

Alvaro Siza's Design Strategy: An Insight into Critical Regionalism

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Abstract—By the emergence of the debate over the failure of Regionalism in the late 1970s, Critical Regionalism was introduced as a different way to respond to the state of architecture in the post-war era. Critical Regionalism is most often understood as a discourse that not only mediates the language of modern architecture with the local cultures but also revives the relation between architecture and spectator as indexed by capitalism. Since the inception of Critical Regionalism, a large number of architectural practices have emerged around the globe; however, the work of the well-known Portuguese architect, Álvaro Siza, is considered as a unique case amongst works associated with the discourse of Critical Regionalism. This paper intends to respond to a number of questions, including; what are the origins of Critical Regionalism? How does Siza's design strategy correspond to the thematic of Critical Regionalism? How does Siza recover the relation between object and subject in most of his projects? Using Siza's housing project for the Malagueira district in Évora, Portugal, this article will attempt to answer these questions, and highlight Alvaro Siza's design procedure which goes beyond the existing discourse of Critical Regionalism and contributes to our understanding of this practice.

Keywords—Alvaro Siza, critical regionalism, Malagueira Housing, placelessness.

I. INTRODUCTION

PERHAPS to fully understand the causes for the emergence of Critical Regionalism as a response to the ongoing crisis in architecture, it is necessary to go back to the “project of modernity” and draw a brief chronological narrative of its transitions from the emergence of the CIAM conferences (*The Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne*) to the Second World War. It was in the early twentieth century that a crisis in architecture caused by the rejection of traditions became tangible. Arguably, the failure of Le Corbusier's Pessac housing in 1924 is one of the first tragedies that questioned modern architecture's radical ideas concerning local cultures. In Pessac, Le Corbusier injected the concept of “minimal dwelling” and a modern house as “a machine to live in” as was introduced in the first and second CIAM. However, Le Corbusier's considerations, including flat roofs and strips windows, were excessively radical to digest by the Pessac residents; as a result, his housing project was not welcomed, and faced rapid transformation and erosion by its occupants. Nevertheless, the rise of the first and second CIAM congresses in the 1920s, could be considered as the first turning point that contributed to the gap between architecture and local traditions in a global scale. Most of the first and second CIAM work

programs were drawn up by Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, and with separate sessions, the global consensus on the standardization, minimalization, abstract expression and mass production was formed. In addition, in a session, Le Corbusier argued that high-rise housing with maximum density is the true solution to housing issues, and that “economic, social, and cultural life were all dependent on a high density of settlements,” [1] the ominous concepts that became a justification for the mass production of high-rise slabs and formed a state of Placelessness and crisis in architecture.

The emergence of International Style could be counted as the second turning point that provoked the aforementioned crisis in architecture. The term International Style or International Modernism was introduced by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in the modern architecture International Exhibition that was held at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) on February 9, 1932 [2]. The intention was to introduce a universal modern style for vast-scale architectural production and urban development globally, by encapsulating common stylistic aspects of modern architecture from specific radical works of carefully selected architects, including Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. Hitchcock and Johnson formulated three elements for International Style without considering regional traditions. These are; the articulation of volume instead of mass (to maximize the amount of floor space for a given site), the emphasis on balance rather than preconceived symmetry, and an abstract expression [3]. Fueled by the housing shortage caused by the Second World War, this controversial “international solution” was widely exported, and a large number of countries used it to respond to the housing crisis due to its fast construction speed and low building cost. Subsequently, the new proposed buildings created a deep sense of cultural disorientation among local communities and contribute to the crisis especially in countries with a rooted architectural tradition.

It can be argued that the seeds of Critical Regionalism were planted by the rise of Regionalism that stood against the forceful presence of International Style and the subsequent chaotic architecture state in the postwar era. By the rapid dissemination of International Style and “the mechanical reproduction of the object” after the Second World War, the unity that once existed between architecture and “place” were entirely demolished. The new universal style, with the domination of technology, raised great concern among architects and critics and reconfirmed Jurgen Habermas's

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argument concerning the incompleteness of modernity and the historical avant-garde. Less than a decade, the concept of Regionalism was introduced by Lewis Mumford as an opposition movement to the nihilistic dimension of International Style; he stated that the “style is truly universal since it permits regional adaptations and modifications,” as cited in [4]. By the introducing the concept of Regionalism, Mumford attempted to revive regional identities and the relation between architecture and viewer by using the idea of “place making.” However, due to the rejection of modernization influences and universal technological advancements, along with the radical use of obsolescent regional elements, the movement not only failed to overcome the crisis but also formed a new disorientation in architecture. As a result, architects and critics were faced with a number of questions: how could architects revive the diminished relationship between object and subject through a compromise between the local culture and modernization? How could one have a “critical” perspective to universalization and be a regionalist simultaneously?

