

REFLECTIONS OF LE CORBUSIER ON THE WORK OF ÁLVARO SIZA

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Raúl García García

Doctorando, Departamento de Proyectos, Escuela
Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Valencia (ETSAV)
Universidad Politécnica de Valencia. Valencia, España.
arquitectura.raulgarcia@gmail.com
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3775-6755>

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Image of Álvaro
Siza with his
inseparable cigar,
alongside the image
of Le Corbusier,
who used to smoke a
pipe.

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ABSTRACT

This research article navigates through the different common lines seen between the life and work of two of the most relevant architects of the 20th century: Le Corbusier and Álvaro Siza. Though belonging to different times, they both constitute indisputable examples of the architecture of their times, where several aspects in common appear, inviting us to think about the unconscious influence of the Swiss master on the work of the Portuguese architect over the years.

Keywords: Álvaro Siza, Le Corbusier, Contemporary Architecture, Modern Movement, influences

RESUMEN

El presente artículo de investigación plantea un recorrido por las diferentes líneas comunes advertidas entre la vida y la obra de dos de los arquitectos más relevantes del siglo XX: Le Corbusier y Álvaro Siza. Aunque pertenecientes a diferentes épocas, ambos constituyen indiscutidos referentes de la arquitectura de su tiempo en los que asoman numerosos aspectos en común que invitan a pensar en una influencia inconsciente del maestro suizo sobre el trabajo que el portugués desarrolló a lo largo de los años.

Palabras Clave: Álvaro Siza, Le Corbusier, Arquitectura Contemporánea, Movimiento Moderno, influencias

RESUMO

Este artigo de pesquisa propõe um percurso através das diversas linhas comuns encontradas na vida e obra de dois dos arquitetos mais relevantes do século XX: Le Corbusier e Álvaro Siza. Embora tenham vivido em épocas diferentes, ambos são referentes indiscutíveis da arquitetura de seu tempo. Entre eles podem-se contatar inúmeros pontos em comum, os quais nos convidam a suspeitar de uma influência inconsciente do professor suíço no arquiteto português ao longo dos anos.

Palavras-Chave: Álvaro Siza, Le Corbusier, Arquitetura Contemporânea, Movimento Moderno, influências

INTRODUCTION

Trying to discover the influence, today, that a figure like that of Le Corbusier had on the theory and practice of 20th century architecture, somewhat lacks sense. It may not be an exaggeration to say that there has been no other architect that has achieved this, both with their built work and their theoretical work, setting new parameters in the discourse of modern architecture in the same way as the Swiss architect did with what is assumed as the start of the Modern Movement.

In the same way that for many other architects of the time, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (1887-1965) was, without a doubt, one of the stand-out influences for Fernando Távora (1923-2005), and by proxy, for his disciple Álvaro Siza (1933-). The theoretical thinking of the Swiss architect, set important grounds in Siza, who was capable of adopting (and conceiving) all the international trends he had access to after the opening up seen in Portugal with the Carnation Revolution, which made him a referent of architecture at the end of the 20th century, as a nexus between the Modern Movement and current architecture. Siza would transfer, often unconsciously, different aspects that are very present in the work of Le Corbusier and his theoretical discourse. From an in-depth study of the work of both architects, mainly using the methodology defended by the Pritzker 2001 award-winner, Jacques Herzog, where he states that "considering buildings and describing what one sees is the best way to learn architecture" (Kipnis, 1997 p. 16), some of the reminiscent echoes of the Swiss architect are extracted in the work of the Portuguese architect. Some of the most notable reflections of the past that these traces left in the architect of Matosinhos, are spelled out below.

REFLECTION 1

KNOWING THE PAST TO BUILD THE FUTURE

On numerous occasions, the Swiss master manifested being in favor of the study, but not of the direct use, of what he called 'folklore', stating that "the study of folklore does not provide magic formulas capable of solving contemporary architectural issues; it informs intimately about the profound and natural needs of men, manifested in the solutions experienced as centuries have gone by" (Le Corbusier, 2006, p. 28).

This is, without a doubt, the same attitude that Álvaro Siza would later adopt when looking into the regional architecture of Portugal - especially in the north -, which undoubtedly represents a crucial role in his means of understanding Architecture. The rationalist approach he uses to develop his path, beyond what the materials and construction techniques allow him -or invite him-, to analyze the physical circumstances of the territory and the socio-economic politics of the population, often finding the answers to the material needs there are in the rural setting.

