potentially controversial subject, often going as far as to volunteer his references within a given project precisely, hence stifling speculation as to their origin, simultaneously enhancing speculation as to the mechanisms through which they came about. Curtis comments this openness while highlighting the latter:

Siza's architecture has been engaged with the particular conditions of Portugal, its landscape, light and culture; but it has also been in continuous dialogue with certain seminal modern works by Le Corbusier, Aalto, Wright, Loos, Oud (and others), and with earlier phases of history.³

While the formulation *dialogue* is perhaps problematic, Siza's engagement with the aforementioned authors is undeniable, nevertheless.

A few pages later, Curtis brings forward one of Siza's oft quoted statements: "Architects invent nothing... they work continuously with models which they transform in response to the problem they encounter."⁴ Curtis retrieves it through Peter Testa, whose more holistic version is of import here. As cited by Testa, Siza proposes: "Architecture is increasingly

- 5 Siza in “Interview,” *Plan Construction* (PAN) 11e session (May 1980) cited in Testa, “The Architecture of Alvaro Siza,” 42. Curtis’s placement of ellipsis after “nothing” may suggest a firmer assertion.
- 6 “Si on peut parler d’un apport critique... Les références sont les instruments que possède un architecte, c’est son patrimoine de connaissances, d’informations. Il n’y a pas de raison de faire des complexes. Ce sont toutes les expériences, qu’il est possible de connaître, et que l’on peut utiliser. Dans un contexte concret, l’architecture utilise des instruments en fonction de ce contexte. Alors ce n’est pas une position critique, c’est l’utilisation la plus sage possible dans un contexte donné.” Siza, interviewed by Christine Rousselot and Laurent Beaudoin, “Entretien avec Alvaro Siza,” *AMC Le Moniteur Architecture* (February 1978): 33–41, 33. Interview conducted in September 1977.
- 7 “C’est un peu la même chose que pour les références. Ce patrimoine de la tradition portugaise est utilisable par rapport à des problèmes concrets. Ce qui est valable, ce qui est utile, il faut s’en servir. Ce qui n’est que romantisme n’est pas intéressant.” Ibid.
- 8 Curtis, “Álvaro Siza: An Architecture,” 42.
- 9 Ibid., 36.
- 10 Testa, “The Architecture of Alvaro Siza,” 44. While not interchangeable, in the case of Siza, I suspect *models* and *references* pertain to similar processes of assimilation and retrieval. I’ll focus on Siza’s specific addressing of *references*.

a problem of use and reference to models... Architects invent nothing. They work continuously with models which they transform in response to the problem they encounter.”⁵ An important detail stands out with that frequently omitted sentence: Siza suggests the matter stems upstream as inherent to architecture, not downstream by exclusive purview of the architect(s), a significant detail to his particular positioning. It ties in very clearly with another statement issued in an interview also parsed by Testa. It comes on the heels of Christine Rousselot’s and Laurent Beaudoin’s allusion to a “critical contribution to these references,” to which Siza offers (in full and newly translated from the source):

If we can speak of a critical contribution... References are the instruments which an architect possesses, they’re his patrimony of knowledge, of information. There’s no reason to have complexes. They are all the experiences, all that is possible to come to know, and that we can use. In a specific context, architecture uses instruments accordingly to it. Therefore, it’s not a critical position, it’s the wisest use possible within a given context.⁶

Leaving no room for mythos, Siza tackles the matter of references head-on and unambiguously as *knowledge, information, experiences*, and a necessary *instrument* for the exercise of architecture, questioning whether there’s a critical contribution to be had. Rousselot and Beaudoin then allude to Portuguese traditional architecture. Siza is unequivocal: “It’s a bit as with regard to references. That heritage from Portuguese tradition can be used to address concrete problems. That which is valid, that which is useful, should be used. That which is but mere romanticism is not interesting.”⁷ In Siza, the use of references is clearly part of the solution rather than that of the problem — moreover, not an end in itself. Noticeably using the same term as Curtis, Testa considers that Siza’s take on references suggests the idea of “finite invention,” a baffling notion vis-à-vis “modern orthodoxy and the certainty of its myths of progress.”⁸ Indeed, Siza stands out rather than blends in amongst his contemporaries, in part, for this heterodoxy.

Curtis posits “Siza has been quite open about his reliance upon historical models, but relatively secretive about the mainsprings of invention which allow him to transform these examples,” and extends a lament: “Probably such things lie beyond the scope of rational explanation.”⁹ While Curtis laments, Testa considers “there may exist rules governing the nature of referent models and the process by which these are transformed.”¹⁰ Testa’s proposition is perhaps more hopeful of the scrutability of the inscrutable. Both Testa and Curtis suggest processes at play which may or may not be explained and indeed explainable. Yet, both suggest Siza’s active involvement is needed for *any* revelation to unfold. I agree and suggest further: the way in which Siza has been quite open is as relevant as the interrogations it furthers. In other words, inklings of what

- 11 “Je ne peux oublier le premier contact avec l’œuvre de Alvar Aalto.” Siza, “Préexistence et Désir Collectif,” *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* no. 191, ed. Christian Dupeyron (1977).
- 12 Examples in *Ibid.*, 121; Carlos Castanheira et al., “Entrevista com Álvaro Siza: fragmentos de uma experiência,” in *Álvaro Siza, Obras e Projectos*, ed. Pedro de Llano and Carlos Castanheira (Matosinhos: Electa, 1996), 27–55; Siza, “Alvar Aalto: algumas referências à sua influência em Portugal (1998),” in *Álvaro Siza. 01 Textos* (Porto: Civilização, 2009), 211–12; Maddalena d’Alfonso, “Conversazione con Álvaro Siza,” in *Álvaro Siza, Due Musei* (Milano: Electa, 2009), 124–39. Siza, “A IN/Disciplina de Álvaro Siza [Registo vídeo],” apresentação Nuno Grande, Carles Muro (Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 2019).
- 13 *Álvaro Siza. In/disciplina*, 12 September 2019 to 5 January, 2020, MACS, Porto, Portugal. Exhibition and catalogue curated by Nuno Grande and Carles Muro.
- 14 “Fazia mal!” Siza, “A IN/Disciplina de Álvaro Siza.”
- 15 “Nasceu em Matosinhos em 1933. Tornou-se arquiteto em vez de escultor, para não contrariar o pai.” Siza, *Imaginar a evidência* (Lisboa: Edições 70, 2000), 147. First published in Italy in 1998 as *Immaginare l’evidenza*, a most relevant work for any theoretical framing of the author.
- 16 “O que posso dizer é que [então] me interessei pela arquitectura.” Siza, in “A IN/Disciplina de Álvaro Siza.”
- 17 “J’ai acheté six numéros au hasard parmi lesquels celui de mai 1950.” Siza, “Préexistence et Désir Collectif.” The magazine is in fact the April issue. April referred throughout, except as per originals in footnotes.

