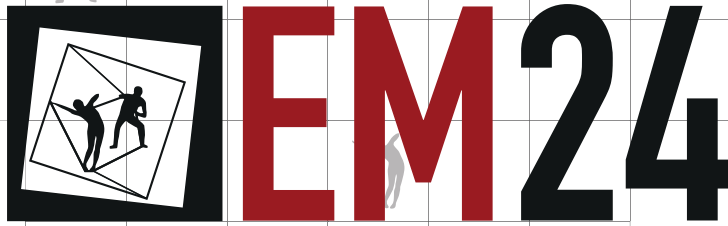


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IN-PRESENCE / THE BODY AND THE SPACE

The role of corporeity in the era of virtualization

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The pursuit of presence in Siza's architecture.

A phenomenological narrative of Piscina das Marés

Key Words

Presence, Multi-sensory, Nature, Embodied, Experience

Synopsis

Architecture, in its essence, has the ultimate capacity and capability to move us and shape our emotions. This is arguably the determining difference between constructing a building and architecture. The art of constructing a building, if done accordingly, has the ability to offer an existential experience. The sense of an embodied presence in space is an evident element of Alvaro Siza's architecture. An architecture that not only responds to the functional needs but goes beyond the mere questions of functionality and allows us to have an existential sense of the artifact, as in the case of Piscina das Marés.

The renowned French poet Jean Tardieu, delicately raises an essential question when he asks, "Let us assume a wall, what takes place behind it?" [Jean Tardieu, as quoted in Georges Perec 1992, p. 72], recognizes the necessity for meaning to seize behind mere construction. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty, in his book *The Phenomenology of Perception*, highlights the limitations of a mere visual approach to space and calls for a bodily experience [Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. 26]. It is our embodied experience of the world around us that is the root of our knowledge, and hence, he argues in a provocative way that "We know not through our intellect but through our experience" [Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. 298]. It should be mentioned that perception is not merely an observation; in fact, perception is the constant state of consciousness in an embodied manner [Alizadeh 2022, p. 88]. There seems to be a fundamental challenge, or rather a problem, which reduces and limits architecture merely to the domain of vision. At the end of the day, contrary to what Le Corbusier sought, architecture is not a play of forms in light and is a multi-sensory reality, as Pallasmaa argues [Pallasmaa 2011, pp.40-49]. The human memory and understanding of the surroundings are not bound to one of the senses and should be comprehended in a holistic manner, including our experience in an existential

sense [Pallasmaa 2011, pp. 40-49]. Hence, also the necessity for an approach to architecture in a multi-sensory manner, and to design spaces that will be perceived holistically. As Merleau-Ponty argues, "My perception is therefore not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once" [Merleau-Ponty as quoted in Juhani Pallasmaa 2021].

Having said so, the architecture of the renowned Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza is arguably an architecture of seven senses. It is perhaps the personal characteristics of Siza, reflected in his oeuvres, that create a sense of presence in his architecture. Alberto Campo Baeza, emphasizes three characteristics that distinguish Siza and his architecture, arguing that Siza is a Poet, a Creator, and a Researcher [Campo Baeza 2010, p.121]. The profound professional life of Siza has produced various works of architecture, differing in function and scale, yet what unites these works is that Siza's architecture moves us, his architecture is to be understood in an embodied existential sense. One of the prominent early works of Siza is the Ocean Swimming pool situated in Leça da Palmeira, commonly known as "Piscina das Marés". As described by Ana Tostões, "Siza had seven top seeds, that is, seven turning points in his own works and Portuguese architecture," and certainly Ocean Swimming Pool is one of these top seeds according to her [Ana Tostões in conversation with Teresa Cunha Ferreira 2023, p. 151]. Yet unlike many other sports complexes, which are in constant contradiction with the surrounding built environment, Piscina das Marés is an artifact that converses with nature, though it does not merge with it, which is how architecture should relate itself to nature [Campo Baeza 2014, p87]. Though the pool does not imitate the surrounding nature, it interprets it, in the same manner, Osip Mandelstam suggested that "with chilling freedom, architecture situates itself in a field of action interpreting nature"[Mandelstam as quoted in Campo Baeza 2014, p.84]. In his own words, Siza emphasizes his intention to create a dialogue with the rocky nature, as he states, "not ignoring [nature] but rather dialoguing, a built-nature dialogue" [Siza 2022, p.135].

The general plan of the pool, consisting of a rectangular layout, though has the clear footprints of an artifact, and human expression, but is in a metamorphosis of nature. So much so, that arguably, it seems that the pools have always been a part of the rocky seashore "as if the artificial was normal to nature" [Alves Costa 2004, p. 23].

When considering the landscape of the Acropolis of Athens, arguably, it is hardly possible to imagine the landscape in question, without the presence of Parthenon. The relation that Parthenon establishes with the surrounding nature is so delicate and profound that it is as if architecture has always been a part of nature. In the same way, today, having passed decades since the construction of the pool, one could not imagine Leça da Palmeira without Siza's pool. In the recent interventions that were done with the objective of rehabilitating parts of the project, Siza, contrary to many other architects, decided to preserve some of the marks that were left on the building due to the impact of time. This is a deliberate decision to manifest what Ana Tostões calls the "wrinkles of the body" of Siza's architecture [Ana Tostões in conversation with Teresa Cunha Ferreira 2023, p. 153]. Moreover, the Pool, though has passed the test of time, is not of the past, nor is it of the future, it is of the nature of presence.

In addition, it is not only the imperfect marks of time on the body of architecture made of exposed concrete that Siza preserves, but also his architecture embraces the geometrical imperfections of nature. Being able to accept imperfections is a virtue, but more importantly, it is an attempt to remain truthful. As John Ruskin argues,

"Imperfection is in some sort essential to all that we know in life. It is the sign of life in a mortal body, that is to say, of a state of progress and change...and in all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life but sources of beauty" [Ruskin 1960, p. 172].

It is the play between the perfect geometric forms and the imperfections of the site, which reveals to us the true essence of space.

When arriving at the site, it is as if the building was invisible from the street view, in fact, very silent. As explained by Siza, he "didn't want to block the sight of the sea...[he] wanted that even those people sitting in the car could see the skyline [Alvaro Siza in conversation with Luis Urbano, p. 137]. It is this silent nature of the Ocean Swimming Pool that indeed prioritizes its presence. It is there, silently without any extra, unnecessary architectural gesture, just like a

tree is beautiful yet silently present. Peter Zumthor argues, “The tree does not want to sell me something. The tree won’t say to me - ‘look at me, I am so beautiful....’ It’s just a tree - and it’s beautiful” [Zumthor 2013]. Likewise, Siza’s architecture, by its silence, manifests the self-evident essence of its presence.

The project’s relation with nature is not the only parameter that defines the various dimensions of experience in space. One could refer to the truthful expression of the concrete as an “artificial rock”, the compatibility of the used materials in the project, the play of light, the perception of the weight of architecture, and the questions of scale. All of the mentioned factors are valid since an embodied experience is rooted in a multi-sensory encounter with space.

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FIGURES

Fig.1 - Anastasiia Kholopova, *Photo of Piscina das Marés*, 16th December 2022, 12cmx16cm