II. CRITICAL REGIONALISM

Critical Regionalism was firstly introduced in order to resist hegemonic architectural movements, such as International Style and Postmodern, through a critical point of view. In 1981, the term Critical Regionalism was coined by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in the essay “The grid and the pathway [5].” In the article, these Greek and French-Canadian architects attempted to warn against the vague nature of regional reformism and regionalist’s replication of historical forms. In addition, Critical Regionalism was introduced as an approach stemming from the aspirations of freedom that is linked to the nationalism, liberalism, anti-authoritarianism, and regionalism. Tzonis and Lefaivre believe that, due to the existed crisis, no new architecture could endure without considering a new relation between designer and user, a new link that could be maintained by Critical Regionalism, “a bridge over which any humanistic architecture of the future must pass” [5].

In 1983, two years after Tzonis and Lefaivre, Kenneth Frampton contributed to Critical Regionalism through a discussion about Paul Ricœur’s article over rooted cultures and civilization. In his essay, Frampton highlights Ricœur’s statement that the “world culture hybridization” would emerge over the cross-fertilization between universal civilization and local cultures [6]. For Frampton, global modernization had contributed rapidly to universal placelessness; thus, he proposed that “different regions should retain their identity independent of the contradictions underpinning the dialogical relation of modernity with capitalism [7].”

Tzonis and Lefaivre subsequent attempts to present Critical Regionalism aspects are defined by the universalism, globalization of information and mechanical reproduction of western cultural values. In 1990 and 2003, by publishing other articles, “why critical regionalism today [8]?” and “Architecture and identity in a globalized world [9],” Tzonis and Lefaivre redefined the subject of Critical Regionalism through the consideration of contemporary architectural

complexities. According to Gevork Hartoonian, in this leading essay “the word ‘critical’ is not used to denote an opposition, or resistance against anything internal or external to architecture.” He continues: “They emphasize the particular, defining region in terms of the value of the singular circumscribes projects within the physical, social, and cultural constraints of the particular, aiming at sustaining diversity while benefiting from universality [10].”

Although the architects did not mention the capitalism influences on postwar architectural production, in an indirect way, they attempted to battle mechanical reproduction, minimalization and commodification as the consequences of globalization of capitalism values. According to Tzonis and Lefaivre, Critical Regionalism revives the relationship between architect and user indexed by capitalism, engaging the object with the subject through an imagined dialogue, in which place-defining elements and modern architecture language are incorporated “strangely” instead of “familiarily” [8]. This process of “defamiliarization,” which is hard to grasp and even disturbing, tries to identify, decompose and recompose local components, and deliver a “sense of place” in a bizarre “sense of displacement [11].”

Through a number of essays, most notably “Some reflections on Postmodernism and architecture” in 1989 [12], Frampton has also recuperated his statements about Critical Regionalism, and redefined its strategies and features. Frampton highlighted that the fundamental goal of Critical Regionalism is to create a compromise between the impacts of globalization and the elements stem indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular nation. Frampton draws attention to the desire for a new critical approach towards the culture of building, which “while it does not reject the thrust of modernization, nonetheless resists being totally absorbed and consumed by it [12].” Frampton has introduced Critical Regionalism as an “architecture of resistance” and formulated six points for it: the procedure is a marginal approach that takes benefits of universal civilization and local cultures, it stresses on “place-form” and the territory formed by the structure raised on the site rather than any form of free-standing object. In addition, it considers architecture as a tectonic fact: poetic articulation of rational aspects of technology responding to the conditions imposed by site, climate, traditional elements and the quality of local light. Moreover, Critical Regionalism demonstrates a need for the establishment of a more tactile architectural work rather than visual.