lies *beyond the scope of rational explanation* are to be found in Siza, glimpses of the mainsprings of invention may be unlocked — though *invention* may be a tricky term here.

That First Encounter

Álvaro Siza’s first encounter with Alvar Aalto happened by virtue of *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* no. 29, the April 1950 issue, dedicated to the latter. An early account of that encounter was penned by Siza and featured in *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* no. 191, that of June 1977, also dedicated to Aalto. In it, Siza makes special note of the moment’s indelible mark: “I’ll never forget that first contact with the oeuvre of Alvar Aalto.”¹¹ Whether addressing beginnings or references or both, Siza often educes this event, and in retracing his career as an architect, whether by request or by his own volition, repeatedly returns to it.¹² The multiplication in itself attests to its significance, and from it stemmed implications, both immediate and yonder.

In September 2019, a crowd flocked to the Serralves auditorium for the opening of a large retrospective of Siza’s oeuvre.¹³ Asked to elaborate on how he incorporated references when he first started, Siza opened with distinctive wit and a disarming one-liner: “Badly!,” inevitably drawing amusement across the audience.¹⁴ In perfect cadence, as the room simmered, Siza returned to the early 1950s to initial and seemingly unsuccessful academic attempts at grasping architectural project as a student at the School of Fine Arts of Porto. At the time, Siza was partial to sculpture, a well-known fact perhaps best addressed in the opening statement of his witty autobiographical notes: “Born in Matosinhos in 1933. Became an architect instead of a sculptor, as to not upset his father.”¹⁵

This partiality, Le Corbusier as *the* reference at the school, a scarcity of architectural publications in Portugal and *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* [AA] one of few to reach a country submerged in a dictatorship furthering its insularity beyond a purely geographical condition (lest we forget) and Carlos Ramos’s providential advice uttered during an architecture crit (that his young student should buy a few architectural magazines), frame the setting. However, the event’s importance stretches far beyond the necessary critical mass required to shift his academic hesitations, clearly noted in his: “All I can say is, I was [then] interested in architecture.”¹⁶

“I bought six issues at random, including that of [April] 1950,” Siza wrote in 1977, underscoring *that* issue above all others.¹⁷ In 2019, as Siza again recounted this, that very same AA with its distinctive powder blue cover was upstairs at the museum galleries, part of the materials on show. Displayed inside a large table case, beneath the glass cover, it acquired the aura of a natural history specimen, perhaps one that helped support a new hypothesis, found, catalogued, pinned down, wings wide open, among a selection of other specimens, battered, oxidized, each with

- 18 Siza confirms this about an AA dedicated to Walter Gropius, perhaps no. 28, February 1950, in Carlos Castanheira et al., “Entrevista com Álvaro Siza,” 28.
- 19 “Je ne peux oublier le premier contact avec l’œuvre de Alvar Aalto, telle qu’elle était publiée et analysée dans son développement, ni la fascination et l’émotion avec laquelle je vis pour la première fois les photos de Viipuri et du Dortoir des étudiants de M.I.T.” Siza, “Préexistence et Désir Collectif”

its own museum label, some dating back to those formative years — a rare 1929 Ràfols and Folguera’s first ever published monograph of Gaudí, a copy of Bruno Zevi’s 1951 *Architettura e Storiografia*, Lewis Mumford’s *La Cultura de las Ciudades* of 1957 — Siza’s own memorabilia of the palpable kind (figure 1).

The significance of that AA, that exact specimen, lies in its materiality, as the possibility of documental revisitation depends intrinsically upon the existence of the original, which Siza certainly kept for that effect.¹⁸ Simultaneously, it lies in the immaterial substance emanated from its pages into impressions he carefully collected, consciously or unconsciously revisited through the years — far transcending the material specimen (and indeed, the architectures inside it). For the purposes of this inquiry, the significance of an identical specimen lies within the exact same reasons, as Siza effectively placed a layer of his making atop its pages.

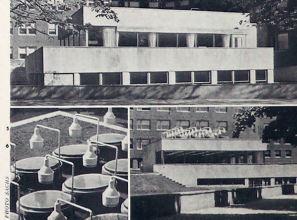
I’ll never forget that first contact with the oeuvre of Alvar Aalto, as it was published and analysed there, or the fascination and emotion with which I saw the photographs of Viipuri and the MIT student dorm for the first time.¹⁹

fig. 1 *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* no.29 (1950). (Siza’s specimen, center) exhibited at MACS in *Álvaro Siza in/disciplina*, curated by Nuno Grande and Carles Muro. September 2019. (by author)

This short cogitation is in and of itself quite revealing. Nevertheless, in a later text largely based on this 1977 account, Siza extends the above passage — period replaced with comma — exposing the eureka moment in full colour:



fig. 3 *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 29 (1950),
12–13. Viipuri Library. (author's specimen)



20 “(...), as curvas dos objectos em madeira, aço, vidro, couro, cobre — as curvas dos lagos da Finlândia. Ou aquela fábrica de geometria implacável, nascendo de um maciço rochoso — natureza e betão como Material da Arquitectura.” Siza, “Alvar Aalto: Algumas Referências.”