Although it could conceptually seem that this idea is contradictory, there is a close similarity in the innovative nature of both architects, founded in the knowledge of what already existed. It was not in vain, that Le Corbusier was one of the greatest exponents of the Modern Movement, that promoted a new means of understanding architecture and implied the greatest and most significant change of modern times, in this aspect. His "Five points of architecture" (1926-27), materialized in Villa Saboya, appear absolutely present in the manifest of Fernando Távora's 1951 'House on the Sea', and that accompanied Siza throughout his career, especially at its beginning, coinciding with the enormous impact of the CIAM of 1951 and 1953, where Le Corbusier and his ideas were received with admiration and even, a certain devotion. Then, just as Le Corbusier and Távora had done, Siza abandoned - or at least left on another plane -, the famous five points.

Therefore, both share interest about the History of Architecture, understanding that knowledge of the past is key to be able to create the future. Proof of this is that, on several occasions, Siza says that architects do not invent anything new, they only transform the reality that already exists.

REFLECTION 2

TRAVELING AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

Every time that Álvaro Siza gives an interview, or answers questions in any of his conferences, when he is asked about advice for young architects, his response is always the same: "TRAVEL A LOT". Traveling has been the unconscious source of inspiration of a good number of the Portuguese's projects, which in a meeting he even explained how memories of his childhood, in trips with his family to Barcelona or on visiting La Alhambra, appear without him being aware at the time of how to resolve certain aspects of a concrete project that had a similar issue.

The knowledge acquired through travels, likewise implied an endless source of inspiration that Le Corbusier absorbed throughout his career, both with the influences that he adopted in his stays in South America, as well as from his more renowned travels in India. The Swiss master himself expressed this in the following way:

"The site is the plate of the composition. I understood this during a long trip I made in 1911, backpacking, from Prague to Asia Minor and Greece. I discovered architecture, installed in its place". (Le Corbusier; 2006, p. 64).

This would explain the importance the act of knowing how to read the place has for both architects, not only as a physical space where the built architecture is placed, but rather as a relationship of this physical space with the surroundings. With the immediate physical surroundings, but also with the social setting, the cultural setting, the political setting, and the historic setting. And this is what makes them both have a special sensitivity in the reading of the context, achieving that their work, is often placed in the context as if it had always been there, adapted to the setting without transforming or brusquely conditioning it. In fact, this special ability to read the place is done by these two architects using with a pretty similar methodology:

I arrived, took out my sketchbook, as I always did. I drew the horizons, placed the orientation of the sun, smelt out the topography. The first step was choosing the place, the nature of the land, and then the composition that we were going to do under these conditions. (Le Corbusier, 2014, p. 9)

REFLECTION 3

EYES WHICH DO NOT SEE¹

Maybe, with a certain irony, Le Corbusier titled a chapter of his work, *Towards a New Architecture*, this way, since in 1918 he had lost sight of one of his eyes. Curiously, Siza today is also suffering, and for some time now, from a condition that causes that his eyelids to close, giving him a look that he is musing on occasion, while speaking. Concretely, this expression used by Le Corbusier in 1923 is one of the favorites of the Portuguese architect, which he often uses, which comes to mean a call to attention for society - and specially architects - who are compelled to not just look, but see. Siza considers -he would mention this to us in one of our meetings in his study in Porto-, that "architects learn by seeing, not looking: seeing", and this was what Le Corbusier was trying to say, in one way or another, in the lines of this chapter of *Towards a New Architecture*, where he encourages architects to look further, to focus on planes, ships, and other engineering works to be able to apply what they observe to the area of architecture, as in the long run, the house is a "living machine". In this sense, Jeanneret had the feeling that the style of a new era already existed, manifested in structures and great feats of engineering, and that it had to be merged into two culturally different phenomena: the acknowledgement of the architectonic meaning of engineering, backed by Gropius and other renowned members of the Werkbund, and one's own aspiration to industrialize the site of the dwelling.

¹ The title of this 'reflection of the past' (eyes which do not see) reproduces that of one of the chapters of *towards a new architecture*, the emblematic book that Le Corbusier would publish in 1923.

When asked on one occasion about the great talent of Siza, the Portuguese architect himself said that “it has never been a matter of talent. It was a matter of work, and, above all, having your eyes open” (2016).²

The capacity of seeing further is vitally important for both architects. Of seeing, looking, observing, of being able to capture with their eyes, the essence of the place, its character, its soul, and also its needs, to cover them with the intervention that is done in said space; a proposal that goes against that of believers in the partisan trend where architecture must transform the environment, instead of adapting to it.

REFLECTION 4

INVOLUNTARY OPPORTUNISM

For Siza, the great talent of Le Corbusier is because of “being the right man in the right time and at the right place”.³ This kind of opportunism is understood, if we consider that Le Corbusier appears on the international stage at a time of great transformation in the entire world. In the 1920s and 1930s, resulting from the euphoria of World War I, there is a great appetite for living, creating, and rebuilding. It is a historic moment where artistic creation experiences a noticeable boost. And something similar happens with the end of World War II, at the end of the 1940s. Le Corbusier, who has a special sensitivity, sees himself as by chance immersed into that atmosphere of change, and it undoubtedly helps that his renovating ideas acquire a well-known international scope and projection.

