

Álvaro Siza Vieira: Another Void

1. Kenneth Frampton, "Álvaro Siza: Duarte House and the Teixeira Apartment," in *Labour, Work and Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 299–303.

2. See Frampton, "In Spite of the Void: The Otherness of Adolf Loos," in *Labour, Work and Architecture*, 197; and *GA Document*, Special Issue no. 3, *Modern Architecture 1920–1945* (Tokyo: ADA Ed., 1987), 284.

3. See Editorial, *Projeto Design* 341 (July 2008): 49.

4. Lucio Costa, "Testimonial Letter," in *Lucio Costa: Sobre Arquitetura* (Porto Alegre: CEUA, 1962), 124.

It has been said that the architecture of Álvaro Siza Vieira owes much to the disquieting work of Adolf Loos.¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the most recent and important buildings by the Portuguese architect, the Iberê Camargo Foundation in Porto Alegre (2008), confirms the enigmatic nature of his work.² But for the Brazilian public, in particular, the unease brought about by an apparently indecipherable form seems from the outset to be alleviated by a sensation of familiarity. It was not difficult, after all, to recognize from the initial images of the "Brazilian Siza" more or less explicit references to local modern architecture.³ Can we not perhaps see in those reinforced concrete ramps (particularly the external cantilevered ramps protruding from the main body of the building) echoes of the structural prowess and free gesture of the architecture of Oscar Niemeyer, Lina Bo Bardi, et al? At the same time, a visit to the completed building is enough to clarify how unfamiliar Siza's design really is.

The word *clarify* is not quite right, however. Despite the apparently photogenic nature of the foundation building, which comes across clearly enough in photographs, clarity is not one of the attributes of Siza's design; quite the opposite.

The most eloquent elements of the foundation are the reinforced concrete cantilevered ramps that fly outside of the body of the building. Siza obviously knows that external ramps have been among the elements most commonly identified with modern Brazilian architecture, at least since the 1939 Brazilian Pavilion designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa for the New York World's Fair. The origin of this trope is hardly unknown. Costa, the great champion of modern Brazilian architecture, always liked to emphasize that the unexpected and extraordinary blossoming of the local modern architecture was due to the "genuine seeds, planted here at the right time by Le Corbusier, in 1936."⁴

From direct contact with the French master, Brazilian architects learned more than how to employ the five points of a new architecture, how to take up the four basic compositional forms, and how to make use of the endless possibilities brought by the new technology of reinforced concrete. Above all, they learned "the undeniable foundation of all the

5. Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret: Œuvre Complète 1910–1929* (Zurich: Les Éditions d'Architecture Erlenbach, 1946), 33. Emphasis in original. English translation by P. Morton Shand.

6. Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, trans. John Goodman (London: Frances Lincoln Publishers, 2008), 86–102.

7. Colin Rowe (with Robert Slutsky), "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," in *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 159–84.

8. See Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 1," in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 202.

plastic arts: *the forms that the eyes see.*" Or, "positive, objective attitude: clarity of reading; clarity of conception; *action.*"⁵ From this came the modernists' insistent refrain regarding the "three reminders to architects":

1. *Volume. Architecture is the masterful, correct and magnificent play of volumes brought together in light.*

2. *Surface. A volume is enveloped by a surface, a surface that is divided according to the generators and directing vectors of the volume, accentuating the individuality of this volume.*

3. *Plan. The plan is the generator. The plan carries within it the essence of the sensation.*⁶

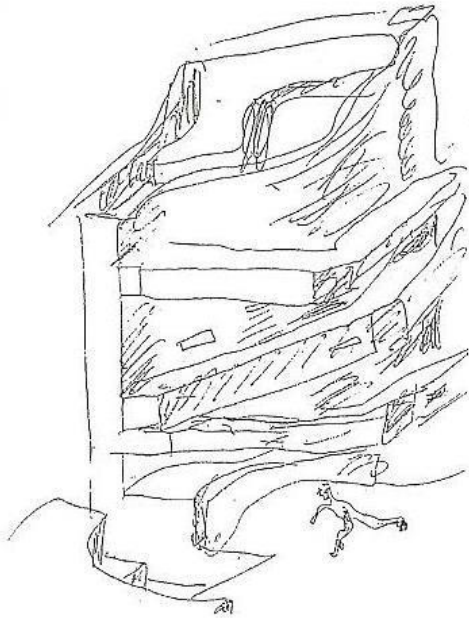
But what "sensation" exactly? As a product of the pictorial research of cubism, the sensation Le Corbusier spoke of was related to movement – the movement of a sensitive body in space and time. And the complexity of his work lay in the fact that it was both idealistic – based on an unshakeable belief in the sublimating force of *good form*, classical and timeless – and anchored to a radical materiality.