, or the curves of the wooden objects, steel, glass, leather, copper — as curves of the lakes in Finland. Or that factory with stern geometry, rising from a rock massif — nature and concrete as Material of Architecture.²⁰

By infusing the earlier paragraph with such impressions, the momentous event becomes even more apparent.

Through the retroactive effects of Siza’s accounts, it’s worth inspecting an identical specimen. One can imagine... Happening upon revelations as the winding shape of *the MRT student dorm* on pages 28 and 29, breaking the massive size of what could have been another platitudinal Cambridge dorm into smaller, softer, more palatable vistas, for the benefit of inhabitants and neighbours, including the river Charles (figure 2). Marvelling at *the photographs of Viipuri*, the compression and decompression above-head induced by the undulating wooden ceiling of the conference room on page 12, or the dauntless take on symmetry in the reading room on page 13, with its central soft-cornered counter and descending stairs delineated by symmetrically carved wooden handrails in sinuous touch-inducing seduction (figure 3). Beholding Aalto’s *wooden objects, steel, glass, leather, copper*, pages peppered with exquisite details, plywood bent into abstract shapes and the possibilities it must have unlocked against his hesitations. Enthralled by the low-angle shot of *that factory with stern geometry, rising from a rock massif*, at the top right corner of page 15, flanked by Siegfried Giedion’s insightful text (figure 4). It reads in part:



fig. 4 *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 29 (1950), 15. Sunila Mill. (author's specimen)

- 21 Siegfried Giedion, "Alvar Aalto," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no.29, ed. André Bloc (April 1950), 87.
- 22 Ibid., 86.
- 23 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 1st ed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), 340.
- 24 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 3rd ed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), foreword. With extracts from the book, the article is more profusely illustrated, extending thirty-one pages, inverting the book's images-to-text ratio. The book was part of the syllabus at the school — see Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 35. It's quite possible the April 1950 AA reached Siza before Giedion's 2nd edition.
- 25 "L'influence de l'œuvre et de la pensée de Aalto devint alors inévitablement un point de référence et de méditation (...)." Siza, "Préexistence et Désir Collectif." See also Siza, "Alvar Aalto: Algumas Referências."
- 26 See Siza, "Alvar Aalto: Três Facetas Ao Acaso," *Jornal de Letras*, February 1983.
- 27 "Aalto, como dizia, impressionou-me muito, e iria marcar-me bastante no início da minha prática profissional, nuns primeiros projectos desenvolvidos no clima da arquitectura vernácula portuguesa. (...) ainda que [na Boa Nova] se evidencie mais a descoberta de um Alvar Aalto, com evidentes conotações de arquitecto procedente de outro país na periferia da Europa que pela arquitectura vernácula." Siza, in Carlos Castanheira et al., "Entrevista com Álvaro Siza," 28. Emphasis added.

Aalto took care that the rounded granite blocks, on which the factory stands, were not blasted to the level of the shore. He knew how to use the contrast between their massiveness with the delicate steel structure of the row of pylons which support the conveyor and the different texture of the flat brick walls.²¹

By an extraordinary juncture, but a few years after that first encounter, two of Siza's earlier works completed to wide acclaim — Boa Nova Tea House (1958) and Swimming Pools (1961–66) — would rise from the rock massifs of Leça da Palmeira's oceanfront, as did Aalto's Sunila Pulp Mill (1936–39) in Kotka. It would be precipitous to leave Siza's calling upon Aalto solely at the whimsical in that remarkable coincidence, just as it would be unwise to dismiss it entirely.

Siza ascribed the discovery of Aalto's *oeuvre and thought*, quite importantly, *as it was published and analysed there*. Indeed, Giedion's thorough research-based article shines in his choice of photographs and illustrations and insightful passages — "Each detail has a well-reasoned explanation", explanations Giedion proceeds to offer, revealing facets of Aalto's *modus pensandi* and *modus faciendi*.²² Giedion first published *Space, Time and Architecture* in 1941 and while Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright were heavily featured, Aalto was but marginally mentioned. In a brief appearance, about Wright, Giedion posits the Finnish architect's work is proof Europe "[o]n another level and by other ways than Wright's (...) is moving towards the organic."²³ However, in its "eighth printing (second edition)" of 1949, apart from minor changes, Giedion adds an entirely new chapter dedicated to Aalto. A few months later, a decanting of 'Alvar Aalto: *Elemental and Contemporary*' is poured onto the April 1950 AA — a special occasion for which the magazine's founder and editor, André Bloc, thanked the author in a brief introductory note.²⁴

By the time Siza became aware of Aalto, early impulses for an in-depth and systematized inquiry of Portuguese popular architecture were brewing in the academic circles of Porto and Lisbon, and came to fruition during the 1950s, imbuing the atmosphere of the school and Fernando Távora's studio, where Siza began working before graduating. This contextualization is brought forth before Siza adds: "The oeuvre and thought of Alvar Aalto then became — inevitably — a point of reference and meditation."²⁵ In his texts, Siza proceeds to unfold particularly carefully how Aalto's discovery reads within this context: more a *however* than a *apropos*.²⁶ The need for re-exacting it in that contextualization often emerges. Case in point: "[Aalto] struck me in the very beginning of my professional practice, in a few early projects I developed under the atmosphere of Portuguese vernacular architecture," significantly deeming, "*however*, in [Boa Nova] my discovery of an Alvar Aalto with overtones as an architect from yet another peripheral European country becomes more evident, rather than through vernacular architecture."²⁷

