

Houses of Work and Play: Alvaro Siza at FAUP (1985-1997) and Fernando Tavora's School of Architecture at Guimaraes (2009-12)

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“To me, and to my occupation, hockey was a major influence: the game is so fast and demanding that it is impossible to separate previously defined strategy from improvisation. They must act in tandem, with the decisive support of wheels. In Architecture one can also resort to ‘flying wheels’ to deal with the complexity, the extent, and the accidents that every project entails: previous knowledge, perhaps experience and undoubtedly doubt – these are instruments continually set against each other from the beginning, until synchronism, or a certain operative instantaneousness are attained.”

—Alvaro Siza

“The being of art cannot be defined as an object of aesthetic consciousness, because, on the contrary, the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. It is part of the event of being that occurs in presentation, and belongs essentially to play as play... What we mean by truth here can best be defined again in terms of our concept of play. The weight of the things we encounter in understanding plays itself out in a linguistic event, a play of words playing around and about what is learnt. Language games exist where we as learners—and when do we cease to be that?—rise to the understanding of the world. Here it is worth recalling what we said about the nature of play, namely that the player’s actions should not be considered subjective actions, since it is, rather, the game itself that plays, for it draws the players into itself and thus becomes the actual subjectum of the playing... When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates us just as the beautiful captivates us... what we encounter in the experience of the beautiful and in understanding the meaning of tradition really has something of the truth of play about it.”

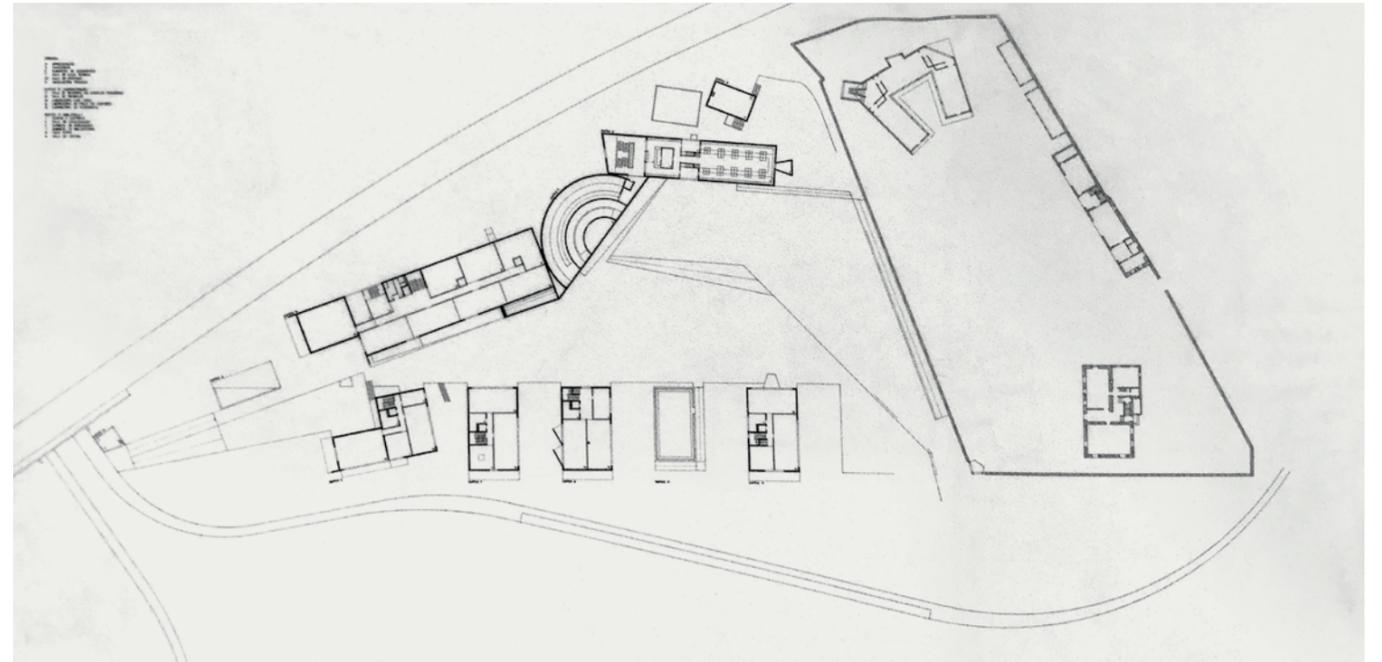
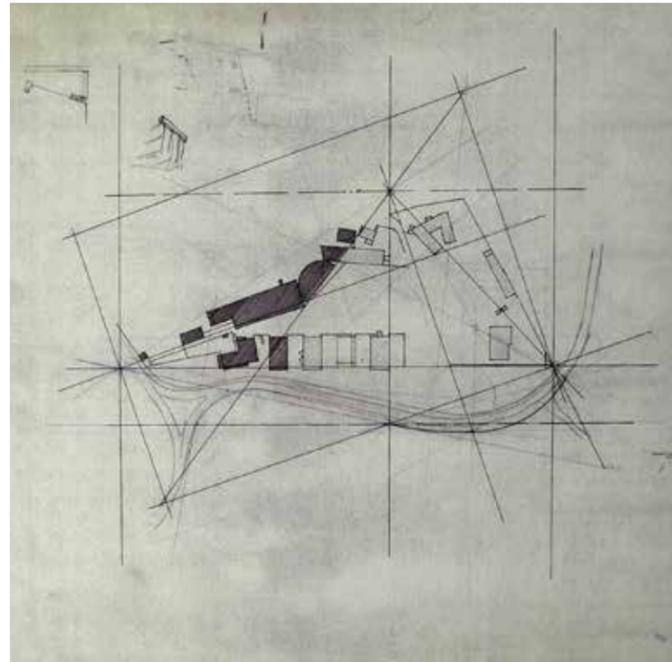
—Hans-Georg Gadamer

