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**The reconstruction of the Chiado in Lisbon.
 Álvaro Siza and the artifice of heteronomy**

Abstract

The plan conceived by Álvaro Siza to rebuild the Chiado neighbourhood in Lisbon, following a blaze which wiped out four whole city blocks between Baixa and Bairro Alto in August 1988, was based on a dense system of relationships at different scales. Siza's proposal worked on redefining the relationship between the volumetric structure of the destroyed buildings, organized within the Marquis of Pombal's grid plan, and a system of interstitial spaces which rediscovered traces of ancient routes, hidden away by the Cartesian rigour of a reconstruction following the earthquake of 1755. Siza proposed a spatial experience which allows us to amble through the various layers of the place's memory, where the traces of the fire are intermingled with those left by the earthquake. A web of perceptual and mental connexions which substantiated the idea of a city based on relationships, with the fabric seen as a three-dimensional web of geometries and epochs, supporting the implementation and development of a body which is sometimes complex, sometimes not, as opposed to a flat pattern punctuated by events.

Keywords

Reconstruction — Urban Design — Public space

In August 1988, just a few days after the blaze which destroyed eighteen buildings in the centre of Lisbon, the Municipality instructed Álvaro Siza to draw up a detailed plan to reconstruct the damaged area, which involved four whole city blocks of the Chiado neighbourhood. The firm of this architect from Porto¹ had the support a municipal technical office specially set up under the guidance of Victor Manuel Pessanha Viegas, which permitted the coordination of an architectural proposal containing all the many aspects which entail essential repercussions in the design of a plan: from the relationship with the infrastructure to administrative issues, in particular that of land reorganization, which is fundamental in reconfiguring open spaces in negotiations between the public and private sectors. In fact, if with respect to the volumetric arrangement of the buildings towards the street, the alignments and the related design of the façades – strongly identity-making elements of a part of the city seen as a unitary whole and not as a sum of individual artefacts – the choice fell on substantial maintenance, as well as an interpretation of public land – partially released for private property, partially recovered with operations of thinning inside the lots – which constituted the fundamental element in redefining the location's identity. As a result, the new design, through a sort of archaeology of memory, worked on the margins, on the transition areas, where time had accumulated different possibilities and rediscovered the spatial values of that medieval city wiped out by the earthquake of 1755 and given a new form by the Marquis of Pombal's reconstruction work. It was in fact inevitable that the Chiado fire would take the collective memory back to that traumatic event, like a short circuit, and it is particularly interesting to look at the plan of the damaged area to re-