- 28 “Non sono del tutto d'accordo sul fatto che esista una prima fase della mia produzione legata agli aspetti dell'architettura vernacolare (...). Nutrivo, però, una gamma di interessi più ampia, relativa anche ad altri aspetti che credo si riconoscano nel progetto di Boa Nova o ancora meglio nella piscina di Leça da Palmeira.” Siza, in d'Alfonso, “Conversazione con Álvaro Siza,” 125. Emphasis added. See also Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 34 for similar assertion.
- 29 “Mas se olharmos com atenção a expressão arquitectónica, notamos as influências de Alvar Aalto (...). Este interesse pelo arquitecto finlandês sobrepenha-se à atenção pela arquitectura vernacular e pela difusa preocupação pela desmistificação de uma ideia superficial de arquitectura ‘nacional.’” Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 34.
- 30 “É uma obra de cimento e madeira, de expressão absolutamente alheia à arquitectura tradicional portuguesa. Recordo que, quando começava o projecto, comprei uma publicação sobre a obra de Frank Lloyd Wright, e certos aspectos, certas partes da sua obra, como a Casa do Deserto, exerceram uma positiva influência sobre o meu trabalho. Na piscina está presente o poder na sua essencialidade geométrica concretizando-se, mesmo, a sua presença nos 45 graus de implantação utilizados por Wright no seu projecto. Lembro-me que, então, Wright foi para mim como uma via de libertação.” Siza, in Carlos Castanheira et al., “Entrevista com Álvaro Siza,” 32.
- 31 “A relação entre a natureza e a construção é decisiva na arquitectura. Esta relação, fonte permanente de qualquer projecto, representa para mim como que uma obsessão (...).” Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 17.
- 32 These encounters happened through a grand tour of Scandinavia with architecture grad-students and teachers organized by the school to which Siza had then returned to teach.
- 33 “Creio que o aprendizado, em arquitectura, signifique exactamente uma ampliação da área de referências.” Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 35.

Perhaps even more clearly: “I disagree there is a first phase of my production devoted to aspects of vernacular architecture”, concluding “I fostered, *however*, a wide range of interests, also related to other aspects I believe are recognizable in the Boa Nova project, or better still in the Leça Swimming Pools.”²⁸ To that effect, about Boa Nova, Siza once proposed:

If we look closely at the architectural expression, we notice the evident influences of Alvar Aalto (...). This interest in the Finnish architect supplanted any attention to vernacular architecture and a diffuse worry for the demystification of a superficial idea of ‘national’ architecture.²⁹

In that last sentence, there is an important caveat to keep in mind as, similarly, about the Swimming Pools:

It’s a work of cement and wood, with a completely alien expression to that of Portuguese traditional architecture. I remember, when I was starting that project, I bought a magazine about the oeuvre of Frank Lloyd Wright, and certain aspects, certain parts of his work, as [Taliesin West], exerted a positive influence over my work. In the swimming pools that strength is present in its geometric essentiality, manifesting, in fact, in the 45-degree plan used by Wright in his project. I remember, by then, for me, Wright was liberating.³⁰

Siza’s words attest that these references were summoned quite consciously and far and beyond considerations of vernacular tradition. He later suggested: “The relationship between nature and construction is decisive in architecture. This relationship, permanent fountain of any project, represents to me as though an obsession.”³¹ Considering the works of Aalto and Wright, Siza may instead have been rather moved towards, and moved by, their particular take on *nature and concrete as Material of Architecture*.

Making no apparent distinction between his academic and professional activities, Siza rather establishes a clear before & after — that *first contact*, a most salient detail in his autobiography. It’s noteworthy he educes *this* contact more often than those that followed — it was the first of three firsts. After an AA lands in his hands in the early 1950s, it is (only) in 1969 that Siza first encounters Aalto’s architectures in situ, and Alvar himself.³²

Implications, Immediate and Yonder

A collection of references is presented by Siza as *the* means to the métier: “I believe that which is learnt, in architecture, means exactly a widening of the area of references” — possibly the single most encapsulated contemplation the author offers on the matter.³³ In this regard, his first

- 34 Siza, in Jorge Cordeiro, “Alvar Aalto descrito por Álvaro Siza Vieira,” *Jornal de Notícias*, 8 June, 1998.
- 35 Luis Barragán in Ignacio San Martín, *Luis Barragán: The Phoenix Papers* (Phoenix: Center for Latin American Studies Press, Arizona State University, 1997), 25. For Barragán’s clear referencing of Bac in Casa Cristo see D. Mezzino et al., “Documenting Modern Mexican Architectural Heritage for Posterity: Barragán’s Casa Cristo, in Guadalajara, Mexico,” *ISPRS II-5/W3* (2015): 199–206.
- 36 Peter Walker and Melanie Simo, *Invisible Gardens: The Search for Modernism in the American Landscape* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 69.
- 37 See note 6.
- 38 “(...) a importância da educação visual que resulta da facilidade de apreensão das formas e sua retenção pela memória (...)” Fernando Távora, *Da organização do espaço*, ed. Manuel Mendes, 8th ed. (Porto: FAUP Publicações, 2008), 26. First published 1962.
- 39 “Il contatto diretto con l’architettura degli altri Paesi effettivamente è avvenuto più tardi, dopo gli anni settanta. E si è aperta una riflessione molto più ricca, che presentava aspetti diversi rispetto a quelli che per me erano stati così importanti nelle riviste, nelle fotografie e nei resoconti di chi poteva viaggiare.” Siza, in d’Alfonso, “Conversazione con Álvaro Siza,” 125.

encounter with Aalto appears to have been the catalyst, or rather, the threshold to all *that which is learnt*. Le Corbusier, the reference at the school, had not been equally convincing, at least not by then, while Aalto was virtually unknown and received with scepticism. Anecdotal tidbit: thrilled by the discovery, Siza showed Aalto to colleagues and professors, some of whom deemed his works “baroque”, a pejorative jab.³⁴

While jolted within a milieu, Siza’s self-driven gathering of Aalto suggests a highly autobiographical discovery, as others that followed. It’s the early nature and the (limited) means through which it came about that make it so arresting.