The final building of the great Portuguese architect Fernando Tavora, the School of Architecture at Guimaraes, is arguably his most didactic, in the sense that it is designed as a place to teach architecture in, and to act as a lesson in itself. His protege, Alvaro Siza, famously built a new home for their alma mater. Previously known as ESBAP, (Escola Superiore de Belas-Artes do Porto) FAUP (the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto), relocated from the art school in the centre of Porto to be part of the University of Porto campus in the 1990s. It is, very self-consciously, a *House of Architecture*¹, a dressing up box of fragments, quotes and well-mannered jokes. FAUP is as a sort of analogical microcosm of the cities of Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia, I believe. In contrast, Tavora’s school of architecture at Guimaraes—

part of the University of the Minho—does not attempt to assimilate nor to represent an entire city’s topography in miniature. In common with FAUP though, the sloping site itself, at the edge of a concrete university campus, at the edge of a stone city, becomes part of the landscape of the interior of the architecture.

Set on a hillside, close to a road bridge at the mouth of the river Douro, the bridge seems to be part of the extended composition of FAUP; the school-city a gateway to the Atlantic Ocean, and the world “beyond the luxury of academia”, Wilfried Wang suggests². An early design development plan—seemingly the primary site plan in fact—describes the generating geometric principles from which the project develops. Siza established two things simultaneously: a point from which he projects lines that “centre” parts of the composition beyond the site (actively just beyond the northern wall of the old villa garden); and at the same time he draws the scheme within the confines of a DIN Standard, Fibonacci sequence-derived, Golden Section ratio-A-paper-size. In other words, the initial drawing establishes the project as an exercise; establishing architecture as a mode of creativity founded on proportion and geometry as an analogue of order, growing from the discipline of orthographic drawing. As in all surveying and thence design work, the site is ordered by being measured and drawn first of all. Decisions made at this stage, about what to exclude or include within a project, Siza seems to be saying more or less explicitly—and I happen to think he’s making this point (pretty much) very obviously—can generate a whole concept for a building project. In this case, the diagonal that bisects the *Site as Drawing* establishes a theoretical point from which disparate parts of the architectural whole are related. One can’t see this ‘centre’, it is not a perspective device or a visual panopticon, but once you know it exists, the uncanny sense of familiarity that relates the parts of the whole together, are explained. The point of origin is less important than the effect that it has in orienting everything outwards, beyond itself; which results in the tremendously liberating sense of the school throwing you out onto the horizon of the river and the sea. This sensation is both familiar and unfamiliar: there is sufficient sense of reciprocity between the various parts, and articulation of their differences, to establish a satisfying sense of identity and a sense of place, without this feeling introverted or totally safe. Architectural education, Siza seems to be suggesting, is a threshold between childhood and mature artistic freedom, and the school credibly seems to prepare generation after generation for the adventures of professional life.