According to Le Corbusier, the ultimate architectural experience – the ultimate "sensation" – would occur in movement, during which recognition (of classical form) and surprise (discovery of the contingent) were combined to produce an awareness of form. The architectural sensation was, therefore, identified with the intelligibility of form, or rather with the process of the intelligibility of form – of clear form.

This was not, of course, a simple intelligibility. Le Corbusier's architecture proposed a play of spatial stratifications that implied "continuous fluctuations of interpretation," a kind of tension that, as Colin Rowe noted, always obliges us to produce new readings. Nevertheless, these stratifications never resulted in the dissolution of form.⁷ On the contrary: despite its complexity, form remained intelligible to *the eyes that see*: "clarity of reading; clarity of conception; *action.*"

That clarity is the crucial character of the Corbusian *promenade architecturale*. The *promenade* was not a random, arbitrary walk; it was an organized walk, predefined by a plan that resolutely established strategic and structural viewpoints – essential for a *controlled* fluctuation of meanings and interpretations – amidst a plurality of possible views.

Le Corbusier's architecture was also and above all cubist in terms of its epistemological foundation, meaning in terms of a belief in the essential clarity of visual language⁸ and in the innate capacity of *the eyes that see* to understand form by decoding the signs of that language. For Le Corbusier, the basis of this language was geometry – the "sensory mathe-



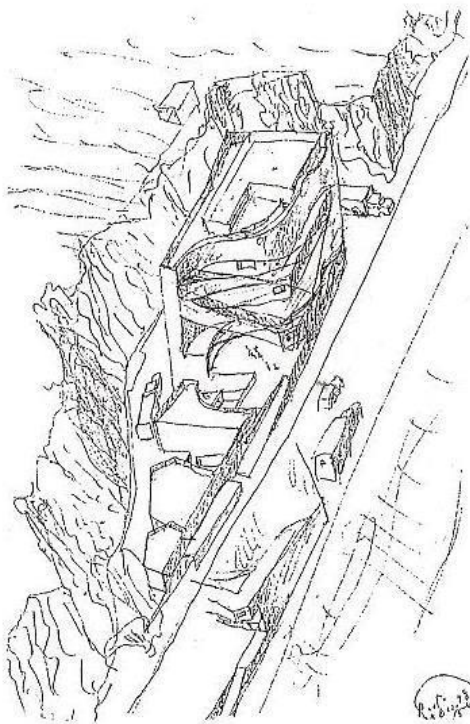
matics” that would translate the underlying universal order of contingent things through the visual.

While Niemeyer never adopted the spatial stratifications of Le Corbusier, the spatial nature of his architecture was likely a by-product of cubist research (despite his lack of interest in cubism), as suggested by his own use of the *promenade architecturale*. For Niemeyer, the *promenade architecturale* is almost always a device with more modest ends than it was for Le Corbusier; as a rule it simply frames one’s perception of the formal integrity of pure volumes. In his most accomplished designs, the *promenade* produces a dialogue between the formal integrity of pure volumes and the landscape in which they are placed. Conceived in this way, the Niemeyer promenade has, as a rule, overemphasized one specific architectural element: the ramp – especially the curved ramp that rises to the entrance of a building and provides an overall view of it.

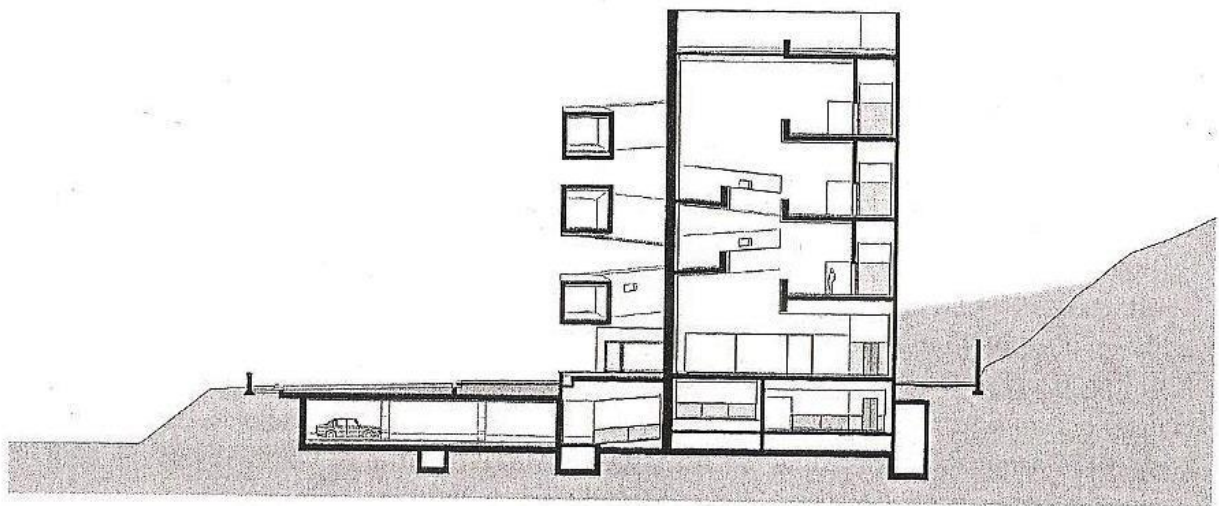
Niemeyer’s insistence on the perception of the formal integrity of pure volumes is one explanation for his propensity to design curving ramps that start to rise from the ground plane well before engaging the building itself. Even when they do not allow for a “complete view” (that is, the view from which the designer conceived the building) Niemeyer’s ramps consistently emphasize the separation between user and building, or between the space surrounding the building and the space it contains. A Niemeyer building thus affirms its nature as “object” – as a pristine volume defined by a surface that envelops and contains it and whose internal spaces are separated from the outside by the planes of enclosure.