The case of Siza is not so different, having heard many comments of well-known friends, Eduardo Souto de Moura or Kenneth Frampton, among others, who say that the fame and recognition arrived “despite him”. Álvaro Siza starts his professional path under the guidance of Távora, his master, who a few years earlier had begun a project to form the identity of the School of Porto and sees in Siza, a figure capable of providing continuity and symbolizing this new Portuguese School. Later, this is added to the fact that Portugal takes on an atmosphere of change and freedom (after the Carnation Revolution of 1974, that brought an end to the dictatorship of Salazar)⁴, similar, somewhat, to the one around Le Corbusier at an international level. These airs of change, after decades of dictatorship and hermetism, lead to Siza being surrounded, without overly seeking this, in the SAAL projects that position him, as a sort of expert in social housing. These circumstances will facilitate the international recognition that he had not sought from his discrete profile and way of understanding architecture.

Thus, we can say that there is a kind of parallelism in the way both architects reach international renown, almost accidentally, or at least not sought deliberately, as only the consequence of knowing how to read the socio-political situation surrounding them, with a sensitivity that allowed them to interpret the needs of the time, and respond to these with their theoretical and built proposals.

2 Interview made by the author to Álvaro Siza in his Porto office in December 2016.

3 Interview made by the author to Álvaro Siza in his Porto office in December 2016.

4 António de Oliveira Salazar was the head of the Portuguese regime that was in power from 1933 to 1974. After the dictator's death, in 1974, a series of chain reactions were triggered that would bring an end to the regime with the Revolution of 1974.

REFLECTION 5

MATERIALITY OF LIGHT AND KINETICS OF SPACE

Both for the work of Le Corbusier and Siza, natural light and the kinetic nature provided by it to architecture, are essential elements. Natural light adopts a special symbology in sacred buildings, which are object of the comparative analysis presented below. Said approach is based on the work of Henry Plummer, a great scholar of the work of the architects in question, who pays special attention to the light aspect.

Le Corbusier, in his three sacred buildings (Ronchamp, La Tourette and Saint-Pierre en Firminy), manages as he so wished, the orientation, the openings and the materiality to lead to a type of architecture, that in all cases, has a strong kinetic character due to natural light. Light has been associated for thousands of years, to the divinity and sanctity of religion. With each new era, and each artistic movement, a language of light itself has histori-



Figure 1

Inside Le Corbusier's church of Ronchamp.
Source: Photograph by Rory Hide (<https://www.plataformaarquitectura.cl/cl/02-74548/clasicos-de-la-arquitectura-ronchamp-lecorbusier/1288285438-ronchamp-roryrory-1000x750>)

Figure 2

Outside view of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp church.
Source: Photograph by Cara Hyde Baso (https://www.plataformaarquitectura.cl/cl/02-74548/clasicos-de-la-arquitectura-ronchamp-lecorbusier/1288287321-ronchamp-1000x666?next_project=no)



cally emerged: the bright bells of Romanticism, the Byzantine golden glow, and the stained glass of the Gothic, are just an example of this. However, at the turn of the 20th century, light adopts a new meaning, also in religious buildings, that Henry Plummer explained as follows in his book *Cosmos of Light: The Sacred Architecture of Le Corbusier*:

Instead of serving as a tool of religious persuasion, as it generally has in the past, light has become a quiet force to visually resist and elude, erode and outshine, the Church's mandate. Light eats away and weakens institutional discipline, while exerting its own dazzling powers to draw attention out to the sky and its commonplace marvels – in effect using light to consecrate the natural universe. (Plummer, 2013, p. 97).

In the case of the Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut de Ronchamp (1950-1955) [Figures 1 and 2], the main characteristic is the continuous cycle of solar events. The dawn sun lights up the side chapel, turning it into a reddish tinted empty space, which Plummer considers as a clear analog of human birth. As the sun moves, the high openings located between the eastern and southern walls begin to be flooded, penetrating the deep hollows generated on the southern wall. A small horizontal slit of barely ten centimeters, visually separates the ceiling from the wall, generating a marked contrast. The solar cycle culminates at dusk, when the opening located in the other chapel, allows a warm glow to bathe the inside of the building.

The Convent of La Tourette (1953-1960) [Figure 3], with a much more straight-lined geometry than the poetic shapes of Ronchamp or Firminy [Figure 4], implies a more complex work of light. Each and every one of the aisles has an open side, each one with one orientation, which leads to very different lighting sensations. The different openings provide an irregular rhythm to the light, which in the opinion of Plummer, remind one of a musical composition:

Unlike the repetitive rhythms of windows and columns in traditional churches, these fluent rhythms are aperiodic, based upon intervals of light and transparency that gradually compress and expand in waves. The lovingly cadenced beats have the intonation and flow of music — not orchestral music, but chant-like sounds, whose tones help to draw people further into a contemplative state. (Plummer, 2013, p. 124).