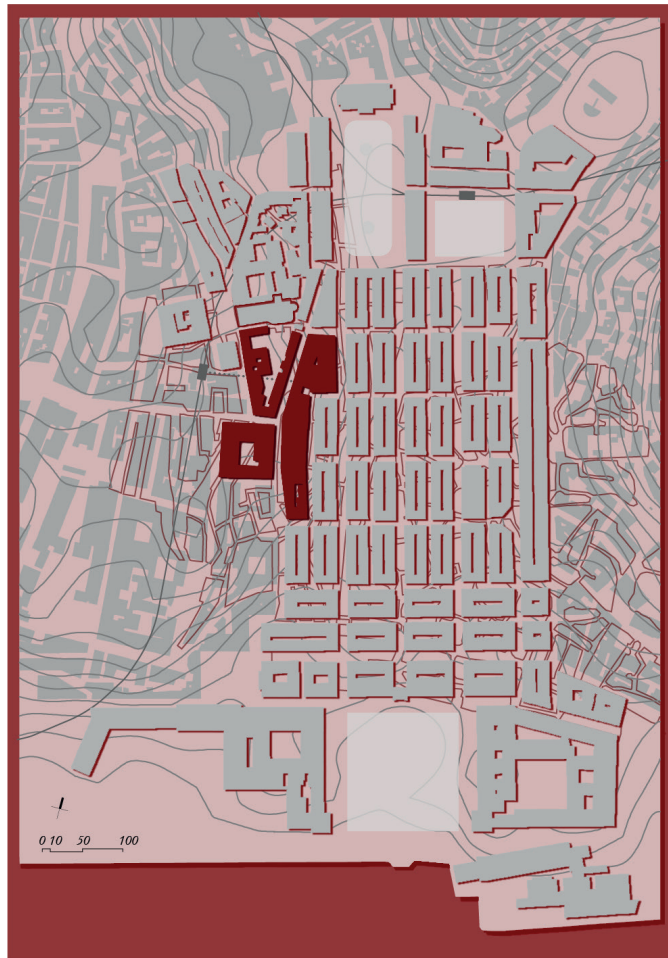


Fig. 1

Lisbon, plan of Baixa with a reconstruction of the sketch of Layout no. 5 by Eugenio de Santos in 1780, superimposed on a drawing of the blocks destroyed by the 1755 earthquake. The lots involved in the project to reconstruct Chiado following the 1988 fire have been highlighted. The route of the metro line and the underground connection between the Chiado stop and the lift inside the Grandes Armazéns do Chiado are indicated. Álvaro Siza's architectural proposal compared and matched with the new access and crossing system which connects the area to the more complex series of transformations involving the whole of Baixa. Original scale of the drawing 1:10.000. Graphics by Ambra Lofrano, 2021.

read certain aspects of the Enlightenment project in fine detail. In fact, it is immediately clear that the effort of this reconstruction can be linked to a broader programme to regenerate Baixa – a fact partially thwarted by subsequent political decisions.

The choice of Siza's name was significant: he was not an architect from Lisbon, but from Porto, whose design thinking was deeply rooted in the experience of the SAAL Brigades²; a figure who in those years was establishing himself on the European scene thanks to the construction of residential complexes in Berlin and The Hague, while at a national level he was dealing with construction of the Malagueira district in Évora, giving life to a skilful interweaving of traces of the old and new foundations. The idea of holding a competition was excluded, and this raised some objections. And yet the intention behind this choice was not to replace this part of the city with an architectural “insert” signed by a starchitect, but identifying a design sensibility capable of finding in a dialogue, in a relationship, a reconstruction strategy which would leave room for a memory of the place as well as possibilities of future transformations. What was immediately recognized as a heritage to be preserved was the overall historical and architectural environmental value of the neighbourhood, not only because of being stylistically relevant, but because it was a part of the common sentiment of this ancient city. And this was why the idea of putting one of the leading exponents of the so-called “Porto school” to the test was so persuasive, within which a precise way of looking at the question of the relationship between the old and new in architecture was transmitted. It is certainly in the work and teachings of Fernando Távora that we find an



Fig. 2

Lisbon, aerial photograph of Chiado after the 1988 fire. Chiado occupies a transitional position between the level where Baixa lies and the Bairro Alto hill, and has long represented one of the most important civic and commercial areas in the city. The slope on which the built fabric is arranged is crossed by the Santa Justa Lift, whose terminus reaches, across a suspended walkway, the ruins of the Carmo Convent and Church, a Gothic complex which remained open to the elements after the 18th-century earthquake.

Álvaro Siza collection - Canadian Center for Architecture - Gift of Álvaro Siza © Álvaro Siza.

underlying design thought passed down on the drawing boards for many decades. An aptitude, that is, to conceive a new work in relation to the “circumstance”, that is, «the whole set of factors which gravitate around an architectural event», cultivating an awareness that «systematically implies a critical stance, which, with respect to the status quo, implements a re-signification»³. This aptitude, far from representing an expression of flaccid thinking, acceptance of a sort of predestination, or the implementation of an attempt at mimesis, affirmed the strength of the design act as a form of knowledge and stressed the intrinsic link between formal investigation – declaredly autonomous – and a search for rootedness with the place and consequently with the history of which it would become the theatre. In this process, invention always corresponded to a discovery; and it was Álvaro Siza himself who recalled this, when he recounted how he had a eureka moment, later proven by historical documents, to reopen the connexion with the southern side of the Carmo Convent: «This confirmed my idea regarding what had been done and seems to have disappeared, in reality it still remains, it is only necessary to look for it. The architect is also a detective; there is a latent presence, the interventions on a city never disappear, they remain there and can be ignored or used as a support for a project»⁴.