Siza is making a case I believe, in his insistence on publishing and re-publishing this site plan drawing, for the origin of design as *disegno*, and in particular for the primacy of the plan (as Alberti



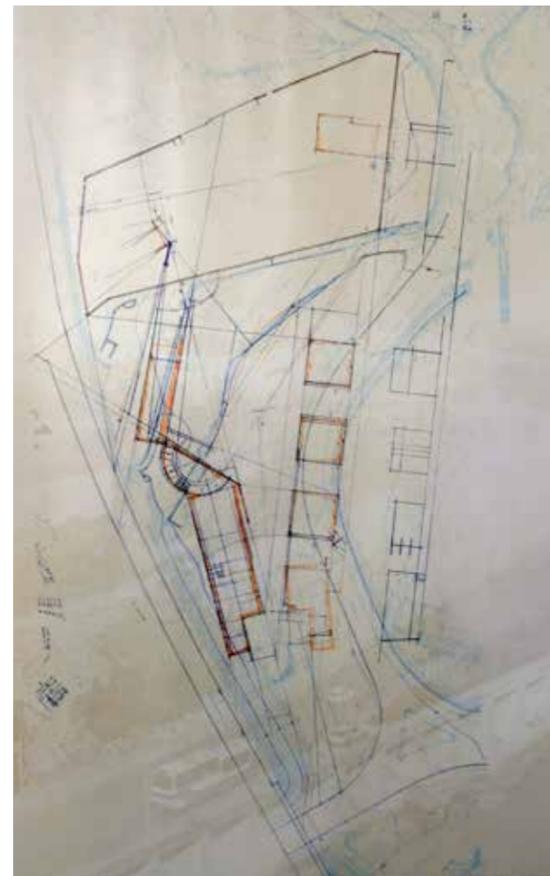
suggested). Also, I'd suggest, for the fundamental role of geometry in unifying the visible and invisible aspects of architecture. This is, in effect, an argument for the primarily spatial character of architectural experience on the one hand, and for its fundamentally theoretical nature too. This unremarkable site plan drawing is strange but not obscure, it features as one of only six drawings of the FAUP project in the catalogue of the recent exhibition Alvaro Siza: in/discipline at Serralves Institute in Porto (19th September 2019 to 2nd February 2020)³. A version of this drawing is also for sale as a poster in the bookshop at FAUP, and has been since the building opened.

As well as the significance of the site plan as a heuristic, analytical device, the *site* is not some disembodied field in Siza's theory of pedagogy—if one can assume that this is what the drawings and the school are, I'd like to suggest they are. Site is earth, world, city; it is embodied and material, thick with tacit meaning, and latent communicative cultural power.⁴ Siza seemingly *cuts into* what is in fact mounded-up, made ground at FAUP. An analogue of the riverine geology of Porto, albeit artfully faced with stone cladding, the piazza in between the administration blocks and the studio houses is reminiscent of the granite wharfs in the quays of the old town. The long, lower structures to the north of the site house the lecture hall, exhibition spaces, the library and offices, etc., and are connected via gently sloping ramps that extend beneath the central courtyard to a series of subterranean spaces forming the basements of the studio villas. These *villas* imitate the wine lodges across the Rio Douro, which the school overlooks. It is a perfect fusion of city and architecture—*architecture as city* even (as Florian Beigel and Phil Christou might suggest⁵)—gently teaching students about their reciprocity.

The library is a pedagogic message in itself. The journey from thick, rocky ground to illuminated sky is completed there, and this phenomenological shift is accompanied by a declaration of the erudite, hermeneutic task of imagination. The long, triangulated white glass roof light is a quotation from the three glass roof lights in Alvar Aalto's academic bookshop in Helsinki.⁶ A small door at mezzanine level opens onto a tiny terrace with view of the city of Porto below, as if inviting your imagination to take flight from *within* the traditions of the discipline of architecture. Alvar Siza has the wit and imagination to make such a point playfully and with tact. The decorum of this mimetic creativity acts as an introduction to young architects to a not-so-secret world of imaginative possibilities⁷; reminds us that all new architectural knowledge is one part of a living archive of ideas. A "project", Siza claims, "is for the architect what the character of the novel is for an architect... but the project is a character with many authors, and it becomes intelligent only when it is dealt with like that, otherwise it becomes obsessive and impertinent. The design is the desire for intelligence."⁸