Another recurrent characteristic of Niemeyer’s ramps aids in this process of objectification: that is, their tendency to maintain a view of the horizon line. This perception of the horizon line, emphasized during the approach along the rising, external curved ramp, confirms to observers that what lies immediately before them is indeed an *object* – something that does not fuse (as in the architecture of Le Corbusier) with the space that surrounds it. This view of the horizon also enables an observer to situate himself in relation to other identifiable and autonomous objects or bodies, which appear high or low, near or far, big or small. Thus for Niemeyer, more simply and directly than for Le Corbusier, the ramp is the element that enables a good reading of pure volumes. Ultimately, its specific function is, in fact, to clarify form and space.

But what about Siza’s enclosed, cantilevered ramps at the Iberê Camargo Foundation? The first thing one notices about



ÁLVARO SIZA, IBERÊ CAMARGO FOUNDATION, PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL, 2008. VOLUMETRIC SKETCHES. DRAWINGS COURTESY THE ARCHITECT.

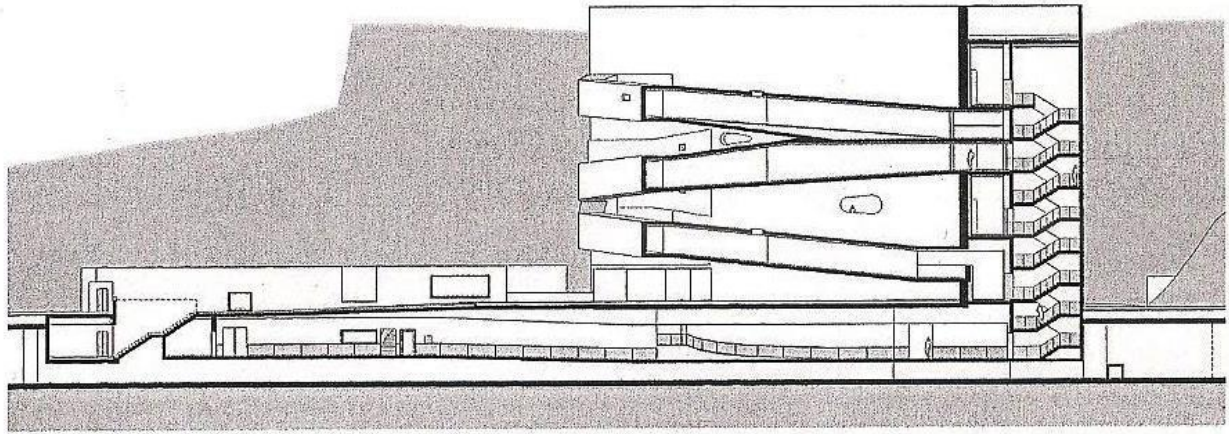


ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: ÁLVARO SIZA,
 IBERÊ CAMARGO FOUNDATION,
 PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL, 2008.
 SECTIONS. DRAWINGS COURTESY
 THE ARCHITECT.

these ramps is that, once *inside* them, it becomes difficult to perceive the external space surrounding them. Contrary to what one expects when approaching the building – when one sees the ramps explicitly projected outward, suspended in air – when one enters these spaces, the sensations of externality and elevation simply disappear. Instead, there is a sense of frustration and incomprehension. What is the purpose of all that structural effort if not to provide for the sensation of elevation and offer views?

A more detailed analysis of the spatial devices Siza employs at the Iberê Camargo Foundation is helpful. Upon entering the building, it is easy to see that visitors have two main routes by which they can navigate it: either they can start their visit by ascending the ramp from the central atrium until reaching the fourth and highest floor, or they can take the elevator directly to the fourth floor and then use the ramp to descend to the ground floor.