In fact, at Chiado, the reconstruction was intended as a rewriting, and was based on a constructive reading of the reality of the destruction, without leaving room for rhetoric, monumentalism, or nostalgia. Through a dense system of relationships at different scales, Siza redefined the place, intertwining heterogeneous epochs in a fresh urban vision, where the authorship of the project remained a “figure”⁵ etched into the fabric, emerging in a few measured signs of an “interstitial nature”⁶ which

demonstrate the possibility for a contemporary language to construct a new text, intertwined with the language that gives voice to the built substance of this part of the city. And if what Massimo Cacciari affirmed is true (1998, pp. 6-8), that the sense of belonging to a place resides in the fact of “speaking” its language, that language which “is not grammar or syntax, is a set of possibility that I discover gradually which ... I act in, which I work within”, then what the architect Francisco Barata wrote about the idea of the city as a collective work is also true, namely that: «if we were to make an analogy with writing, the city would look more like a newspaper than a jointly written text. It is like an open global project, one which binds unity and meaning to texts that are independent and autonomous⁷». Again, in the reconstruction projects, the architect’s autobiographical memory and the plural imagery rooted in the place of the catastrophe, produced a tension, in a chorus of voices which admitted fractures and suspensions. Destruction inspires new inventive processes; in the project to reconstruct Chiado, Siza found a principle of coherence in the rigour of the method, leaving each voice its own space, in a pulverization of the author, in a declared heteronomy, which syncretically shows the various identities that make up a single place.

These, in short, are the reasons why it is now relevant to reconsider certain aspects of this experience as the application of a strategy capable of restoring the role of synthesis among the many specialist contributions which collaborate in a reconstruction process. The destruction syncretically revealed the latent possibilities of a place, while the new design reactivated the energy buried deep in the mineral debris, for the construction of new images. We could therefore say that the reconstruction project, as well as the journey into the conception of Claudio Magris (2005, p. XV), relied more on the sense of possibilities than on the principle of reality: «as in an archaeological excavation, other layers of reality are discovered; the concrete possibilities that have not materially been realized but once existed and survive in shreds forgotten by the passage of time, in open passages, in still fluctuating states».

Chiado occupies a transitional position between the heights of Baixa and the Bairro Alto hill, and has long been the hub of an intense social, cultural, and economic life. In the years preceding the 1988 fire, this neighbourhood also suffered from the transformations which affected the whole city centre: a progressive depopulation and a crisis among the commercial establishments. The strong reaction of the whole of the citizenry to the fire demonstrated on the one hand the persistence of its identity-making role, but at the same time the collective awareness of a need for its transformation. For this reason, the guidelines established by the Municipality immediately showed an intent to reconstruct the totally destroyed or severely damaged lots, but also to implement a physical reconstruction in a more general process to regenerate the area, an attempt to rediscover the profound connexion which linked the various activities reintroduced and the urban structure that hosted them⁸.

The design of this part of the city, characterized by its topography – which entailed the construction of various types of connections between the differences in height: very steep streets, stairways, platforms, etc. – and from the presence of various religious complexes. It shows the extreme efforts made by the Marquis of Pombal’s plan to maintain its morphological continuity, by hybridizing with real conditions, as well as its ability to draw

some of its fundamental rules from the extant city. Indeed, the position of the eastern side of the Convento do Espírito Santo da Pedreira – whose imposing bulk dominated the slope – was one of the factors which helped to determine the positioning of the orthogonal grid of the Enlightenment city. In the grounds of the convent, heavily damaged by the earthquake, was built the Palácio Barcelinhos, which in 1894 became the seat of the Grandes Armazéns do Chiado. This building, together with the Art Nouveau-style Armazéns Grandella,⁹ along with the volume of the Carmo convent, represents the only exception compared to the Pombal typology which constitutes the underlying pattern of Chiado's urban fabric. In effect, despite the deformations imposed on the plan by the unevenness of the ground, the rigour with which the rule was pursued made it possible to extend the identity of Baixa by scaling the retaining walls of the hill. And it is precisely when we witness the faltering of Cartesian logic in the face of a topographical complexity that we understand the value of this strongly unitary vision of the city. In fact, in the dialogue with the specific nature of the place, the tension takes shape between the principles underlying the abstract rule and those that Carlos Martí Aris (1990, p.85) defined as the «verification of the norm, variations and compromises», capable of revealing its ability to adapt to a specific condition. Observing the moment when an idea of a plan demonstrates the possibility of undermining one's limit from within, it is impossible not to refer, once again, to the reflection that Giorgio Grassi (1988, p.32) dedicated to the Roman cities of Timgad and Djémila, underlining how in the latter we can witness the ability «to learn, understand, and adapt to that same elementary idea».

To speak of Lisbon, or rather, to understand its urban structure, we must first of all become familiar with the nature of the place on which its settlement is arranged: i.e., its geography. An irregular site sprawling across a vast protected bend which precedes the point where the River Tagus flows into the Atlantic. From this natural harbour, dividing the area on which the built-up area would be arranged in two parts, a flat valley stretches out, defined by the surrounding hills: to the east the harsher one of the São Jorge Castle, to the west the one where Bairro Alto was built. Baixa stretches out on the central plain which descends to the northern bank of the watercourse.