In more ways than one, Siza’s first encounter with Aalto mirrors that of Luis Barragán’s with Ferdinand Bac. The spoils of his 1925 trip to Paris for the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs were Bac’s tangent works, not the cutting-edge European vanguards that generally enthralled at the time. The discovery of Bac happened through two books, *Jardins Enchantés* and *Les Colombières*, published that year. This discovery “was in fact a kind of liberation”, Barragán later said — Bac, a reference confirmed and infused in Barragán’s oeuvre, traceable back to as early a work as Casa Cristo (1927–1929).³⁵ And yet, it was only later that Barragán first visited when “in 1931–1932 he lived in Paris and attended lectures by Le Corbusier, frequently escaping to Bac’s gardens of memory in the French Riviera.”³⁶

Siza coalesced particularly early references exclusively through their representations in magazines, well before the possibility of experiencing them, of experiencing architecture *through* it. Yet, paradoxically, specificities of our training are precisely rooted in the acquisition of knowledge through a multitude of means, including that which pertains to the experiential in the absence of the possibility of in situ experience, ultimately leading to the deepest possible understanding and prediction of outcomes — as Siza posits, *all that is possible to come to know, and that we can use*, thus: an operative demesne of references.³⁷

Writing in 1962, Távora underlines “the importance of visual education, which results from an ease in the apprehension of forms and their retention through memory” — indeed, the importance of knowledge rooted in architecture itself and in its representations heavily informed the pedagogical compass of the school.³⁸ Távora points out but one aspect, as visual education conceivably extends well beyond the apprehension of form. That Siza experienced a certain degree of immersion in architecture merely through its representations, both in image and in word, is clear. Siza addresses this with d’Alfonso, confirming that:

Direct contact with foreign architectures effectively came later, after the 1970s. And a much richer reflection opened up, which presented different aspects than those which I had found so important in the magazines, photographs and in the accounts of those who could travel.³⁹

- 40 “Ma non credo che vi sia una frattura così netta nella mia produzione, c’è stato semplicemente un contatto personale e diretto con la realtà degli altri Paesi.” Ibid.
- 41 Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism. Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance (1983),” *OASE* 103 *Critical Regionalism Revisited*, Tom Avermaete et al. ed. (2019): 11–22. Emphasis in the original.
- 42 Susan Sontag, “Photographic Evangsels,” in *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005), 115. First published 1973.
- 43 “Aprender a ver é fundamental para um arquitecto, existe uma bagagem de conhecimentos aos quais inevitavelmente recorreremos, de modo que nada de quanto façamos é absolutamente novo.” Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 139. Emphasis in the original.

He added, “I don’t think there’s such a clear fracture in my production [after that]; there was simply a personal and direct contact with the reality of other countries.”⁴⁰ Perfectly captured here are specific complexities and contradictions of architecture (and its experience), both as an object of inquiry and as a *métier*. Siza suggests while *a much richer reflection* resulted from later in situ experience, an equally valid one happened before and in lieu, *through photographs* and through *the accounts of those who could travel*, through others. No *clear fracture* happened as a result of what came after — what came before, a valid enough experience to inform his practice. (In this lies the importance of Giedion’s well-rounded framing of Aalto in that AA.) The key word in Siza’s considerations is: *different*.

Indeed, that which may happen in lieu does not impede the possibility of (a certain) access nor does it impede renewed access to “*experience itself*,” to borrow Kenneth Frampton’s emphatic phrasing.⁴¹ One may argue, Barragán had already visited Bac’s gardens well before he did and such was the case with Siza and Aalto — to visit for the first time while revisiting. A parenthetical passage in Susan Sontag’s *Photographic Evangsels* elucidates a similar notion:

To deplore that photographs of paintings have become substitutes for the paintings (...) is not to support any mystique of ‘the original’ that addresses the viewer without mediation. Seeing is a complex act, and no great painting communicates its value and quality without some form of preparation and instruction. Moreover, the people who have a harder time seeing the original work of art after seeing the photographic copy are generally those who would have seen very little in the original.⁴²

Access to the representation before the original needn’t detract from the latter, its *mystique*, in turn, may very well be reachable only without mediation, through the full scope of an embodied experience. Regardless, original and representation, both perceptual objects, and in Sontag’s last suggestion, a key to what sets apart a trained eye.

“Learning to *see* is fundamental for an architect,” Siza considers, as “there is a wealth of knowledge to which we inevitably turn, in such a way that nothing we do is absolutely new.”⁴³ This *learning to see* is perhaps reminiscent of Bruno Zevi’s title *Saper vedere l’architettura* of 1948 — published the year before Siza enrolled and still part of the school’s syllabus half a century later. On the one hand, *learning to see* dissipates illusions of (the need for) invention and, on the other, for seeing to extend beyond the surface of the pages of a magazine may very well be an equally *complex act*, requiring a learning — to attain *all that is possible to know*, even by proxy.

That architectural representations now abound as never before is underlined by Juhani Pallasmaa, who warns of the “omnipresent visual

- 44 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2005), 27.
- 45 “Eu julgo que quando um estudante quando entra para a escola — porque quis ir para arquiteto — já viu tudo. Já viu o que eu não vi senão ao fim de muitos anos.” Siza, in “A IN/Disciplina de Álvaro Siza.”
- 46 Gaston Bachelard, Introduction to *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994). Originally published 1958.
- 47 “(...) eu tenho na minha mente, porque vejo sentindo, aquilo e aquilo e quase os 360 graus (...)” Siza, in “A IN/Disciplina de Álvaro Siza.”
- 48 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 175–76. Originally published 1945.
- 49 Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 42.
- 50 Vittorio Gallese and Alessandro Gattara, “Embodied Simulation, Aesthetics, and Architecture: An Experiential Aesthetic Approach,” in *Mind in Architecture*, ed. Juhani Pallasmaa and Sarah Robinson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 171.

image” as potentially leading to a “bodiless observer”, a desensitization which is particularly worrying for the practice of architecture.⁴⁴ Today, an architecture student “*has seen all that I hadn’t seen, not for many years,*” Siza voiced, alluding to the same *problem*.⁴⁵ A trained eye was most useful then to navigate the scarcity of information as it is now in face of its excess. Then, as much as now, the widening of an operative demesne of references results of judicious and circumspect parsing, through purely instinctual aesthetic inclinations and propensities as well as a trained eye continually honed by the very act of researching — this *trained eye* is quite literal here, and (still) very much part of our specific set of skills.