At first, the foundation appears to be a classic-modern spatial system like that established by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Guggenheim Museum in New York. However, the experience of visiting Siza's building could not be more different from that of visiting the Guggenheim. For if, in Wright's case, the great central void never disappears from the field of vision, thus ensuring a visitor's constant perception of the whole, in Siza's case the opportunities for global views are intentionally restricted. The foundation's divided spatial system consists of at least three distinct entities: the exhibition spaces themselves, located at the rear of the building; the great void of the atrium in the central sector of the building, where the internal ramps of the museum can be found; and the internal space of the cantilevered ramps that project outward from the front of the building. This system implies that, whether ascending or descending, one's move-

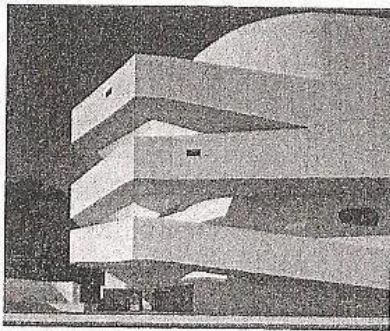
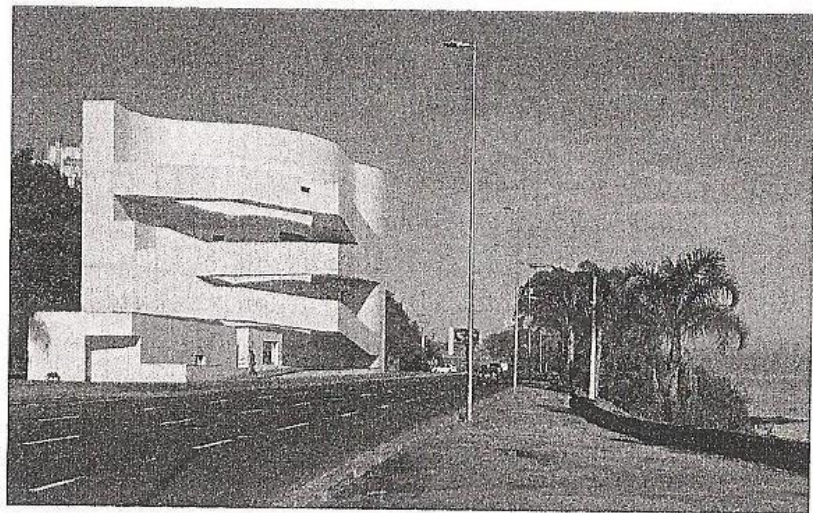


ment will necessarily be characterized by the alternation of these three spatial conditions, each of which provides for very particular experiences.

The first of these conditions is the exhibition spaces, which are occupied by the overwhelming presence of Iberê's paintings. Clearly, Siza has no intention of encouraging any confusion or intermingling between these spaces – with their conventional, almost monotonous geometry – and the central void of the atrium. The contiguity of these two conditions is controlled through a virtual vertical plane, defined by solid parapets that clearly separate one condition from the other.

The second spatial condition is the grand entrance atrium and the internal ramps that cross it. These ramps are characterized by the panoramic views they offer of both the atrium and the exhibition spaces. In contrast to the emphasis Siza gives to regularity and uniformity in the exhibition spaces, he reinforces the irregular and uneven aspect of the internal ramps. Here, parallelism, orthogonality, and planarity are explicitly avoided. Moreover, the full visibility of the atrium draws one's attention to the opposed yet complementary qualities of these two spatial conditions. Indeed, the unavoidable sight of the ramps on one side of the atrium accentuates one's perception of the diverse formal and spatial qualities of the galleries on the other. The void of the atrium functions as an intermediary element that both separates and connects them.

The third spatial condition is in the cantilevered exterior ramps. These are narrow, low-ceilinged spaces with strict thermal and acoustic insulation. Not a single picture hangs on their antiseptic white walls. A few tiny windows provide momentary and particularly unsatisfactory views to the outside. The number, position, and dimension of those windows are puzzling. So is their purpose: are the windows there to punctuate the route? Or to allow strategic views of the land-



