Engagement and Estrangement: Participation and Disciplinary Autonomy in Álvaro Siza’s S. Victor Neighbourhood

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Abstract: Citizens’ participation in the design process has been discussed since the aftermath of World War II as an instrument to promote a more humanist approach to habitat. However, it has been also accused of fostering populist outcomes where the designer is merely the hand of the people, challenging the traditional limits of architecture’s disciplinary autonomy. Hence, to which extent can architects negotiate their critical approach to the status quo with the will of the people? Is there any contradiction between the architect’s social commitment and architecture’s disciplinary autonomy? Should the architect design for the people or with the people? To contribute with some possible answers to these questions, this paper presents a critical approach to Álvaro Siza’s S. Vitor housing neighbourhood, a project designed with citizens’ participation. It will discuss the contributions brought about by the creative tension immanent in the relation between the designer and the user. It will chiefly explore the delicate negotiation between the architect’s engagement and estrangement in the design process, and its consequences in promoting urban inclusion.

Keywords: architecture, citizens’ participation, populism, disciplinary autonomy, Álvaro Siza

Introduction

In December 1976, the influential Italian architectural magazine Lotus International published an issue with a contribution by Álvaro Siza on his project for the S. Victor housing neighbourhood, in the Portuguese city of Porto. This project was part of a larger housing programme designated the SAAL Process, which was launched in the aftermath of the 1974 Portuguese democratic revolution.

This programme had the ambitious goal of contributing to solve the country’s housing shortage, which was estimated to affect 25% of families (David, 1976: 60). Moreover, it aimed to accomplish this ambition using an innovative methodology, which was based upon the social organization of the demand (Bandeirinha, 2007). The programme prompted the

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creation of dwellers’ associations, and encouraged participatory methodologies where the future users and the so-called technical brigades (usually coordinated by architects) should be part and parcel of the process.

In this issue of *Lotus International*, the magazine published a sort of manifesto entitled “The Line of Action of the Technicians as Technicians”, written by Álvaro Siza. In this text, Siza delivers his account on the challenges brought about by SAAL’s novel methodology, arguing that “the Brigade does not adopt simplistic positions, such as: learn with the people or teach them” (Siza, 1976a: 87). By rejecting these *simplistic positions*, he dismissed, therefore, both a populist and a paternalistic approach. And, on a Marxist tone, he went on arguing: “the Brigade believes that its expertise and its ideas, within the concrete limits of the reconstruction of the habitat, with a dialectic relationship with the present ideas of the population it works for, will form the basis of a physical world created for and by a society that wants to be classless” (Siza, 1976a: 87).

Siza was thus keenly arguing in favour of a disciplinary approach that should, above all, be able to pursue a qualified outcome, one that should overcome the temptation of just delivering “what people want”. Moreover, the Brigade should reject the idea “that the urgency of the problems could constitute a limiting factor to quality and poetry” (Siza, 1976a: 87).

Siza’s plea on quality and poetry seems thus to resonate with a drive towards an autonomous disciplinary approach, one which should be severed from the contaminations brought about by negotiation processes such as participatory procedures. However, he was also keen in rejecting an approach where the project was constructed from a hegemonic position. Hence, how can the gap between these two seemingly opposed poles be bridged? Is it possible to preserve architecture’s disciplinary autonomy while, at the same time, be engaged with other stakeholders towards pursuing a negotiated outcome?

To contribute possible answers to these questions, in this paper I explore Siza’s project for the S. Victor neighbourhood, designed and built in the mid-1970s under the aegis of the SAAL process. The built outcome is discussed against the background of the debate on participatory processes and new design methodologies, which aimed at an empowerment of the users in the design process.

### Shunning conformism

The historical periodization modern/postmodern has been heavily discussed by the scholarship and it seems, now more than ever, to be defined by extremely blurred lines. To avoid the notion of postmodern, several alternative notions emerged, such as late capitalism or post-Fordism. Cornelius Castoriadis, a Greek-French philosopher, challenges this historical periodization and suggests a political one instead. According to him, the critical or modern period (from the Enlightenment until the sunset of totalitarianisms in the late 1950s) was superseded by the retreat into conformism. Hence, according to Castoriadis, the current historical moment is characterized by a “complacently mixed up with loose but fashionable talk about ‘pluralism’ and ‘respect’ for difference, for ‘the other’, it ends up by glorifying eclecticism, covering up sterility and banality, and providing a generalized version of ‘anything goes’” (cited in Aureli, 2008: 7).