Despite the didactic elegance and precision of his prose, Alvaro Siza insists that: "Here and there I read and heard that, as an architect, I lack a clear supporting theory. I agree."⁹ Elsewhere, he contradicts the veracity of this assertion by insisting upon a theory of architecture that is exceptionally demanding, and somewhat paradoxical: "Architecture is the revelation of a hazily latent collective desire. This cannot be taught, but it is possible to learn to desire it." He continues,

Clockwise from top left: Exhibition of student work at FAUP; early site plan of FAUP by Alvaro Siza; final site plan drawing of FAUP; early site plan of FAUP for sale as a poster in the bookshop there



"Therefore, architecture is risk and risk seeks impersonal desire and anonymity, from a merger of subjectivity and objectivity. In the last analysis, in a progressive distancing from the I. Architecture means commitment transformed into radical expression, in other words, a capacity to absorb the opposite and go beyond contradiction. To learn this requires teaching us to seek the Other within each of us." He concludes, "Architecture is Art or it is not architecture."¹⁰

Despite Siza's protestations not to have "a clear supporting theory", in his writing, and in particularly in his drawings and buildings, we are reminded of the ancient meaning of theory, which Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as a form of festive participation in his essay "What is Practice?". Gadamer declares, "This is what the Greeks called *theoria*: to have been given away to something that in virtue of its overwhelming presence is accessible to all in common and that is distinguished in such a way that in contrast to all other goods it is not diminished by being shared and so is not an object of dispute like all other goods but actually gains through participation. In the end, this is the birth of the concept of reason: the more what is desirable is displayed for all in a way that is convincing to all, the more those involved discover themselves in this common reality: to that extent human beings possess freedom in the positive sense, they have their true identity in that common reality."¹¹ It is not always necessary to have read philosophy to act with wisdom of course, and one does not need to have read nor to have written theory in order to demonstrate it: and, just as paradoxically, art tends to both precede and yet to grow out of criticism – it is a form of discourse in itself. Siza's architecture exhibits "Maturity and freshness, tradition and innovation, repetition and difference, continuity and contrast, discipline and freedom", Carles Muro suggests¹², and this juxtaposition of opposites echoes



Siza's own declaration, cited by Muro in the Alvaro Siza: in/discipline catalogue: "Tradition is a challenge to innovation. It is made of successive grafts. I am a conservative and a traditionalist, that is to say, I move between conflicts, compromises, hybridisation, transformation."¹³ Whilst Siza somewhat modestly claims to "lack a supporting theory", this may be because his work (like Aalto's) is a form of *built architectural theory*, a theory of participation where an imaginative architect, he claims: "draws what most impresses him and becomes, like all great creators, an 'agent of cross fertilisation' – the seed of transformation. What I mean by this", Siza continues, further clarifying his professed non-theory, "is that by mastering proven models (the model is universal), he transforms them, as he introduces them into different, distorted realities, he also interbreeds them, uses them in a surprising and luminous way; strange objects that come to earth and then put down roots. The student building in Boston (1947) is an Aalto building and it is at the same time an American building."¹⁴ My contention is that at FAUP Siza seized the opportunity to embody his theoretical intuitions, in particular regarding the mimetic character of the architectural imagination, and that he sought to make this manifest in a spatial, and specifically spatially dramatic manner.

At the western end of the site new students are introduced to the campus through a sort of open ruin of a portal. Externally, it is painted white like the rest of the architecture of the school, but is painted red inside (in imitation of a 19th century villa situated at the eastern end of the complex). Matriculating students pass through this gateway as a right of passage en masse, at the Architects' Christening party each September, at the start of the new school year. Domestic scales abound within a taught civic framework; in the garden of the old villa the Carlos Ramos Pavilion (named after a former professor of Siza's)

unifies further a strong sense of historical and spatial continuity between older and newer designs. The "4th wall" of which is framed by a public garden loggia, an ~~XXXXXX~~ of fundamental construction principles: rough hewn stone columns tied to timber beams by twine, supporting vegetal growth. A minimal primitive gazebo; architecture year zero. Architectural history is recast as a matter of generations evolving from a familial past, the students occupying this background condition seemingly naturally, as if – in the pavilion building particularly – they have co-opted an existing structure, and made their home in it, in an act of audacious creative re-appropriation. The school becomes their home, Siza's architecture their inheritance.