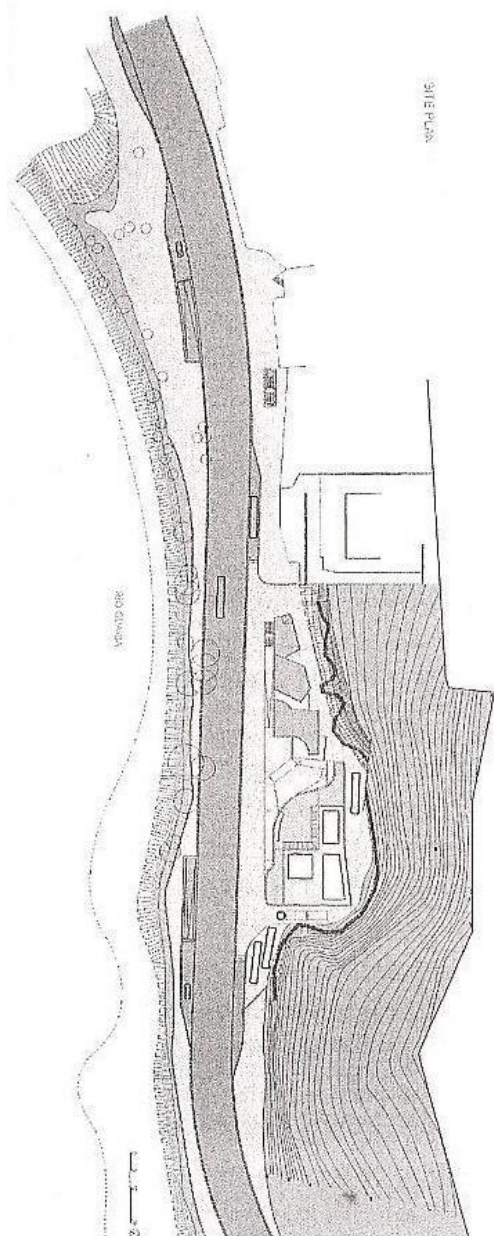
ÁLVARO SIZA, IBERÊ CAMARGO FOUNDATION, PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL, 2008. "FLYING RAMPS" VIEWED FROM OUTSIDE. TOP: MOMENT OF CO-PLANARITY. RIGHT: OVERALL VIEW OF THE BUILDING. PHOTOS: NELSON KON.

scape? Or just to let in some natural light? In any case, unlike in the galleries or atrium, there is no visual connection with the internal museum spaces. This separation leads to an unexpected sensation of isolation.

It is a disturbing sensation – not because of the isolation itself, but because of the disruption it subtly provokes. For despite everything we are forced to absorb from the moment we first see the building and the ramps projecting from its body, we feel as if we have somehow been led into a kind of illogical space, not only disconnected from the other spaces in the building but also released from its supposed spatial/structural logic. This interruption is symptomatic of and demonstrates how the critical aspect of Siza's design is discontinuity, not continuity.

For Le Corbusier – in fact, for the most hegemonic, fundamentally constructive current of the Modern Movement – continuity was not just an important aspect of architectural design, it was one of the foundations (if not *the* foundation) of the actual idea of the experience of modern architecture. Continuity was emblematic of the connection of modern architecture with one of the central themes of scientific and philosophical thinking at the turn of century: the interdependence of vision, movement, and the content of consciousness. For writers as diverse as William James and Henri Bergson, the key feature of the constituting consciousness occurred in a fusion of moments that always concluded with a synthesis of continuity and movement. For these thinkers, the formation of consciousness took place as in a film, in the form of an "integrated visual narrative" with its "taut stream of thematically connected images." The continuity of the visual experience demonstrated the actual constituting consciousness – a process that revealed "the brain mechanisms that give coherence to perception."⁹

9. Oliver Sacks, "The River of Consciousness," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 51, no. 1 (January 15, 2004): 41–44.



ÁLVARO SIZA, IBERÊ CAMARGO FOUNDATION, PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL, 2008. SITE PLAN. DRAWING COURTESY THE ARCHITECT.

In this sense, the *promenade architecturale* was a device somewhat similar to the flow of consciousness – in the case of architecture, of the constructed consciousness of the architectural form. A consciousness that, immersed in the time and space of phenomenal reality, causes a kind of synthesis of sightings/experiences that are never really disconnected.

Ultimately, therefore, the *promenade architecturale* was not just *one* aspect of the Corbusian architectural experience, it was *the defining architectural experience*: the process – fluid, continual – through which the play of overlapping strata would be understood, articulated, and synthesized by vision (itself hypervalued because of this), thus reaffirming the certainty – and the corresponding well-being – in the moving observer of the organic coherence of the form.¹⁰ The continuity of the architectural experience corresponded to the coherent and intrinsic unity of the form and thus to its clarity.

It is in this sense that the now-classic axiom “the plan is the generator” might be understood. For more than anything else, the Corbusian plan was the architectural apparatus par excellence, one that produced interdependent yet fluid relationships – or those luminous, gray zones that exist in between possible movements and necessary sightings. Like maps followed not by the feet but by the eye, Corbusian plans are the synthesis of twin conditions of consciousness – coherence and fluidity – signaling the “penultimate” clarity and intelligibility of modernist architectural form.