Fernando Pessoa opened his notes on what the tourist must see thus: «Over seven hills, which are as many points of observation whence the most magnificent panoramas may be enjoyed, the vast irregular and many-coloured mass of houses that constitute Lisbon is scattered. For the traveller who comes in from the sea, Lisbon, even from afar, rises like a fair vision in a dream, clear-cut against a bright blue sky which the sun gladdens with its gold. And the domes, the monuments, the old castles jut up above the mass of houses, like far-off heralds of this delightful seat, of this blessed region¹⁰».

In Lisbon, the urban text unfolds according to a strongly persuasive criterion of continuity, where the exceptionality of certain urban artefacts finds its role only within the maze of a tight and continuous narrative. Here, the architecture of the city was able to convert the facts of history into form, presenting a multiple, multifaceted face to the citizenry who recognized themselves in it, with reference to a clearly defined identity, and elements and parts which are heterogeneous, in a pattern of relationships on a territorial scale. It goes without saying that this reflection cannot be

extended indiscriminately to the whole city, all of its parts, and each single phase of its development. However, what is undeniably recognizable, in certain periods of its history and in some of the projects which influenced its transformations, is a common effort to search for a coherence between the urban and architectural conceptions. In particular, the effort of the refounding act, which the Marquis of Pombal carried out following the earthquake, still represents an unavoidable connexion for all projects dealing with this place today¹¹.

The breath of the city of Lisbon – the capital of a small kingdom, the last bastion of continental Europe, and the gateway to a colonial empire with vast borders and constantly changing fortunes – proceeded at a syncopated rhythm throughout the course of its history, seeing periods of glory alternating with moments of crisis. And yet, or perhaps precisely by virtue of these continuous ripples, the identity of the city remains recognizable, just as its myth can be recognized, a point of convergence between culture and the physical signs that shape them.

Perhaps for this reason, when on the morning of the 1st of November 1755 a violent earthquake destroyed between a half and two-thirds of its buildings in the space of a few minutes, the whole world felt the shock. As is well known, while this calamity shook the roots of Enlightenment optimism, it also offered the opportunity to a small country like Portugal, at that time fossilized in late Baroque culture, to reinstate itself and reconnect with the culture of Europe. Indeed, to enter the very heart of the contemporary debate, as a theatre of what would not be merely a reconstruction, but a “recreation”¹² of urban culture and its principles. The catastrophe opened up an unprecedented field of experimentation in which a tricky balance was sought between theoretical models and pragmatic empiricism: a complex ideological, formal, symbolic and functional synthesis. On the one hand, the desire was to take the opportunity to shape the city of the new rationalism, on the other, the urgency and drama of the status quo forced any abstract models into a direct confrontation with tradition, convention, and concrete experience. In this process, the architects involved played a fundamental role in translating the demands of emerging political power into an urban configuration, one which could maintain the signs of the place’s memory. In fact, as Gonçalo Byrne has pointed out, despite the almost total cancellation of some of its parts: «The new city was not created out of nothing, but within the previous one, filling the empty spaces of the damaged zones, recreating its destroyed centre with new symbolic and monumental values, continuing expansion between undamaged zones, or in areas adjoining their margins, and taking a great deal of care over the connection between old and new»¹³. There was an awareness and aspiration that the reconstruction plan would represent a matrix for the subsequent development of the city over a vast horizon of time. Consequently, the strategy defined by the military engineer Manuel da Maia – recruited soon after the disaster by the Marquis of Pombal¹⁴ to address the theoretical side of the project, by consulting various architects and overseeing the operations of those working in the *Casa do Risco* (Municipal Design Department) – was translated into an urban figure from the roughs produced by the architects Eugenio dos Santos and Carlos Mardel. These two preparatory tools were flanked by a solid executive apparatus consisting of regulations – which also allowed operations at an administrative level – and models – which made it possible to investigate



Fig. 3

Lisbon, plan of the Chiado blocks included in Álvaro Siza's reconstruction plan. The system of open spaces defined by the 1990 project is highlighted, which included private areas sold off to the public. In the quadrangular block located between Rua Ivens, Rua Garrett, Rua Nova do Almada and the staircase of São Francisco (Block A), the central courtyard has been organized as a collective place accessible from three passageways. At the southern terminal of the Armazéns do Chiado building (Block C), the passageway which connects Rua do Crucifixo with Rua Nova do Almada at two different heights has been reintegrated. For Block B, the drawing shows the relationship between the connection system defined by the 1990 plan and the pedestrian connection project for the Terraços do Carmo developed in 2008.