III. ALVARO SIZA AND THE MALAGUEIRA HOUSING PROJECT

A. The Formation of Malagueira Housing

Since the introduction of Critical Regionalism, a large number of architectures practices have emerged; nevertheless, the works of the well-known Portuguese architect, Álvaro Siza, has been recognized as one of those who has inscribed a specific way to revive the fading dialogue between the building as “object” and spectator as “subject.” Thus, for the purpose of this paper, the Malagueira housing project was chosen in order to give more understanding of Critical Regionalism and Siza’s

reflections and interpretations of this approach. In this project, Siza not only fully addresses Frampton's six points of Critical Regionalism but also goes beyond the current discourse of this procedure and shines a new light on other neglected aspects which are necessary for maintaining a sustainable work in the age of globalization and mechanical reproduction of the object.

By the outbreak of the 1974 "White Revolution" in Portugal, and the downfall of near fifty years of dictatorship in the country, the new Portuguese Secretary of State for Housing and Urban Planning endeavored to eliminate the existing housing shortage issue. The Malagueira social housing project was part of a larger public housing plan in Evora. The objective was to establish 1200 affordable units on 27 hectares, for the lower and middle classes of society, by considering the region cultural characteristics [13]. Alvaro Siza was introduced by Evora's mayor to the municipality board as the only choice and solution to the housing crisis because of Siza's credit, regional practice, and housing experience in the Portugal region. Siza composed the elementary design concept and strategies during four months, and the final plans were endorsed by the board in November 1977. Of the 1200 residential units planned, 1100 units were built prior to July 1997, and construction was completed in 1998 [14].



Fig. 1 Malagueira housing [15]

B. Architecture for the People, by the People

Alvaro Siza employs a unique design strategy toward engaging users in the development of plans and concepts. This procedure, which is called Participatory Methodology, could be seen in any Siza's housing design process, directly tends to reflect peoples' demands and revives the relationship between designer and users. In case of Malagueira, Siza begins to form the concepts and early plans through a number of conversations with the future users, authorities and local housing co-op representatives. Interestingly enough, after the finalization of the plans, Siza built a number of full-scale models of the rooms, kitchens and living rooms using light-weight blocks to explore client feedback concerning their thoughts and experiences. Siza frequently highlights "user's engagement" as a fundamental aspect which has priority over all design process steps. However, it could be time consuming and frustrating for a designer to express all the needs and demands. According to Siza, sometimes users and authorities' responses are authoritarian and despotic; they reject all the architectural complexities and try to impose their perspective. Siza states that a designer could simply acquiesce in this time-consuming

process for avoiding discussions; however, a real procedure of engagement means that one should accept tensions, as the results of these exchanges are determinant [16]. Arguably, these direct interviews not only increase the durability of a housing by reflecting users' demands, but also improve the dialogue between "object" and "subject" by making the architect conscious of residents' capacity for reception of his or her design concepts and ideas.

C. Palimpsest versus Tabula Rasa

For Alvaro Siza, site, terrain, and pre-existing elements are fundamental for his architectural design. Siza describes that in his initial work, he commences by the examination of the site in order to find out which elements can be used or should be removed in order to adapt the project to the current situation in the region. According to Frampton, Siza's projects have strong dependencies on region's topography and local elements and "he has grounded his buildings in the confirmation of a specific topography and in the fine-grained texture of the local fabric [17]." However, the final outcome of his work might not be identified easily by the locals, and would not only be attributable to obsolescent local elements or region vernacular architecture. Siza has strongly opposed the modernist methodology of the Tabula Rasa; he has never looked at project sites as a white leveled plane and has always used pre-existing elements as the beginnings and strong foundations for his works. Perhaps this claim can be proved by the examination of Siza's early sketches of Malagueira housing. Siza had highlighted all the existing objects, such as trees, rocks, paths, ancient remains, and windmills in his drawings. Subsequently, he tried to evolve his ideas and plans of Malagueira housing by the consideration of discovered elements and also the topography features. Through highlighting pre-existing details, Siza demonstrates how an architects' intervention could avoid placelessness, and gain benefits by creating a deep sense of place and belonging for future residents.

D. Malagueira, the Flagship of Mediation

It can be suggested that the "mediator" feature of Critical Regionalism constitutes the major part of Alvaro Siza's work. This compromise between the rooted cultures and globalization influences establishes new hybrid elements that can be highlighted in all aspects of Siza's work, particularly in the Malagueira housing project. For instance, Siza designed extended duct-walls in order to transfer and supply gas, telephone, electricity and fresh water for the Malagueira units [18]. The design concept of the walls is derived from the Roman Aqueducts, as a local ancient structure, combined with concrete frames, as a modern experience. These innovative hybrid walls are not only expressed as an infrastructure, but also function as an entrance, gate, façade, canopy and also a landmark, as shown in Fig. 2. It can be argued that, using this combination, Siza utilizes the dynamic feature of modernism in order to recover the existing defunct elements of a project site.

