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Álvaro Siza Vieira
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Santiago de Compostela, 1988-1993

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Art is the religion of our times, and museums are its churches. Within the monumental nucleus of Santiago de Compostela, the Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza Vieira built a new pilgrimage site between 1988 and 1993. Across from the convent and the church of Santo Domingo de Nonaval, the Centro Gallego de Arte Contemporáneo (Galician Center of Contemporary Art) is a holy building that shelters the ceremonies and rites of contemporary artistic piety. Sponsored by the new autonomous administration of the region of Galicia as the major future patron of creativity in the plastic medium within the community, its commission to the master from Oporto illustrates the symbolic importance of the institution. As did Catalonia with New Yorker Richard Meier's MACBA in Barcelona and the Basque country with Californian Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao, Galicia commissioned its temple of the arts from a renowned international figure whose brilliance of contextual form would bestow artistic legitimacy to the so far mostly undetermined future contents of this center.

Awaiting well-defined permanent collections and lacking a constant public, most of these art collection centers rely on their ability to attract visitors based on the distinctiveness of the edifice and the publicity for their programs. For this reason, the architects are often selected from among those professionals with the most prominent artistic profile, an achievement firmly established by Siza. A great designer, draftsman, and sculptor of courage, Siza evidently has ties to, and a fondness for, the geographical setting of this Atlantic edge of Europe. Shortly before the completion of the center, he saw his prestige in the plastic arts endorsed with the award of the Pritzker Prize that his US colleagues Meier and Gehry had received in 1984 and 1989 respectively: the architects of the temples of art must be conferred a priestly office within their demanding métier.

In his *Memorial do Convento*, José Saramago - the first Portuguese-speaking author to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature - describes both the painstaking construction of the Mafra Convent, a colossal structure aspiring to imitate the Escorial that João V built in the early eighteenth century, and the love story of the soldier Baltasar and the visionary Blimunda, who rise above the hardships of the construction work physically and symbolically, thanks to a flying machine and their stubborn determination born of love. In Santiago de Compostela, Álvaro Siza - together with Saramago, the most universal of Portugal's sons, with whom he shares his social consciousness and Iberian spirit - also stands face to face with a Baroque convent situated along the indistinct boundary of the historic center of the city, and rises with determination and sensitivity, above the fiendish difficulty of the site to construct a gravid and airy building that floats without resorting to flying machines.

The site certainly presents a fiendish problem, for the difficulty of the rugged topography is compounded by the irregularity of the perimeter; by the need to create a "dialogue" with the convent and the church of Santo Domingo de Bonaval (in whose former garden the building sits)

without emphasizing the west façade of the complex that had for long remained hidden behind the high walls surrounding the grounds; and by the expediency of encompassing the beautiful terraced garden that contains the convent cemetery while breaking up the sightlines to some unfortunate nearby structures of undesirable visual impact (including a deplorable school built in this century). The twisted urban memory is the problem that Siza is faced with, which he miraculously solves with a single conjurer's gesture, so apparently simple and evident, but in reality the product of a prodigious intuition characterized by synthesis that need not envy for a moment the inventive imagination of Saramago's Padre Bartolomeu.

The spark of inspiration is not found, as we might think, in any of the hundreds of preliminary freehand sketches for the project, but rather, in a detailed plan drawn in pencil that reproduces on a scale of 1:1,000 the site and its surroundings and in which Siza highlights with lines of different colors the most important alignments and sightlines of the complicated urban environment. This careful analysis leads him to the critical decision to organize the building as two elongated rectangular prisms that form an acute angle, joined at the corner to conform the access. One of the prisms is situated along the existing street, and the other leaves a flared space between the art center and the convent, leading to the terraced garden, while the intersection of both forms a covered entry just steps from the monumental doorways to the church and convent of Santo Domingo.

The countless subsequent sketches are limited to developing, as the latter-day Siza is so wont to do, the impeccable initial decision. The empty triangular space between the two sections is a scenographic atrium of soaring height that separates the administrative area (and, after a sharp turn, the auditorium) of the streetside wing from the exhibition areas in the garden wing. Traffic is directed mainly along a theatrical longitudinal stairway parallel to the prism of the galleries that provides access to the different levels as it climbs upwards from the entrance vestibule to the flat roof, which can be used as an open-air terrace for sculpture exhibits. Below it lie some magnificent views of the old center of Santiago. Each of the ancillary areas, from the temporary exhibit space to the library, from the restrooms to the book store, is taken advantage of for repeated diagonal articulations.

In fact, it is in this exacerbated trapezoidal or triangular composition that projects like a geometric echo the irregular terracing of the garden that Siza's talent for working with the topography stands out: the building becomes the link between the random landscaping of the garden and the compact volume of the city, allowing both to influence it. These, precisely, are the vague elements that best fit the manner of the Portuguese master, so fond of making careful folds on his blank canvases with a sculptor's sensitivity. That same subtle and disconcerting look is present in the skylights of the galleries from which hang surreal, upside-down tables to diffuse direct light. It appears again in the mannerist proportions of the open spaces, which waver between the emphatic verticality of the access elements and the flattened horizontality of many of the galleries; in the profusion of acute angles of the rooftop scagliola; and in the plaster coating of the walls, benches, and low walls, as well as the pale marble of the floors.

The homogeneous whiteness of the materials used inside the building - whose only accents are the dark wood of the gallery floors, some interior cabinetry, and the rungs of the main stairway - bathes the interior with a luminous glow that imbues it with the lightness of a building made of artfully folded paper. The exterior, tiled with squares of granite - the traditional building material of Santiago when used in the form of ashlar - gives the same impression of weightlessness by the use of large horizontal lintels. These emphasize the epithelial nature of the stone, whose continuum is interrupted on a diagonal, leaving no doubt about the nonexistent supporting function of the lintels. The nature of the contrived covering - applied for contextual reasons, and one that has not aged well in the rainy climate of Santiago - endows the structure with the fragile and abstract appearance of a

model that gives expression to the ill-defined sense of unease that is inseparable from contemporary art.