Original scale of the drawing 1: 2,000. Graphics by Ambra Lofrano, 2021.

issues both on a technical level, through the creation of such construction approaches as the *gaiola*¹⁵, and on a representational level, through the design and control of the *façades* as well as the open spaces in the built environment.

The unifying element of the urban design, understood as continuous, is the *façade*, a limit to mark the transition between the public and private spheres, between the possibility of imposing a certain system of rules and the margin left open to variations and subsequent transformations. This system hinges on three fundamental elements: the layout, the standard elevation, and the cross-section. It is somewhat surprising that in the archival research, investigated further precisely in relation to the drafting of the plan for the reconstruction of Chiado, there are no indications on the plan of the Marquis's house¹⁶.

It is from this consideration that Siza drew the criteria of his "open" strategy¹⁷. Of the eighteen buildings which stand at the intersection of Rua Nova do Almada, Rua do Carmo and Rua Garret – with the exception of the aforementioned volumes of the Grandella and Chiado department stores – all of them substantially follow the Marquis's typology – while showing different degrees of maintenance and alterations with respect to the original model, whose spatial relationships within the plots have been compromised.

Recognizing the collective value of the *façade* designs, and therefore of the construction rule which governed the scheme, the architect restored the elevations of the destroyed buildings to a greater uniformity in terms of height and rhythm, in a rigorous interpretation of the rules defined by the *Casa do Risco*. In this way, Siza bypassed the specious debate on the convenience of preserving or reconstructing the *façades*, by drawing directly on the original design of these buildings, without mediation.

Also in the executive model, the process borrowed some fundamental principles from the Enlightenment reconstruction: the fact of being