Hence, Castoriadis’ notion of retreat into conformism resonates with an instrumental use of rhetorics of difference to foster a liberal drive. In this context, thus, what is the extent to which the SAAL process resonates with this retreat into conformism?

One of the goals announced with the creation of the SAAL was to enhance *pluralism* and to foster architectural approaches that could be respectful for difference and for *the other*. The
outcome of the SAAL operation at S. Victor embodies this programme and, as such, it was praised by some of the most influential international critics and professional media. However, instead of eclectic, the project was connoted with references from the 1920s architectural avant-garde and thus seen as a belated dogmatic modern. Moreover, instead of sterile or banal, it was cherished as an outcome of a “hyper-sensitivity towards the inherent nature of a given-site” (Frampton, 1986: 10). It seems, thus, that there is little resonance between this project’s characteristics and Castoriadis’ suggestion of the current historical moment as a retreat into conformism. Moreover, I would suggest that the project for S. Victor challenges conformism and the ‘anything goes’ approach thus embodying a convoluted condition of ambivalence that pervades the project in multiple layers. To further examine this condition of ambivalence, I will explore Siza’s assessment of the delicate balance between an appraisal of ‘the other’ and architecture’s disciplinary autonomy.

A critical negotiation

In the same issue of Lotus International mentioned above, the magazine also published an apologetic review on a local proletarian housing type, the ilhas (islands), written by Siza to support his Brigade’s architectural approach in S. Victor’s operation. Siza’s appraisal of the ilhas model is, at first sight, somewhat unusual. In fact, poor living conditions at Porto’s ilhas were considered responsible for some violent plague outbreaks that had occurred in the city since the late nineteenth century. They were the result of a bourgeois speculative exploration of the new working class that migrated from the countryside to build the workforce that would support Porto’s (and Portugal’s for that matter) belated industrial revolution.

The ilhas are small housing complexes built in the backyard of middle-class houses, with one single common access to the street and a narrow common yard/corridor, which serves as the only source of light, access and ventilation to the housing units. As their name suggests, they are isolated communities hidden from the street (and, often, also from public concern) behind the bourgeois house, which acts as the filter towards the public space.

Despite the charged public opinion on the ilhas, Siza considered them a model of community life, which was, in fact, a direct consequence of the segregation of the population in those settlements. He acknowledged, however, that this was a housing model that the inhabitants repudiate en mass. “But to repudiate this image”, he contended, “does not necessarily mean refusal of systems of adaptation and whatever is positive in that community life” (Siza, 1976b: 87).

Thus, Siza argued that the ilhas should be considered “the basic element of the urban tissue.” To solve the essential problems of the model, however, he claimed that an emphasis on the design of the open spaces should be the Brigade’s primal concern. The spatial organisation of the houses would be a secondary problem to be solved later, one that he considered easier.

On a reflection about the enigmatic title of Siza’s brigade appraisal of the ilhas model, Alexandre Alves Costa contends that Siza was deliberately creating a new statute for the ilhas

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2 For more information about Porto’s ilhas, see (Teixeira, 1996).
associated with a clear social and political agenda. Costa (2002: 12) argues that “when one calls proletarian island to the ilhas, one is conferring them a new sense and a new dignity. The singular gives them globality: it is the group of all ilhas, it is the city to be built or reconstructed. Proletarian because the new city will be for the workers before it becomes a classless city.”

The implementation of this programme was not, however, as straightforward as Siza and his team would wish. In the area assigned to the S. Victor brigade, the municipality already owned some plots while others were privately held. The occupation of the parcels was also diverse: some were vacant, some occupied by residents and others had empty or ruined buildings. With such diverse conditions, the expropriation of some properties was a fundamental step to develop a plan for the entire neighbourhood.