Rafael Moneo suggests that Siza has arranged his buildings at FAUP like characters on a stage¹⁵, in a form of narrative post-modern architecture. The project is at once a portrait of the city and of its architecture, and its architects¹⁶. Siza depicts FAUP's famous architectural professors in the facades of the studio houses, linking architectural character to physiognomy in a profoundly erudite riff on Beaux-Arts theory. FAUP drips with the feel and sensations of Porto, it's a profoundly exciting and strange place to visit, and works very well in all weathers. Even the plant room chimney is a lesson; a miniature, humorous footnote commemorating Aldo Rossi's drawings of monumental industrial structures. The message is unmistakable: Read Architecture; Become aware of it; Dream of it; Love it; Quote from it; Steal it; Make it your own. Above all, the task remains "today", Siza suggests, "to rediscover the magical strangeness, the singularity of obvious things."¹⁷

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Tavora had less land and less money at Guimaraes, and was building a new school; and so his project is not as biographical as Siza's, nor is it a portrait of a city, but it is also a seriously playful and urbane building. Tavora inherited a modern site, one dominated by cars, sat above a car park. His task was not to condense the city into a mythic landscape, but nonetheless to also create a heuristic one. Students learn about the embroiled, reciprocal character of spatiality and ground at Guimaraes, in an artificial, highly orchestrated interior world.

You enter up some steps, across a concrete bridge, above a scrappy campus edge car park, beneath a thin porch held symmetrically at its centre by an X shaped steel column. Arriving inside you find yourself in an enormously long tall hallway, at the end of which, rising before you, a long slender white stair passes overhead. WCs and lockers and lecture halls are situated to your left as you enter the building, and a cafe welcomes you across the hallway, opening onto a small stone court beyond. Everything is as it should be, you feel immediately accustomed to the architecture. It is so mundane as to be almost banal: unthreatening, hospitable, almost enervating. Yet your eyes are drawn towards the culmination of the hallway, and there something strange and magical occurs.

The ground plane, which is made up of an orange linoleum, rises suddenly in a hump, jumping from the banal to the surreal in one jump cut. This little trick almost trips you up: the ascent is disconcerting, physically challenging, frankly odd. White balustrade walls enclose a timber stair that rises elegantly upwards, mastering the void beneath, and bathed in light falling from above. One is projected up towards the floors above as if the ground below is being broken up in an earthquake. It feels like being in a centrifugal force field, shot out of a canon, propelled to fall, somehow, upwards.

What appears beyond the base of the stair feels like the very centre of the school: a drawing studio, laid out like an anatomy theatre. Timber steps rake up around a timber floor, at the centre of which are seats and pedestals for models. Life drawing is the heart and soul of Portuguese architectural education¹⁸, and students cannot progress beyond first

year unless they pass a module in it. This stricture has led to heart ache and worse at FAUP (and even suicide)¹⁹, and yet the Guimaraes school, whose curriculum and staff have grown out of the Porto school, have adopted drawing as the foundation upon which architectural pedagogy and learning rests²⁰. At FAUP, the life drawing studio, whilst delightful, is somewhat small (and cramped, now that many more students are being accepted than Siza's brief anticipated). At Guimaraes, the drawing studio is itself a species of landscape, an intimate town square, a regal barn, a sort of church devoted to observation and phenomena.

You arrive at the top of the long staircase into yet another long, somewhat boring corridor, but immediately to your left, as if by magic, a door appears, and beyond it a timber world. The Nuno Portas Library was relatively empty still when I visited with David Grandorge in 2013²¹. The books from Portas' library had not yet arrived. Two sentences by Portas are inscribed onto the walls of the room, forming a sort of minimalist ornamental frieze running around the mezzanine; they exhort the unity of the arts, and the continuous project of being modern²². In common with the life-drawing studio, it is a sort of archetype of a room for learning, an image of library, as much as a place for reading. The design studios, in contrast, are well lit and long, opening views out to the landscape above and city valley below you. Work is focused on tables and computers; the horizon beyond is incidental, something constant and inevitable.