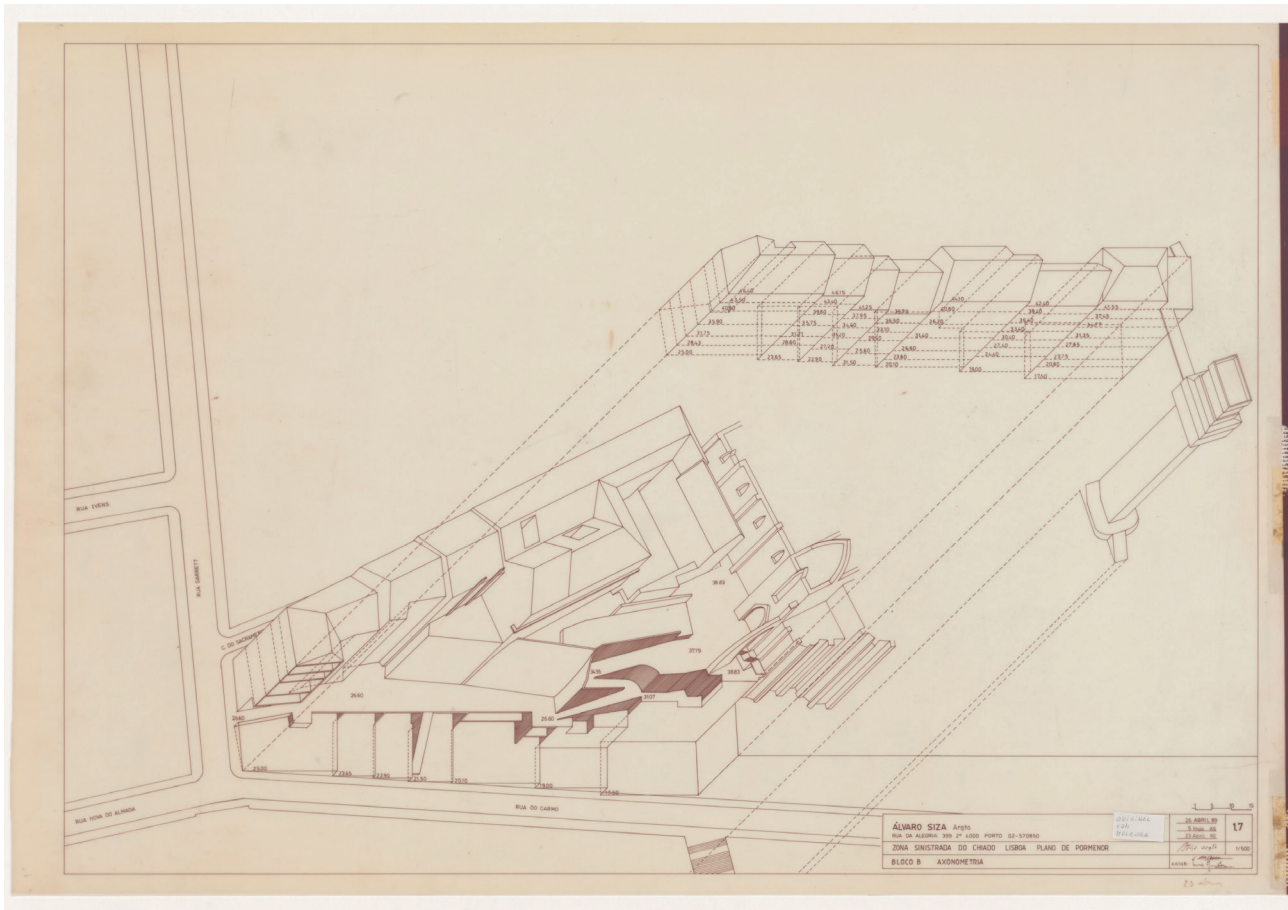


Fig. 4

Álvaro Siza, Lisbon, Chiado, Block B. Axonometric exploded view, 1989-1990. The interior of the block between Rua do Carmo, Rua Garrett and Calçada do Sacramento (Block B) was modified by constructing a raised platform divided into a system of ramps and walkways at different heights. Clinging to the existing terraces and to the side of the Palácio Valadares (today Escola Veiga), the ground thus re-defined reaches the southern side of the ruins of the Carmo Church. This has defined a completely different perspective, of a progressive discovery, compared to the direct arrival allowed by the walkway of the Santa Justa Lift.

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formalized in a few, clear and concise points, which nullified any possibilities of interpretation regarding the essential aspects, while leaving a series of possibilities open in other areas. More precisely, as regards the buildings' façades, the indications were quite literal and arrived at a definition of the individual structural and decorative elements, while, as regards the interiors, the owners were free to rely on individual architects who could define how they would be laid out, working within guidelines which permitted variations.

As for the techniques and materials to be used, the plan strictly prescribed the use of that language which was in fact the language of the community, without leaving any room for the voice of the architect designing the project, nor for those who would continue his work. Siza himself commented (1989a, p.71), «Is it all the same? Some people are disappointed: the shop windows are boring, it is said, a bit of modernism is needed. Anyone who looks closer notices the double glazing and other things, especially the people who leave there. Those who live better notice nothing. There is not even a need».

Where the transformation really cut across the epochs of the city was in the new design of the public spaces. Siza defined a new mobility inside the lots, by means of a system of routes which compensated for the differences in height and introduced alternative possibilities of movement with respect to those given by the street network. The integration between the buildings and the public space at the service of the community is one of the more convincing aspects of the project, which makes it an exemplary experience not only from an architectural point of view, but also as a model of urban planning.