The S. Victor brigade divided the area in two different sectors: the recuperation and adaptation of the ilhas in the S. Victor quarter and the Senhora das Dores quarter. For the first, they designed a project to recuperate the ilhas model, creating larger houses with improved sanitary conditions. For the latter, the plan was rather more complex and considered four different types of intervention: type A, on completely free land in the interior areas of the neighbourhood; type B, on empty plots at the perimeter of the neighbourhood; type C, reconstruction using existing foundations and walls of semi-destroyed buildings; and type D, recuperation and adaptation of inhabited buildings at the neighbourhood’s perimeter belt.

Due to problems related to the expropriation process, which created many obstacles to the implementation of the general plan, the brigade decided to start building in the areas where the property was already owned by the municipality. Only two operations were, thus, eventually built: One of type C (reconstruction using existing foundations and walls) and one of type A (on free land in the interior of the neighbourhood).

The housing block created under the type A intervention would eventually become well known in the architectural milieu of the late 1970s and early 1980s. This housing block, however, resonated little with the urban vernacular that Siza so enthusiastically called the “basic element of the urban tissue”. It showed, instead, clear references from the interwar modernist avant-garde, especially with the housing neighbourhoods designed in the 1920s and 1930s by the Dutch architect J.J.P. Oud. Further, Siza himself would also recognize this. Already in 1976, he acknowledged that they proposed “an architecture that made little reference to that existing, but which was rather overlaid on it (conserved even if in ruinous condition)” (Siza, 1976b: 90).

The ambivalence that pervades this project is conspicuously highlighted in this tension between preserving the city’s collective memory and delivering an autonomous artefact. It resonates, moreover, with a larger debate on the preservation of the human qualities of the humble and prosaic against the human alienation fostered by everyday experiences where repetitive gestures are tokens of modernity’s drive towards rationalization, universalism and functionalism.

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3 The Municipality had previously bought plots in the neighbourhood to build a parking lot for the residents in the area. This programme was considered useless by the SAAL brigade whom, therefore, converted the available area into housing.

4 This ambivalence resonates with Aldo Rossi’s idea of an autonomous architecture, which should emphasize both geographical continuities and historical discontinuities. For an insightful discussion on this, see Aureli (2008: 53-69).
Disciplinary autonomy and social engagement

To uncover the deep structures defined by modernity and everydayness, and the relentless rationalization of contemporary city, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre claims for a critical analysis that can go beyond a simple ‘change life’ attitude or a rejection of lived experience. Therefore, Lefebvre calls for the expression of the energy, humanity and creativity embodied in the humble, prosaic details of daily existence in order to challenge the commodification of the everyday.

According to Mary McLeod (1997: 12), Lefebvre’s interest in the humble and prosaic is also a manifestation of his criticism on the elitism and heroicism of Nietzsche’s rhetoric of the “superman”. Hence, for Lefebvre, it was time for a “superhumanism”. McLeod (1997: 28-29) argues that Lefebvre’s postulation of superhumanism “is a rejection of bourgeois humanism, of universal rationality, and of suppression of difference. It is also a refusal to accept the death of subjectivity, the endless proliferation of signs, and the celebration of commodity forces – the ‘anything goes’ mentality.”

In the disciplinary field of architecture, the critical analysis suggested by Lefebvre can be paralleled with the concept of “critical architecture”, which Hilde Heynen (2007) defines as a critical engagement of architectural works to their social condition. Heynen uses the Frankfurt School’s critical theory to define an architectural approach that is able to combine its autonomy with social interests. To illustrate this approach, Heynen presents the architecture of the modern movement, especially its architectural proposals in the field of housing. She claims that this architectural approach proposed “a new way of living that offered an alternative to the exploitation and injustice of the status quo. Modern architecture”, she argues, “thus equalled a social project, with utopian overtones, based upon a critical attitude towards the existing” (Heynen, 2007: 49).

This combination of disciplinary autonomy and social engagement is, however, a challenge to established divisions between the notions of modernity and avant-garde. Heynen suggests the notion of a heroic avant-garde, one which is dominant in the works of Matei Calinescu and Renato Poggioli, as associated with those progressive political and artistic movements, which are fostered by a utopian approach, challenging the status quo. In contrast, Heynen designates as transgressive, the idea championed by Peter Bürger and Andreas Huyssen’s of the avant-garde as an artistic approach concerned with bridging the gap between art and life, as opposed to modernism’s autonomous drive.