The acquisition of an operative demesne of references requires perhaps the perilous negotiating of a razor’s edge: retaining the ability to simply marvel at a phenomenon while entertaining the possibility of grasping why it manifests in order for a truly purposeful (re)collection to inform the architectural exercise. Which, in turn, places the architect-beholding-architecture (original or representation) somewhere between the psychoanalyst and the phenomenologist, the irreconcilable dichotomy proposed by Gaston Bachelard. In face of the poetic image, as Bachelard posited, the first “sees and points out the poet’s secret suffering. He explains the flower by the fertilizer,” while the second “does not go that far. For him, the image is there, the word speaks, the word of the poet speaks to him.”⁴⁶

Another of Siza’s recent cogitations raises additional intriguing implications. While addressing the importance of a hand sketch as a representation (nevertheless, limited by a fixed viewpoint) versus reality (the limitless whole), Siza equated his mental processes not to the first but to the latter, apparent in his: “I have it in my mind, I see while feeling, this and that, practically 360 degrees.”⁴⁷ *I see while feeling* — not a far-fetched notion. In 1945, Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposed “every perceptual habit is still a motor habit and here equally the process of grasping a meaning is performed by the body.”⁴⁸ Six decades later, Pallasmaa reiterated the multi-modal nature of seeing: “even the eye touches; the gaze implies an unconscious touch, bodily mimesis and identification.”⁴⁹

Vittorio Gallese’s recent embodied simulation theory shines a light on that which may lie beyond rational explanation here. Gallese has already successfully demonstrated visual beholding of the perceptual object extends beyond the merely ocular, as it “encompasses the activation of motor, somatosensory and emotion-related brain networks,” even if no movement takes place, a process that “generates the peculiar *seeing-as* characterizing our aesthetic experience of the images we look at.”⁵⁰ Thus, embodied simulation is possible through mere *images we look at* — an experience in lieu. Siza’s presence in the foreground of his sketches, hands holding sketchbook and ballpoint, is particularly interesting in reinforcing the implied: an embodied experience is taking place while a sketch is produced as a document of *it*. As one beholds these self-portraits, one sees-as seeing-as, layers upon layers of embodiment.

- 51 “O perfeito seria que não necessitássemos de desenhar, que pudéssemos ver tudo num processo de reflexão interior, e creio que isso pode acontecer.” “A minha tendência é a de começar a desenhar cada vez mais tarde.” Siza, in Carlos Castanheira et al., “Entrevista com Álvaro Siza”, 47.
- 52 “Existe toda uma série de processos fundamentais dos quais, de qualquer modo, nem temos sequer conhecimento.” “(...) influências que se manifestam no subconsciente e que entram no projecto sem nos apercebermos disso.” Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 139.
- 53 “A articulação destas referências é um acto de criação irrepetível. O arquitecto trabalha manipulando a memória, disso não há dúvida, conscientemente mas na maioria das vezes inconscientemente.” Ibid., 35–37.
- 54 This very issue of AA features Alvar Aalto’s obituary.
- 55 “(...) la manipulation ‘artistique’ et par conséquent ‘critique’, d’une language déjà codifié (...)” Oriol Bohigas, *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* 185, ed. Bernard Huet (May/June, 1976), 42–43.
- 56 See AP178.S1.1967.PRO4., Álvaro Siza fonds 1958/2002 at the CCA, Montréal, Canada.
- 57 “(...) manifeste à travers les détails qui ironisent poétiquement (...)” Bernard Huet in *ibid.*, 47.

Siza’s *I see while feeling* is particularly significant in face of all of the above, with profound implications, not only for the role of embodiment (through the original) and embodied simulation (through the representation), but also by suggesting a degree of embodied simulation encapsulated within the mere thought of space within stages of creation. In this particular regard, Siza offers another astounding consideration: “Perfect would be that we needn’t sketch at all, that we could see everything through a process of interior reflection, and I believe that can happen,” adding as his practice matured and in face of each new project “[m]y tendency is to begin sketching increasingly latterly” — the devising of a solution as the consummate mental exercise.⁵¹ Siza’s suggestion of such mastery doesn’t equate to an understanding of its inner workings for it to be valid and operative. As with other possibilities, the author contemplates “[t]here’s a plethora of fundamental processes of which we don’t even have full knowledge, anyway” and, returning to the central matter of references, adds “influences manifest in the subconscious and enter a project without us noticing them”, fully acknowledging the inscrutable.⁵² Nevertheless, Siza does not *not* wonder about its innerworkings: “The articulation of such influences is an act of unrepeatable creation. An architect works by manipulating memory, there is no doubt about it, consciously and, most of the times, unconsciously.”⁵³

Readdressing Siza’s Use of References

Other salient details of Siza’s biography came to be through *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*. No.185, May/June 1976, is dedicated to Portugal and features an important essay in two parts, “La Passion d’Alvaro Siza,” penned by Oriol Bohigas and Vittorio Gregotti.⁵⁴ In perhaps one of the earliest examples of the exercise, Bohigas offers his take on Siza’s use of references as an engagement in an “*artistic* and therefore *critical* manipulation of an already codified language.”⁵⁵ Alluding to the same idea of a *critique*, AA’s then editor, Bernard Huet, writes about the specific example of Casa Manuel Magalhães, Porto (1967–1970). Notably started before and completed after Siza’s visit to Finland, detailing of furnishings and finishes extended well into 1971.⁵⁶ Huet proposes a clear-cut reading: the house is a turning point as Siza stepped away from Aalto and turned his *critique* to more rationalist architectures in “details that poetically ironize” the Modern Movement.⁵⁷ Yet, Siza’s distilling of the Aaltoan imaginary percolates visibly into the house: the ubiquitous undulating shape reappears in details to the plaster ceilings and layered indoor-outdoor transparencies by pairing slim-frame curtain walling with a succession of mimetic interior glass partitions are perhaps reminiscent of a similar device in Viipuri (figure 5).