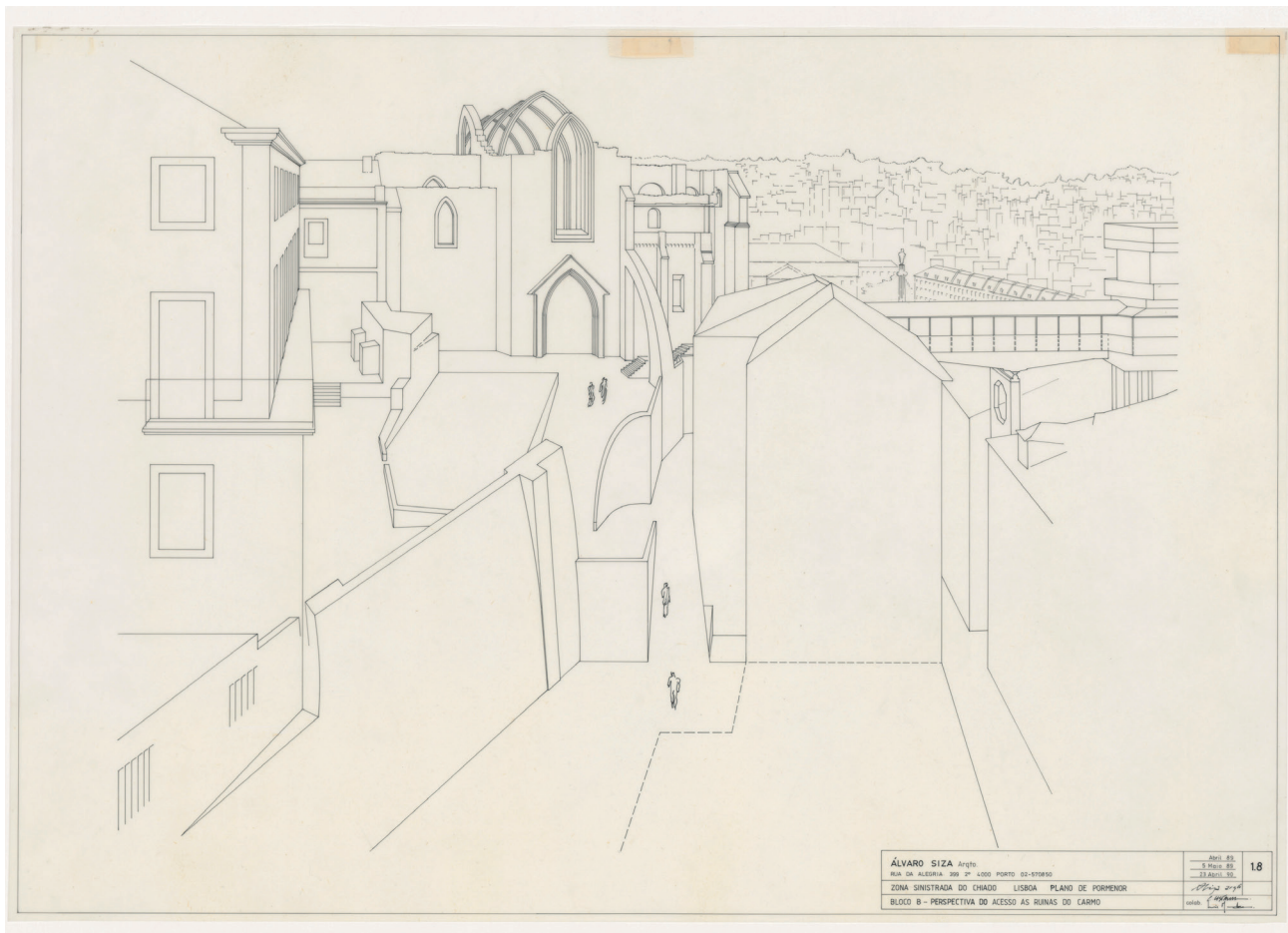


Fig. 5

Álvaro Siza, Lisbon, Chiado, Block B. Perspective view of the new system of public spaces created in the internal courtyard, 1989-1990.

The design of the pedestrian route inside Block B follows the traces of an ancient system of connections of the medieval settlement, which had been adapted to the topography and had been hidden by the new constructions following the 1755 earthquake.

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This strategy is applied to all of the three blocks involved, named A, B and C. In particular, the intervention inside Block B, recently completed by a system of pedestrian routes which develop in the eastern part with respect to the ruins of the Carmo Convent (*Terraços do Carmo*, Á. Siza and C. Castanheira, 2008-2015) has established a continuous web of relationships, made more dynamic by the different systems to compensate for the differences in height. A testimony of how, twenty years later, disregarding the delays in execution of some parts of the plan, or the modifications introduced for reasons beyond the architectural field, it is possible to follow its urban logic, which took root in the memory as well as historical, archaeological and anthropological investigations which ran in parallel, to verify and confirm an interpretative reading of the project. Occasions of this type were implicit in the original project, whose presuppositions included the possibility of being continued over a long period of time and in a choral perspective.

However, the theme of the pedestrian routes is linked not only to the city's past but also to its future, by adding the design of public transport to the reconstruction plan, in particular that provided by the metro.

In this project, Siza solved the issue of the connexion between physical height differences and temporal differences, allowing the visitor to amble through the various layers of the place's memory, where the traces of the fire are intermingled with those left by the earthquake. A web of perceptual and mental connections which confirms the idea of a city based on relationships, with the fabric seen as a three-dimensional web of geometries and epochs, supporting the implementation and development of a body which is sometimes complex, sometimes not, as opposed to a flat

pattern punctuated by events.