Tavora and Siza show that you learn about architecture through repetitive movement through it, via habitual occupation, and, in the case of a school, becoming part of it. We might say, in sympathy with Siza's comparison of architecture with play (in his case roller hockey), that architectural knowledge develops as a sort of muscle memory, both in the arms, hands and eyes, as you make it and read and write about it. Similarly, in *participating* in architecture school, as a student and teacher and critic, architecture enters into your psyche through the re-

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enactment of the traditions of architectural life. It does so via a more or less open, civic theatricality, evident in crits, parties, discussions and confrontations. It enters into *your way of being yourself* via obfuscation and effort, via the joy of work, and the seriousness and joy of play.

Demonstrating I believe, Gadamer's contention, asserted in Truth and Method, that "what we encounter in the experience of the beautiful and in understanding the meaning of tradition really has something of the truth of play about it."²³ Siza is insistent—in the conclusion of the

passage that prefaces this essay—on the ludic character of architectural creativity. He emphasizes design's ambivalent, contradictory and paradoxical nature, and this seems to be, ultimately, what he has to teach us: "Long and relentless, the process calls for (in)discipline. In the end, *discipline* shapes the keystone. It does not function to the fullest until it becomes involved with a sort of disorder that precedes and draws on it, to be at once free and encompassing. Thus rolls the work of the architect. It all hinges on the tiny tip of a stick."²⁴

1 'The House of Architecture', Domingos Tavares, in *The Building of the Faculty of Architecture at Oporto*, Alvaro Siza et al, Porto, 2003.

2 'Discipline and Transform', Wilfried Wang, in *Alvaro Siza: in|discipline*, edited by Nuno Grande and Carles Muros, Koenig Books, p. 79. Wang claims: "in the allusive transformations of precedents, Alvaro Siza shows future generations of architects the way to simultaneously respect their discipline's history while also showing ways to transform its reading... the faculty complex asserts cultural intentions: first, the assertion that is a body of knowledge that is architecture; second, that each unique situation requires its own specific response and that this response, if well studied, generates an authentic solution; and third, that an architecture that an architecture that is developed in the knowledge of its own history will develop its own character... far from being a prison, history is knowledge. Design intelligence, in the way Alvaro Siza understands it, transforms knowledge into site-specific solutions. It is in this sense that we can understand Alvaro Siza's dictum that architects do not invent anything, they merely transform reality," p. 80.

3 Ibid. The drawing is published on page 136.

4 For a broader discussion of these themes see *Civic Ground: Rhythmic Spatiality and the Communicative Movement between Architecture, Sculpture and Site*, Patrick Lynch, Artifice Books on Architecture, 2017: in particular the chapter on Siza's church of St Maria at Marco de Canaveses, pp. 147-160.

5 See for example *Translations*, Architecture Research Unit, Florian Beigel and Philip Christou, Christoph Merian Verlag, 2015.

6 Carles Muro insightfully suggests the profound debt that Siza pays to the work of Aalto in his essay 'Alvaro Siza: Eight Points (Almost) at Random', in *Alvaro Siza: in|discipline*, Op. Cit., pp. 30-41: "Siza identifies with Alvar Aalto and finds in the Finnish master a modus operandi that he has already integrated: the introduction of certain models from the history of architecture into new contexts.", p. 36. Muro bases his argument partly on the essay 'Alvar Aalto: Three Aspects at Random', in *Siza: Writings on Architecture*, Skira, Milan, 1997, pp. 98-104; and on Siza's essay 'Eight Points', published in the same volume, pp. 203-7.

7 For a longer discussion of the significance of Aristotle's term mimesis for architecture, see 'Mimesis and Imagination', Patrick Lynch, in *Mimesis: Lynch Architects*, Artifice Books on Architecture, London, 2015, pp. 195-221.

8 'Building a House, Alvaro Siza, in *Siza: Writings on Architecture*, Op. Cit., p. 51. Cited by Wang, Discipline and Transform', Op. Cit. p. 68.

9 'On in|discipline', Alvaro Siza, in *Alvaro Siza: in|discipline*, Op. Cit., p. 13.

10 'Educational Drawings', Alvaro Siza, n *Siza: Writings on Architecture*, Op. Cit., p. 30. Cited by Wang, 'Discipline and Transform', Op. Cit., p.81.

11 'What is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason', in *Reason in the Age of Science*, MIT, 2001, p. 77.

12 Muro, Op. Cit., pp. 36.

13 Alvaro Siza, untitled, 1983, cited in Muro, Op. Cit., p. 37.

14 'Alvar Aalto: Three Aspects at Random', in *Siza: Writings on Architecture*, 1997, p. 102, cited in Muro, Op. Cit., p. 36.