Siza’s mustering of references in this and other later examples is perhaps not (or rather, is perhaps never) as clear-cut as Huet proposes and, lest we forget, Siza’s questioning of whether there is a *critical contribution* to be had. Synchronously, Siza often reinforces his unwavering position on

fig. 5 *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 185 (1978), 47. Siza's Manuel Magalhães house and (background) *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 29 (1950), 36. Aalto's glass objects. (author's specimens)



58 “É necessário aprender o ofício, ainda que seja para depois esquecer parcialmente o que se aprendeu.” Távora, *Da Organização Do Espaço* (1962), 74. “(...) criação de formas vazias de sentido, impostas por capricho da moda ou por capricho de qualquer natureza.” “(...) deverão resultar, antes, de um equilíbrio sábio entre a sua visão pessoal e a circunstância que o envolve e para tanto deverá ele conhecê-la intensamente, tão intensamente que conhecer e ser se confundem.” Siza, in Carlos Castanheira et al., “Entrevista com Álvaro Siza”, 27.

pointless obsessions with originality, most wonderfully encapsulated in the title ‘To repeat is never to repeat’ (*Repetir nunca é repetir*), the inaugural text to his *Immaginare l'evidenza*. Siza appears to conceive of the assimilation and use of references as a matter concerning and directed by the embodied self in all its mysteriousness, more clearly so than in an intentionally critical positioning as to what came before.

As the *widening of the area of references* is inarguably necessary for the later mustering of said references, the precursor, even in its mysteriousness, seems more tangible a process than what succeeds it. “It is necessary to learn the métier, even if it is in order to then partially forget what you learned,” Siza proposes. Távora, as averse as Siza to the “creation of meaningless shapes, imposed by the whim of fashion or whims of any kind,” considered an architect’s work “should result from the wise balance between his personal stance and the circumstance that envelops him and for that he should know it intensely, so intensely that knowing and being become fused.”⁵⁸ In his 1983 essay, Siza puts forward a quote from Aalto:

- 59 Alvar Aalto, "The Trout and the Stream (1948)," in *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, ed. Göran Schildt (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), 108.
- 60 "(...) não conheço mais exacta e penetrante análise do processo mental de projectar do que a que sintetiza neste fragmento (...)." Siza, "Alvar Aalto: Três Facetas."
- 61 "Acho que é possível identificar referências de uma obra, mas a dificuldade será grande se a obra já é madura, porque então não existirá uma relação só, mas muitas." Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 35–37.
- 62 Perhaps by Madalena Cunha Matos, "Analysis of a project: The Setubal College of Education," in Luíz Trigueiros, ed., *Álvaro Siza 1986–1995* (Lisbon: Blau, 1995), 9–23.
- 63 "(...) repentinamente tomei consciência disso: era verdade em muitos aspectos, inclusive nas proporções." Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 139.
- 64 Curtis, "Álvaro Siza: An Architecture" 37.
- 65 For Curtis's speculation see *ibid.*, 38–39.

The sheer number of various demands and problems forms a barrier that makes it hard for the basic architectural idea to emerge. This is what I do — sometimes quite instinctively — in such cases. I forget the whole maze of problems for a while, as soon as the feel of the assignment and the innumerable demands it involves have sunk into my subconscious. I then move on to a method of working that is very much like abstract art. I simply draw by instinct, not architectural syntheses, but what are sometimes quite childlike compositions, and in this way, on an abstract basis, the main idea gradually takes shape, a kind of universal substance that helps me to bring the numerous contradictory components into harmony.⁵⁹

The above passage prompted Siza to add: "I know not of a more exact and penetrating analysis of the mental process of project that the one synthesized in this fragment."⁶⁰ Again, Siza (and indeed Aalto) delving into mental processes. Although neither Aalto nor Távora address a demesne of references explicitly in these passages, in Siza it appears implied in what informs to *draw by instinct* and for *knowing and being to become fused*.

In that sense, Siza proposes a conundrum for any researcher delving into such matters and, admittedly, to himself: "I believe it's possible to identify references in a work, yet the difficulty in doing so will increase as the oeuvre matures, as there will be not one but many relationships then."⁶¹ His considerations on Boa Nova and the Swimming Pools were elucidative of the first, while his use of references matured to open endless possibilities for speculation. He often recounts the example of a much later Escola Superior de Educação in Setúbal (1986–1994). While he hadn't considered it consciously, the (apparent) influence of the sanctuary in Cape Espichel, a few miles away, was pointed out.⁶² Siza writes: "suddenly I became aware of it: it was true in so many aspects, including the proportions."⁶³ Curiously, in turn, Curtis considers the same work "virtually literal in its reuse" of Giorgio Grassi's student housing at Chieti, "itself a reworking of Weinbrenner's neo-classical Koenigstrasse Karlsruhe."⁶⁴

Let us consider another of Siza's later projects: the School of Architecture FAUP in Porto (1987–1994). While his witty nods to Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier are clear and intentionally so, take the half-cylinder museum space: while Curtis speculates allusions to Aalto's auditorium at the Otaniemi campus in Espoo, the open-air auditorium at Carlo Aymonino's and Aldo Rossi's Gallarate comes to mind, as in all three a semi-circular element — at FAUP not the auditorium itself and not immediately perceivable in its shape, perhaps more interestingly — performs a *rotula* between two wings at different angles.⁶⁵

- 66 Ibid., 33.
- 67 Siza, in Alejandro Zaera, “Salvando las turbulencias: entrevista con Alvaro Siza,” *El Croquis*, ed. Richard C Levene and Fernando Marquez Cecilia (2000), 21. The AA documented an even later second return of the author to Boa Nova in 2014. See no .407 (June 2015), 96–99.
- 68 “Gostaria de tentar expor a minha visão da arquitectura a partir de projectos que realizei, ou até somente imaginei, pois nesses se sedimentaram os meus pensamentos.” Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência*, 17.
- 69 Curtis, “Álvaro Siza: An Architecture” 42.