In this game of mirror references between individual and collective work, every dichotomy between invention and authenticity is overcome, to blend in with the coherence of the place.

It is impossible not to recall here the estranging narrative artifice with which José Saramago let one of Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms, Ricardo Reis, wander the streets of Lisbon, as if he had survived his creator for a whole year after his passing. In this multiplication of the self, of the one, in a sort of plural identity, the research of the author and the urban body blend together in a narrative with a continuous tone, giving substance to the fusion between individual and collective memory. In this fixed but at the same time vibrant scene, the author (Saramago J. 2002, p.9) had the opportunity to question himself on the relationship between reality and invention: «The purpose of art is not imitation ... reality does not tolerate its reflection, rather, it rejects it. Only a different reality, whatever it is, may be substituted for the reality one wishes to convey. The difference between them mutually demonstrates, explains, and measures them, reality as the invention it was, invention as the reality that will be».

Notes

¹ The first part of the recovery plan was presented very swiftly, only eight months after the fire, and its completion came in July 1990. For the complete list of collaborators who took part in the different phases of the project, see the monographic studies listed in the bibliography.

² It seems pertinent to point out here the fact that the results of the SAAL operation (*Serviço Ambulatório de Apoio Local*), born within the *Revolução dos Cravos* of 25 April 1974, were re-read by Vittorio Gregotti as a possible alternative to the dichotomy between architecture and conservation in issue 18 of "Lotus International" in 1978, in an article on "Architecture in historic towns". The case of Porto is illustrated in an article by Alexandre Alves Costa on "The Oporto experience", introduced by Gregotti's essay.

³ Carlotta Torricelli, *L'incontro tra la vita e le forme in architettura. Attualità del pensiero di Távora*, in Távora F. (2021, p. 30)

⁴ Siza Á., *Il rapporto tra antico-nuovo in Italia e in Portogallo. Differenze e analogie*, in Reggiani E. (2015, p. 391).

⁵ The reference here is to Giorgio Grassi's interpretation of a Henry James story entitled *The Figure in the Carpet*, defining the architect's personal imprint as "that sign of recognition so cleverly, tenaciously disguised." See Grassi G. (1984, p.240).

⁶ See Nicolini P. (1997, pp. 7-27).

⁷ Barata Fernandes F. and Pinto R. (2001).

⁸ This aspect, like that of the reintroduction of certain functions, had a substantial weight in guiding not only the design of the reconstruction but also the legislative system of agreements and compromises between the public and private sectors which were intended to provide the basis on which to carry out the project, also on an economic level.

⁹ The Grandella building was constructed in 1891 around an iron and glass framework using an Art Nouveau language based on a project by the architect George Demay, who introduced this new type of department store imported from Paris to the city.

¹⁰ The guide to the city of Lisbon was found in the late 1980s by Portuguese scholars among Pessoa's unpublished writings. The version that was published corresponds to the one written in English in 1925. The first edition came out in Lisbon in 1992.

¹¹ In this regard, see the exhibition catalogue Tostões A., Rossa W. (eds.) (2008) – *Lisboa 1758. O Plano da Baixa Hoje*, Camara Municipal de Lisboa, Lisbon

¹² See in this regard: França J-A. (1972) – *Una città dell'Illuminismo. La Lisbona del marchese di Pombal*, Officina Edizioni, Rome.

¹³ Byrne G. (1987, p.7). The same essay was published in English, dated 1986, in the exhibition catalogue *Alvaro Siza. The Reconstruction of the Chiado, Lisbon*, ICEP,

Gráfica Maiadouro, Porto 1997.

¹⁴ Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, future Count of Oeiras and later Marquis of Pombal, a minister of King Joseph I.

¹⁵ The *gaiola*, or cage, is a standardized construction system devised by the Municipal Design Department (*Casa do Risco*). It consists of a wooden structure, similar in many respects to the balloon-frame introduced in Chicago at the beginning of the 20th century, which could be quickly erected and then clad in masonry. It boasts proven earthquake resistance.

¹⁶ See in this regard, Siza Á. (1990, pp. 48-55).

¹⁷ See Byrne G. (1989, pp. 32-37). The article appeared in issue 64 of “Lotus International”. The title of the issue is *The other city planning* and it features an introductory essay by Manuel de Solà-Morales, “Another modern tradition. From the break of 1930 to the modern urban project”.

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