Siza’s plans are evidence that for him the defining aspect of the architectural experience – or at least its differentiating aspect – is not continuity but *discontinuity*. Generally, Siza’s plans allow one to see that the continuous connection established between movement and vision in Le Corbusier is not an essential condition for the organization of space. In fact, Siza often demonstrates the existence of formal articulations that are hidden, or imperceptible, to the eyes of the user – articulations that, in Corbusian terms, can only be considered abstract or unimportant, or at least negligible from the point of view of the visual structuring of form.

What these plans demonstrate, however, is that movement through Siza’s architecture is often conceived as discontinuous and even disconnected, such that the interruptions that characterize movement through several of his buildings may be important for defining another kind of architectural experience – an experience that, not by chance, is also formed by decentering and instability.

Here, Siza’s affinities with Loos become apparent. Kenneth Frampton notes that “Loos was the only architect

10. On the process of autonomization of vision from the early decades of the 19th century, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

11. Frampton, *GA Document*, Special Issue no. 3: 284.

12. That Siza's architecture operates with a vocabulary apparently identical to that used by modern masters (think of Oud, for example) is crucial in this sense, for it gives Siza's architecture a familiar character, locating it within a tradition by which he may amplify aspects of discord and irrationality.

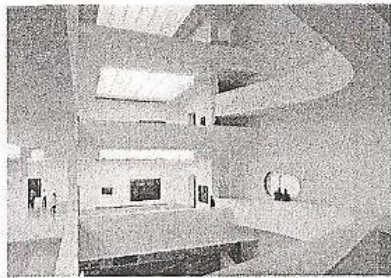
13. Álvaro Siza, "Salvando las turbulencias: Entrevista con Álvaro Siza," *El Croquis* 68-69 (1994): 6-31.

of the twenties whose work was at all Dadaist in feeling." Dadaism was precisely the source of his "disjunctive conception of space," and his "perverse planning."¹¹ Erroneously recognized only as the theorist responsible for banishing ornament, Loos was a designer who rejected the Modern Movement's characteristic ideals of clarity, positivity, and externality; an architect who, shut indoors and protected from the light, investigated darkness, the discontinuous, and the enigmatic – the ghosts of modern, positivist rationality. The complex and disconnected interiors of his buildings, so often diverging from their external appearance, are evidence of this rejection.

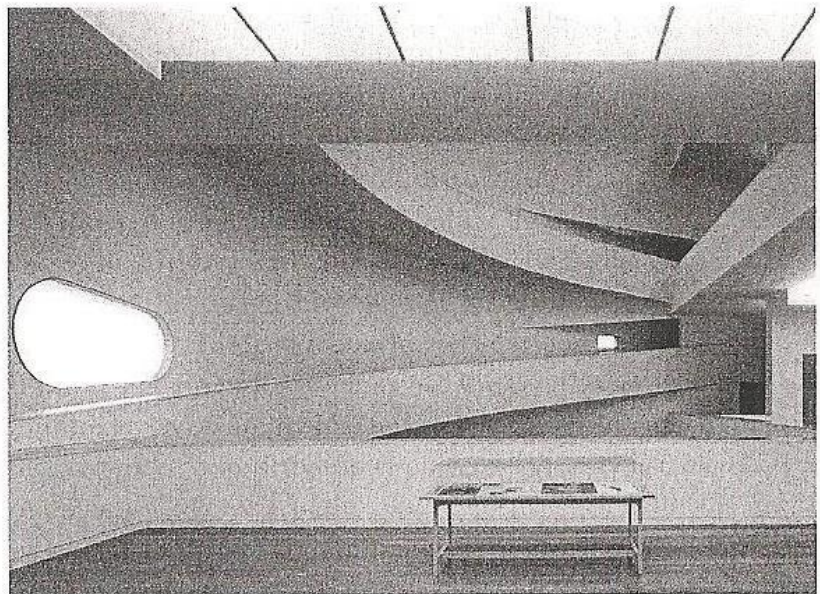
Like Loos, Siza seems to doubt the "hegemony of clarity." The enigmatic nature of his buildings – their rigorous yet incongruous geometry, the disconcerting anthropomorphism of many of his facades, the abstract, even gratuitous plans, the moving and often bizarre images that find a place in his designs, the recurrent "semantic disturbance" and "disjunctive repertoire" observed by Frampton – are all aspects of an architectural aesthetic that from the outset never uses continuity or clarity as its guiding principles.