For some members of the Frankfurt school, such as Theodor Adorno or Jürgen Habermas the concepts of modernism and avant-garde could be used interchangeably. For Peter Bürger (1981) and Andreas Huyssen (1981), however, this “veils the historical achievements of the avant-garde movements. […] Their radical demand to reintegrate art into everyday life.” They argue that the modernists struggled to salvage the purity of high art while the avant-garde attempted to subvert art’s autonomy, its artificial separation from life.

Hilde Heynen (1999: 192) argues, however, that in “Adorno’s view it is only by preserving its autonomy that art can remain critical.” Therefore, for Adorno there is a “dual character of art” that can be useful to use as framework for heteronomous forms of art such as architecture. According to Heynen, on the one hand it allows us to “see works of art in the perspective of their social definition and social relevance […] and on the other hand in the perspective of their autonomy as aesthetically shaped objects” (p. 192).
Dwelling on a liminal position

Siza’s manifesto published in *Lotus International*, mentioned above, stresses this need for a balance between disciplinary autonomy and a critical assessment of social conditions. In the project for the S. Victor neighbourhood this dual approach is also present. On one hand, the architect preserves his autonomy by using the architectural project as a tool to translate the users’ demands. On the other hand, the outcome of his work is the result of a critical assessment of everydayness.

Thus, the rationality and anonymity associated with the modernist principles inherited from the Enlightenment values is mingled with the avant-garde’s desire to bridge the gap between art and life. From this dialectic results a negotiated outcome where needs and desire can be reconciled, as Henri Lefebvre argued. In fact, according to Siza himself, what interests him in the construction of a city “is the capacity of transformation, something quite like the growth of a human being, who from his birth has certain characteristics and a sufficient autonomy, a basic structure that can integrate or resist the changes in life. This doesn’t signify a loss of identity, though” (Siza, 1991: 64).

Siza’s approach reveals a detachment from both authoritarian and paternalistic positions. With this detachment, he delivers an architecture that stands between the anonymity of the everyday and the avant-garde’s conflation of art and life. Or, in his own words:

> the architectural creation is born out of an emotion, the emotion caused by a moment and a place. The project and the construction, demand from the authors to free themselves from that emotion, on a progressive detachment – transmitting it as a whole and hidden. From then on, the emotion belongs to the other(s). (Siza, 2009: 109)

This detachment resonates with Brecht’s notion of *Verfremdung* (estrangement) as noted by José António Bandeirinha (2010). This estrangement becomes instrumental in supporting a position of resistance to a populist approach where the aspirations of the users would unconditionally define the architect’s performance. The architect uses it as a tool for the translation of the users’ aspirations and thus, as in Brecht’s plays, “the actor speaks this [both highly polished and plain] language as if he were reciting someone else’s words: as if he stood beside the other, distancing himself, and never embodying the other” (Bloch, 1970: 124).

Siza’s project for S. Victor therefore represents an architectural approach that challenges dogmatic preconceptions and resists populism. The creative force that Siza finds in blurred hierarchies and reciprocities challenges established definitions of modernism, postmodernism, avant-garde, autonomy, participation, or populism.

Hence, Siza’s architectural approach dwells on an in-between position, one eloquently expressed by the Portuguese modernist poet Mário de Sá-Carneiro in his poem “7”, written in 1914: “I’m neither myself nor the other, / I’m something in-between: / A pillar in the bridge of boredom / That goes from me to the Other” (Sá-Carneiro, 1996: 80).

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5 This text was originally published in 1992. Translation by the author.
6 “Eu não sou eu nem sou o outro, / Sou qualquer coisa de intermédio: / Pilar da ponte de tédio / Que vai de mim para o Outro.” Translation into English by the author.
This liminal locus entails an embedded condition of thirdness that stems from a process of negotiation in which the architectural project occupies a pivotal position as an instrument of mediation between those opposing poles, rather than a tool to claim architecture’s autonomy.

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