Figure 3

Inside Le Corbusier's La Tourette chapel. Source: Le Corbusier Foundation (<http://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/corbuweb/morpheus.aspx?sysId=11&sysLanguage=fr-fr&sysParentId=11&sysParentName=home&clearQuery=1>)

Figure 4

Inside Le Corbusier's Firminy chapel. Source: Photograph by Henry Plummer (<https://www.plataformaaarquitectura.cl/762849/light-matters-le-corbusier-y-la-trinidad-de-laluz/54da556ae58ecec5300000f-view-looking-south-t>)

With the sunset, the light's dance gains more of a leading role, thanks to the slit located on the west wall, that helps to draw lines along the side walls. The north wall connects the two golden lines that slowly move as the sun sets. If this were not enough, it is worth highlighting that this effect varies depending on the season, projecting a small triangle in winter, and a large rectangle when the sun is stronger, during the summer:

The lighting scenography of the Parish Church of Saint-Pierre de Firminy (1960-2006), is structured in three phases. The façade has small windows that create points of light on the ground, becoming waves of light that rise and fall as the sun moves, creating a surprising pattern on the walls in front of the altar.

However, it is worth stating that the construction of the building took place after the death of Le Corbusier, and Plummer states that surely the Swiss architect did not imagine this phenomenon, originated by placing polycarbonate cylinders with concentric grooves.

Around midday, the waves disappear and the light ends with darkness through two tubes at an angle, placed on the roof.

With the sunset, golden light filters inside, bathing the altar wall. A straight-lined canon intensely projects the sunlight, while cosmic scenes appear in a suggestive manner as a whole.

The light techniques used by Le Corbusier are presented as a new multi-faceted and dynamic language, that transcends the constructive statism and adopts a kinetic nature that changes as the hours pass during the day, and as the seasons do so during the year.

Meanwhile, in the church of Santa Maria de Marco de Canaveções [Figure 5], Álvaro Siza "recreates the spirit of the primitive Christian church, providing a supernatural nature to the nave, that resides, to a great extent, in the fluctuating presence of the sloped northern wall that lights the nave using very high windows" (Frampton, 2000, p. 56).

Siza would repeat the play of straight and curved volumes years later, in the Church of Saint Jacques de la Lande [Figure 6], where other aspects, like the furniture, also exude the influence of Marco de Canaveções.

In the church of Marco de Canaveções, Siza makes use of multiple constructive resources to generate a space loaded with meaning and symbolism, which although it changes depending on the area, it is also subjected to this kinetic nature, and varies as the day and the different times of the year go by.

In this way, Henry Plummer explains the different settings that the natural light generates in the church built in 1996:

The light that the three high windows on the north wall of the church emit, appears with the force of its radiation, to pressure and deform the solid plane, making it slope and curve. The directional



Figure 5

Inside Álvaro Siza's Church of Santa Maria in Marco de Canaveães. Source: Personal files of Juan Rodríguez. Rights granted by the author.



Figure 6

Álvaro Siza's Church of Saint Jacques de la Lande. Source: Amado, Ana. Published in Archdaily: <https://www.archdaily.com/889080/alvaro-sizas-new-church-of-saint-jacques-de-la-lande-though-the-lens-of-ana-amado/5a8490d1f197ccb8c000079-alvaro-sizas-new-church-of-saint-jacques-de-la-lande-though-the-lens-of-ana-amado-photo>

light thus paints the space with vaporous effects, whose soft tonal play is heightened by the empty walls. Helping to stabilize the light countercurrent and reaffirm the axis of the liturgy, there are two blind windows behind the altar, lit by a small hidden skylight. Opposite moods are developed in other areas, like the baptismal font, where the rain of light is focused towards the artisanal tiles and even brings a fluid sparkle to the font. The funerary chapel, located under the church, is once again different. After a series of deathly steps and winding corridors, a telluric gloom surges towards us, culminating in a lit space located under the clarity of a small skylight where the coffin is placed. (2009, p. 212)

With all this, it could be confirmed that, with the figure of Fernando Távora as an undeniable nexus, the work of Siza presents several reflections of a past acquired, in many cases unconsciously, from Le Corbusier. And as a confirmation therein, Siza himself acknowledges the Swiss architect as one of his greatest influences, although he assures that, the same goes for Frank Lloyd Wright or even aspects of his childhood, that this is knowledge acquired, that is stored in the memory and appears as unpremeditated influxes, when a given project issue so requires, to contribute towards giving shape to the ideal solution.

These factors are essential to understand the architectonic profile of the Portuguese master, which have led him to become one of the references of the international architectonic stage at the end of the 20th and start of the 21st centuries.

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