In Porto Alegre, however, this approach seems to have reached a new level, for the whole operation suggests an unprecedented commitment to opacity and discontinuity, to the contradictory and the paradoxical. It is no accident that the highlight of this design is its cantilevered ramps, that is to say, the seminal elements of the most radiant, positive, and transparent architecture of Le Corbusier and Niemeyer. But the broad and unrestricted visibility of transparent modernism is almost a provocation here.¹² An affirmation of vision – at least vision at the service of what Siza has called "inflexible knowledge"¹³ – is not enough to address this opaque and paradoxical architecture; one must bring imagination, reverie, and dreams. This is not to abandon the field of visibility, however. It is simply necessary to recalibrate vision so that it is no longer a device wholly at the service of knowledge but also becomes an instrument of the imagination – the same imagination required when one confronts Dada and Surrealist objects.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Iberê Camargo Foundation seems to have characteristics more often found in objects by artists like Man Ray and Alberto Giacometti than in rationalist architecture or constructivist sculpture. In *Passages of Modern Sculpture*, the critic Rosalind Krauss describes some of those characteristics. "By being part of the real space and yet sectioned off from it," she writes, a work like Giacometti's



ÁLVARO SIZA, IBERÊ CAMARGO FOUNDATION, PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL, 2008. VIEWS ACROSS ATRIUM OF GALLERIES AND THE INTERNAL RAMPS. PHOTOS: NELSON KON.



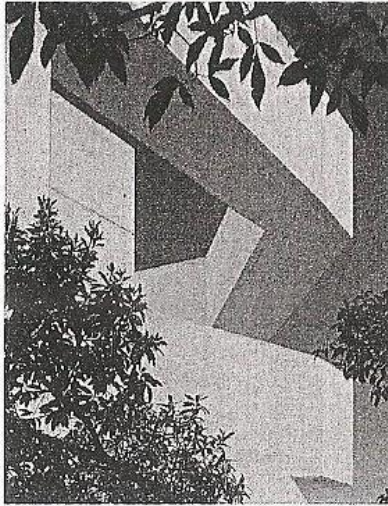
Suspended Ball “attempts to open up a fissure in the continuous surface of reality.” In so doing, the work explores “an experience we sometimes have in waking life, an experience of discontinuity between various pieces of the world.” Surrealist objects are therefore far removed from the “constructivist resemblance between the rational object and the constituting consciousness.” For “the constructivist relationship is predicated on the notion that there is a fundamental identity between the structure of subjective consciousness and the structure of objective reality.”¹⁴ The affinities of Siza’s architecture with Dada and Surrealism also suggest why the emotion brought about by his building is similar to what one feels when viewing an object such as *Suspended Ball*: an emotion that, according to the critic Maurice Nadeau, is “in no sense one of satisfaction, but one of disturbance, like that imparted by the irritating awareness of failure.”¹⁵

This affinity with Surrealism explains why the windows, although they may be few and of insignificant size, have not simply been removed from the foundation’s cantilevered ramps. The intended effect is not the total suppression of the outdoor view from inside, but the paradoxical and enigmatic coexistence (imposed despite objective vision) between internality and externality, between suspension and grounding, as if the void surrounding the ramps were also, somehow, a solid.

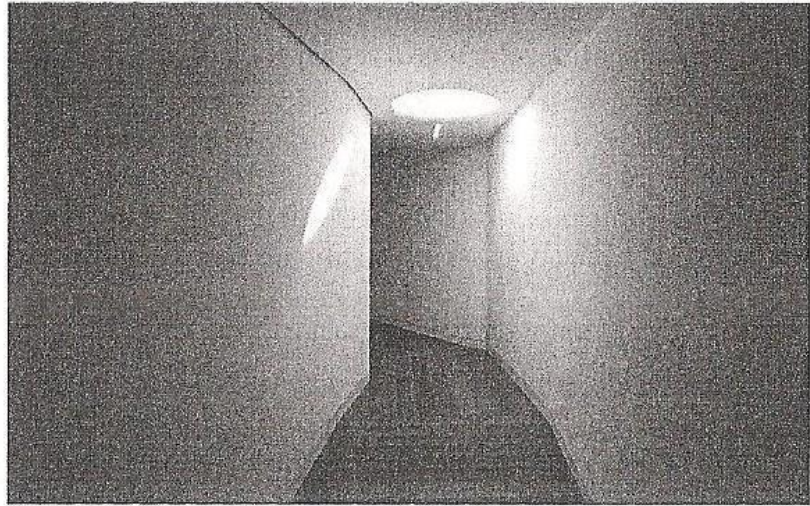
This is not nonsense. For in a sense, the cantilevered ramps are not just surrounded by an atmospheric void, which by definition is transparent and extendable; they are also surrounded by its ghost, the ghost of something that, in a perverse way, was not completely removed from the surrounding space.

14. Rosalind Krauss, “A Game Plan: The Terms of Surrealism,” in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 110–14.

15. Maurice Nadeau, cited in Krauss, 113.



ÁLVARO SIZA, IBERÊ CAMARGO FOUNDATION, PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL, 2008. EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE "FLYING RAMPS." PHOTO: NELSON KON. RIGHT: INTERIOR VIEW OF A "FLYING RAMP." PHOTO: LEONARDO FINOTTI.