15 *Theoretical Anxiety and Design Strategies: In the Work of Eight Contemporary Architects*, Rafael Moneo, MIT, 2005, p. 251.

16 The facades of the houses, urban myth suggests, are supposedly portraits of Carlos Ramos, Nuno Portas and Fernando Tavora.

17 Alvaro Siza, untitled, 1983, cited in Muro, Op. Cit., p. 40.

18 For a brief but informative description of the primacy of hand drawing at FAUP as a deliberate and cultivated tradition of "analogical" enquiry see: 'Pedagogy: FAUP, Portugal', Mathew Barac, *The Architectural Review*, 13th March, 2013: "Against the background noise of motorway traffic to the north, a gentle hubbub rises from the shady café patio at the lower level of the sloping site, where students chat and drink coffee. Laptops and iPads share tables with overflowing ashtrays and empty paper cups. Alongside this familiar detritus is something rarely sighted in architecture schools today. On almost every table – or under the arm or in the bag of almost every student – is a sketchbook. This should not come as a surprise. Sketching 'can be considered our core didactical tool', says José Miguel Rodrigues, director of the MArch programme. And he means it; 'first and second year students are not allowed to use the computer, in order to have a direct relation between thinking and doing' through hand-drawing. This credo informs a curriculum which incorporates drawing as freehand representation of the built environment, as a tool to analyse design problems, and through drawing live models. For Rodrigues and Manuel Montenegro, who together teach drawing as a research methodology in architectural history, pencil and paper are significant for more than just pedagogical reasons. The sketch is central to the 20th-century tradition of the 'School of Porto' in which FAUP is anchored. Associated with Siza as well as Eduardo Souto de Moura, Portugal's other Pritzker laureate, the School emerged according to a regional concept of modern architecture. Scholars Eduardo Fernandes and Jorge Figueira, who completed

PhDs on the topic at FAUP, both trace the School's origins to Fernando Távora's 'permanent modernity': a timelessness that arises when a building resonates with its physical and cultural context. Initially set out in his 1947 publication *O Problema da Casa Portuguesa*, Távora developed this idea in his teaching and in canonical built works. As Fernandes explains, the School subsists in 'a way of thinking connected to a way of doing'. Important to this legacy is what Figueira calls 'the reinvention of the sketch': an emphasis on analogical drawing as a vehicle for architectural creativity." Accessed on 28 March 2020 11.25am: <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/reviews/pedagogy-faup-portugal/8643155.article>

19 The death of a student who had failed 1st year twice led to their fellow students daubing 'Bonjour Tristesse' onto the walls of the school, an ironic reference to the graffiti that was painted onto Siza's apartment building in Berlin (a story related to the author by FAUP alumnus Porto-based architect Dr Paulo Moreira in 2010).

20 For a discussion of the tradition of drawing in "the Porto school", and the different types of drawings undertaken by Tavora, Siza and Souto de Moura, see 'Eduardo Souto de Moura', Francesco Dal Co, in *Souto de Moura: Memory, Projects, Works*, ed. Francesco Dal Co & Nuno Graca Moura, Yale, 2019, pp.482-3.

21 During the academic year 2010-11, Alun Jones and I taught a Diploma Unit (Masters level) design studio at The Cass in London, alongside Paulo Moreira, which focussed on the vexed relationships between road and rail technology, and the urban topography of the historic and modern city. We collaborated with staff and graduates of FAUP, and held our project reviews there. A PDF of the book that the students produced, including an interview with Alvaro Siza that they conducted, can be seen here: https://www.lyncarchitects.com/media/documents/PORTO_BOOK_2010-11_Cass_Diploma_P_Lynch_etc.pdf

22 These statements by Nuno Portas appear in Portuguese, and in somewhat idiosyncratic English: 'Being Works of collaboration, Architecture and Urbanism projects are synthesis, plastic art translations in organized space of those for whom and to whom they were accomplished; own translations, characteristic, diverse, assorted and changeable.'; 'Each one of these buildings was modern, and because all of them were, the constant modernity officiates the set; the building style of each one is not important – what matters is the similar attitude that presided their design.'

23 *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Sheed and Ward, 1993 (1960), p.490; see also p.116.

24 'On in|discipline', Alvaro Siza, in *Alvaro Siza: in|discipline*, Op. Cit., p. 13.