Still at FAUP, and returning to *that* first encounter, a dauntless take on symmetry in the access stairs to the library foyer and in the library itself, or the symmetrical and sinuous counters may have something to do with Viipuri, and so may the large auditorium and its retractable room divider, or indeed Siza’s enduring preference for audiences sitting in perfectly aligned free-standing rather than built-in upholstered chairs so prevalent in Aalto. All of the above are likewise his and profoundly idiosyncratic, part of Siza’s “*several recurrent obsessions*,” as Curtis formulates, worked and reworked over the years — the Siza/Siza pairing more clearly than any other he may have mustered here.⁶⁶

Extraordinarily, the Siza/Siza pairing may equally be an exercise of too far removed an offset. Siza offers an extraordinary retrospective take on Boa Nova after he was asked to conduct works there in 1991, revealing

there was an excessive amount of detail, characteristic of a first project: the balance between detail and atmosphere demands a moderation that a recently trained architect still lacks. (...) At first I was tempted to redecorate a posteriori, but I finally decided to consider the fact that the restaurant was the work of another architect, and I carried out a respectful intervention. (...) I believe there is an integrity in the atmosphere of the restaurant which I decided not to change.⁶⁷

Clearly not interested in establishing theory, like Aalto, Siza entertains a different possibility in the introduction to his *Immaginare l'evidenza*: “I would like to attempt at exposing my vision of architecture through projects I realized, or merely imagined, for in those my thoughts have sedimented.”⁶⁸ Upon Siza’s return to Boa Nova, as *thoughts have sedimented*, an earlier stratum irreconcilable with an acquired maturity is unearthed, as if *the work of another architect*. Simultaneously, in face of his idea of sedimentation, Curtis’s proposal of “a certain continuous strata in Siza’s architectural thinking” is befitting.⁶⁹ Curtis formulates so, referring specifically to the Swimming Pools and a considerably later Centro Gallego de Arte Contemporáneo (1988–1993) and that which reveals a certain hue of sameness in them, rather than that which reveals clearly different deposits. While FAUP and other later works are particularly suitable for such speculations, they are also quintessentially Siza, *especially* in his use of references: drawn and reseeded from a mature demesne of references and simultaneously receded and less evident precisely in them.

Three years after the interview for *AMC*, Rousselot and Beaudoin return to Siza’s particulars for *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 211, October 1980 — its earliest issue dedicated exclusively to his oeuvre. This time around the matter of references is nuanced implicitly through a freeform

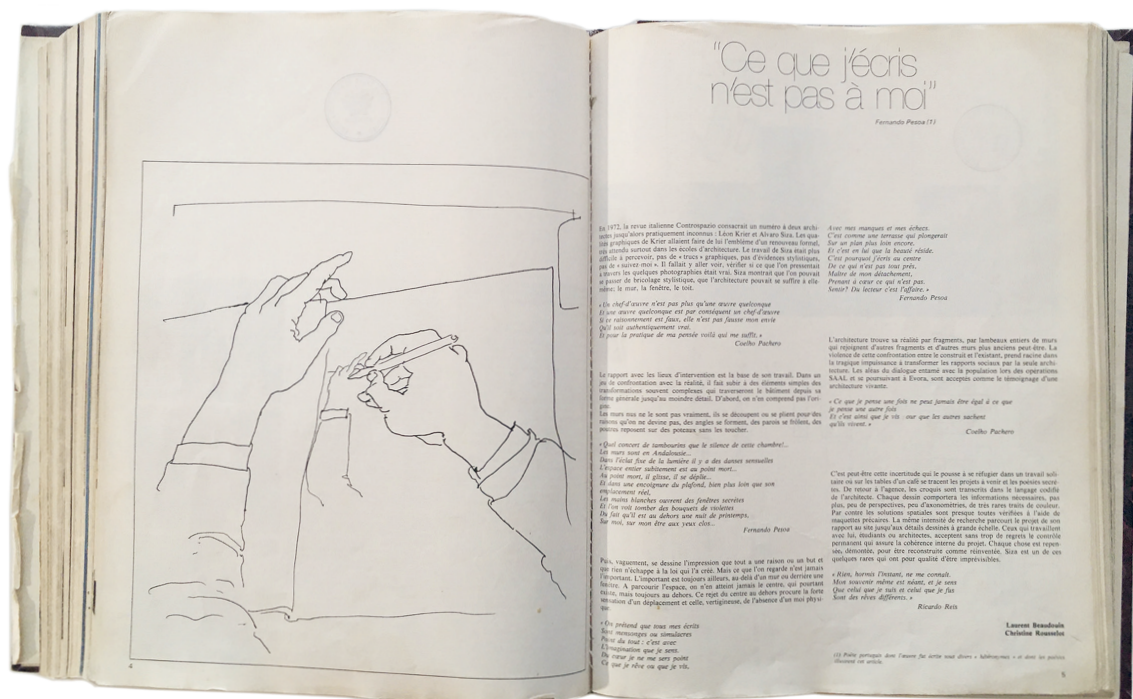


fig. 6 *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* no. 211 (1980), 4–5. Rousselot and Beaudoin's essay. (FAUP's specimen)

essay flanked by Siza's most layered and perhaps best known self-portrait, and allusions to heteronymy in the interspersed use of quotes by Fernando Pessoa, the Geminian who practised 'seeing-as' to its apex. He built his heteronyms so completely that Coelho Pacheco was long presumed to be one of his and is cited as such in Rousselot and Beaudoin's essay — as it turns out, actual *works of another author* (figure 6). Differently, while upon his first return to Boa Nova, Siza considered it the *work of another architect*, others cannot not see it, both in its irreconcilable and continuous strata, as so profoundly none other than Siza.

Outro

Through Siza, in constant build-up and profoundly autobiographical, a mature demesne of references manifests through increasingly fuzzier processes of (re)collection, filtered through gauzy layers of memory, ever more idiosyncratic and farther removed from the source. Simultaneously, the author retains the prerogative of the intentionally referential and intentionally self-referential at that.

Through Siza, architecture appears as if perpetuated through a succession of sublimations and depositions, references collected as *materia prima*, later consciously or unconsciously reworked in looking

for a solution to a problem, resulting in further *materia prima*. The latter suggests architecture, that which results of *creation* rather than *invention*, is built-upon rather than happened-upon, a perpetual movement of *progression* rather than *progress*. The first suggests, in their meaningful collection of references, architects become custodians and vessels of architecture itself.