Analysis of the plans, sections, and elevations together allows one to see how, at Porto Alegre, Siza engages a semantic tension between the two essential elements of the formal structuring of his building: the planes that define the virtual rectangular block that envelops the building (especially the north-facing plane); and the curved plane that delimits and defines the void of the atrium and is expressed on the exterior. The concordance, or moment of co-planarity, between these two planes on the north facade demonstrates that their respective autonomy and interdependence are somehow incomplete. In fact, although the reciprocal distancing of the planes mostly demonstrates physical independence, the moment of co-planarity seems to emphasize that the separation between the two planes is somehow unstable. The complexity of the co-planarity is in this underlying ambivalence. From the viewpoint of someone inside the exhibition spaces or moving along the internal ramps of the museum, the curved plane that defines the void of the atrium is perceived as the plane separating the inside from the outside of the building. In fact, the curved plane performs the more or less conventional role of the "facade plane" – or what traditionally separates the inside from the outside of a building.

The internal route along the cantilevered ramps, however, indicates that this reading is incomplete: for what is presented as pure externality (the flying ramps) is also experienced as maximum internality. Even with the prior knowledge that one has been "drawn out," projected into the air in the cantilevered ramps, one never escapes from the phantom rectangular block of the building itself. Indeed, the actual notion of projection is problematic, because the co-planarity of Siza's design was never entirely resolved.

A sequence of building sections shows how the dialectic established between the movement of physical withdrawal,

IBERÊ CAMARGO, *FANTASMAGORIA IV*, 1987. OIL ON CANVAS, 200 X 236 CM. IMAGE COURTESY MARIA C. CARMARGO / FUNDAÇÃO IBERÊ CAMARGO.



on the one hand, and the continued coexistence of the two planes, on the other, generates the complexity and spatial paradoxes of the design. The insistence on this play with perception only demonstrates how crucial this dialectical operation is for Siza. The sensation of isolation felt inside the ramps is also a product of this tension. For it is the ambiguity between the autonomy and interdependence of the two planes, not the devices isolating the interior of the cantilevered ramps, that transforms the physical space between the cantilevered ramps and the curved plane into a kind of impassable void, because it is also solid.¹⁶

Like the ghosts that inhabit Iberê's canvases, or the "ghostly agents" Frampton finds in Loos, the void between the virtual plane of the north facade and the curved plane that develops from it is the "material" that surrounds and supports Siza's extruded ramps. In a way, this is an illogical void and in any case radically different from the modern "practical" void, the function of which was to allow for visibility and fluid continuity between inside and outside. Here, Siza demonstrates that the ghost of the void is not the solid, it is *another* void, transparent and yet opaque, empty and yet impenetrable, tangible and yet insurmountable.¹⁷

Siza's obsession with white concrete and the extraordinary efforts he employs to obtain it are eloquent. For if the Iberê Camargo Foundation has an allegorical aspect at all, it is the poetic image of the stone monolith – more specifically, the classical block of white marble. In a perplexing and, unless I am mistaken, unprecedented move, Siza has challenged the impenetrable and intimidating solidity of the block of marble

16. Frampton remarks on some of the consequences of the play established between a "frontal plane" running parallel to the orthogonal grid of the exhibition spaces (an element that suggests the perception of the mass as an "eroded prismatic block") and the curved plane of the atrium. Frampton, "O museu como labirinto," in *Fundação Iberê Camargo*, ed. F. Kiefer (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2008), 99.

17. Analyzing the "otherness" of Loos, Frampton also speaks about the "ghostly agents" present in his interiors. Referring to Loos's enigmatic penchant for a certain Egyptoid, wooden tripod stool, Frampton writes, "While their [the stools'] presence or absence may be entirely fortuitous, it is surely more than just another anomaly in what are otherwise seemingly innocuous environments. Perhaps we may see them as icons of a lost heroic culture sitting in judgment on an age that, in Loos's view, was totally deprived of any culture worthy of the name." Frampton, "In Spite of the Void," in *Labour, Work and Architecture*, 203–04.

(the challenge it has represented, not necessarily for sculptors but for architects, builders of voids) and redefined the nature of the void within the realm of architecture.

But to speak of an allegorical image may be deceptive – and not because this design finds no place in the contemporary world of the free circulation of images. It simply finds its place in an openly subversive manner. In a world where everything is transformed into image, Siza has demonstrated that it is still possible to transform images into things. Of course, these will not be simple things, nor obvious, nor facile. But they will always be something more than mere images, and that is considerable.

And because it is more than an image, Siza's Iberê Camargo Foundation, unlike a large proportion of spectacular, photogenic, and tiresome contemporary buildings, is even more captivating on cloudy days than under blue skies. Dissolved in the mist, whispering that it also belongs to the realm of the invisible, it convinces us that, like life, architecture can be deceptive.

Log

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