Returning to the origins of modern architecture is another characteristic of Alvaro Siza's design process. In the Malagueira housing, Siza specifically returned to Le

Corbusier's concept of the Dom-Ino house and manifested its features in plans, facades, and volume, as shown in Fig. 3. In designing the exterior and geometry of houses, Siza followed the same pattern of Dom-Ino shapes that Le Corbusier used in a number of projects, including Pessac housing. Perhaps another example of this tendency could be found in the Malagueira plans; Siza returned to Le Corbusier's modular system, elegantly combining this concept with the existing Evora vernacular house schemes, and the Roman Golden Proportion to form the Malagueira housing plans. This syntax, which recalls the notion of "defamiliarization" of Critical Regionalism, demonstrates that "eternity" for an architect's work would appear through the consideration of the past and present as a mixture, as none would be everlasting individually.



Fig. 2 Extended duct-walls in Malagueira housing [19]

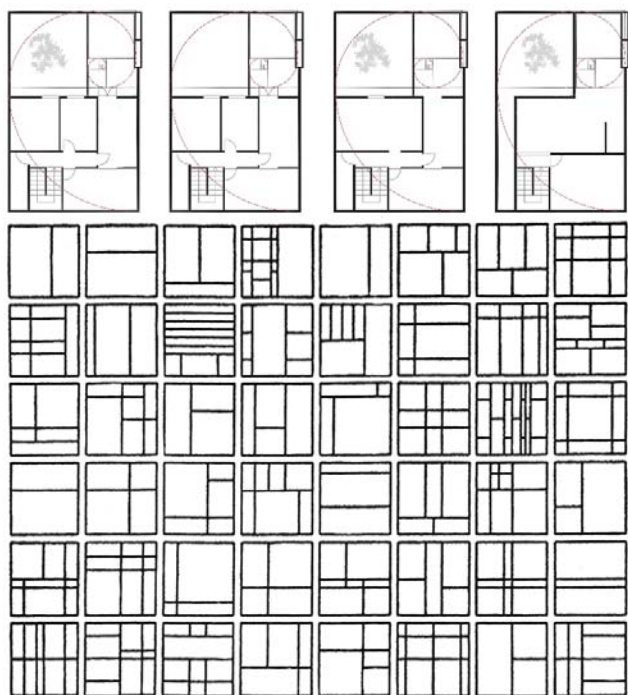


Fig. 3 The reflections of Le Corbusier's modular system and Roman Golden Proportion in a number of Malagueira housing plans

Alvaro Siza's work might be interpreted as a collage of values, the elected values from the inheritance of the past and present that result in the more tactile and metaphysical experience rather than visual and physical. It can be suggested that the Malagueira complex is the true reflection of the mentioned statement. Throughout the use of Evora vernacular architecture features, such as colors, door and window shapes, frames, local materials, Roman Golden Proportion, in combination with the dimensional layering of surfaces that stem from the language of modern architecture, Siza creates a magnificent dialogue not only between the past and present, but also between the culture of building and subject [20]. In addition, Siza articulates each Malagueira house by different tactile images; the visions that connect the residents to the past, revive their memories, and deliver a "sense of place" in a strange "sense of displacement." Arguably, the definition of "image of architecture" that Siza represents in Malagueira housing outstrips Benjamin's interpretation of "image"; "the true images of the past flits by" [21].

IV. CONCLUSION

Given the mentioned points, Critical Regionalism is a design strategy that aims to create an equilibrium between vernacular architecture with the features of modernism and the impacts of universalization, as exemplified in Siza's work. In addition, this critical approach not only attempts to generate a more tactile and tectonic vision of architecture, but also revives the relation between object and subject by creating a deep sense of place for users. Alvaro Siza arguably is the flagship proponent of Critical Regionalism. In the Malagueira housing project, Siza responds elegantly to the aforementioned considerations and creates a new hybrid work that is not attributed to the past or present. This is a new experience for tactile and regional architecture that is mainly formed by the nihilistic features of modernism and the pre-existing defunct elements of the local site. The image that Siza presents in Malagueira housing undeniably goes beyond the existing discourse of Critical Regionalism, contributing to our understanding of social housing design strategy and connecting the building and spectator to the past and present; ultimately addressing an insatiable desire for identity and eternity.

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