



VISUAL

# The Concept Fragment

Alessandra Chemollo

1

## BIOGRAPHY

Alessandra Chemollo was born in Treviso on the 20th of August 1963 and lives in Venice. She graduated from the University IUAV of Venice with a thesis on the relationship between Architecture and Photography.

Her reflection on the representation of architectural works is developed in her professional work and in her self-produced projects, without interruption.

He has realised photographic projects to illustrate numerous monographic texts, deepening specific ways of interpreting architectural works from documentary sources, thanks to his close collaboration with architectural historians – starting with his experience with Manfredo Tafuri.

In her 30 years of professional experience, she ranges from historical to contemporary architecture and develops theoretical areas with didactic and curatorial purposes.

Since 1986 she has worked as a photographer; between 1991 and 2013 she worked with Fulvio Orsenigo (ORCH – [www.orsenigochemollo.com](http://www.orsenigochemollo.com)). Since 2013 she has been teaching the Photography module of the Master of Landscape at IUAV.



<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/19740> | ISSN 2611-0075  
Copyright © 2022 Alessandra Chemollo



I would like to briefly relate a story that, seen from today's perspective, is strangely circular.

A story that starts with the research work I did for my degree thesis, at IUAV in 1995, a thesis that had Marco De Michelis as supervisor and Paolo Costantini as co-rapporteur, whose theme was the photographic reading of Álvaro Siza's work. If this is the starting point, the point of arrival is a small exhibition of mine, "Reduced Version", held in 2003 at Ca' Pesaro, which put together the works of Álvaro Siza, Eduardo Souto de Moura and Fernando Távora.

I believe that to talk about photography one must always consider two elements: the *medium* and the *context*.

In the sense that – in the first place – if I work with equipment that uses medium format film, my look will be different from if I shoot with digital equipment.

Secondly, the fact that a work such as the one on Fernando Távora's architectural work I did in the context of a community of people, so I think my photographs are mine but they are also a little bit Ivana Barbarito's, a little bit Antonio Esposito's and a little bit Giovanni Leoni's, because the thought that generated them is a thought that we developed together, with Távora alive, therefore with a chance to discuss many things with him and not just architecture. Távora, who, as we know, summed up his concept of architectural photography in a sentence that went something like this: "photography is a tragic destruction of architecture because you can take beautiful photos of bad architecture".

This seems to me to be a premise.

The work I did on Távora's work was the latest in a series that began with the Siza monograph for Electa<sup>1</sup>. My graduation came after thirteen years of studies during which I was already working as a photographer and in particular, between 1990 and 1994, with Manfredo Tafuri. It was a fortunate opportunity because working with him was a real education. A reading of ancient architecture I would dare say philological, which involved working on the work of Leon Battista Alberti starting with an orderly reading of his texts, with subsequent discussion of the results.

With this particular background, for me, photographing architecture means working on a project idea.

For the thesis I had interviewed the protagonists of the photographic history of Siza's work and among them Roberto Collovà.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Frampton, *Álvaro Siza. Tutte le opere* (Milano: Electa, 2005).



My first meeting with him was in September 1994, when I was working on my first book for Electa, a book whose title, *Il trionfo della miseria (The Triumph of Poverty)*<sup>2</sup>, I am very proud of. The book was dedicated to the Alberghi dei Poveri (Poor People's Hotels), I had been to Naples to interview Mimmo Iodice then to Palermo, by ship, to interview Roberto Collovà. It was an interesting meeting in the reading of Siza's works, for a depth that in my opinion derives from Roberto's having kept two paths together: architecture and photography. His account of what struck him in getting to know Siza's work was fundamental: Roberto decided to photograph Siza after meeting him in a design workshop on the Cave di Cusa<sup>3</sup>, work that he summed up in this way: "Siza does not make a project about the place, he makes a project to see the place, so his project is a project of vision and I have learnt, through working with Siza, that seeing is the first possible design act".

This is what holds the two paths together.

I do not know how consciously or instinctively Collovà's position coincides with the thinking of Eric De Maré, who divides photography into document, photograph and image, attributing different values to the three categories.

This is exactly the division Collovà works with, using three techniques. He works in black and white to make a reportage, and we could call them images, a work he has been doing for years, covering the whole of Portugal. Then there is photography, work he does in Hasselblad, mainly for architectural photos destined for magazines. Finally, there is documentation, a 24x36 format work that basically serves his teaching activities at the university.

Another lesson picked up by Collovà, for which I am very grateful to him, is his description of *Malagueira*<sup>4</sup> because he tells of how Siza at one point stops the project and his stopping the act of designing allows Malagueira to become a living city.

When Siza was presented in Italy, by Vittorio Gregotti in an article in *Controspazio* in 1972<sup>5</sup>, there was immediate talk of a *non-describability of Siza's work*; an important point because, as we shall see, it has much to do with the work on Távora. Gregotti wrote that "it is not a matter of a literary non-descriptiveness but of the very inability of drawings



3

---

2 Elisabetta Molteni, Paolo Nicoloso, Andrea Guerra, *Il trionfo della miseria. Gli alberghi dei poveri di Genova, Palermo e Napoli* (Milano: Electa, 1955).

3 Álvaro. Siza, E. Souto Moura, R. Collovà, N. Lopez, *Percorso per le Cave di Cusa*, Sicilia, 1980.

4 Álvaro Siza, *Malagueira neighbourhood*, Evora, 1977-1992.

5 Vittorio Gregotti, "Architetture Recenti Di Álvaro Siza", *Controspazio*, no. 9 (1972): 22-25.



and photography to communicate the specific sense of his work". This is why Siza has become, in a way, the architect of detail and has a series of publications highlighting this aspect.

It is interesting to note that over the next twenty years, the ones I have analyzed, we find a very strong evolution in the way photography interprets him, first linking his image to the different political movements following the Carnation Revolution, and then building the image of an *archistar* whose hands end up on the cover. Another interesting aspect of Collovà's work, which I believe is a key point in understanding how the description of architecture has evolved in the world of photography, is his work on *action buildings*<sup>6</sup>, which is in some ways borrowed from the way Ugo Mulas worked on artists. Collovà testifies to having seen Siza, for the first time, in a euphoric state in front of this idea of architecture making in which design becomes something else.

Of Collovà, Siza says that he "knows how to capture the movement of people in a form that explains the project" and that seems to me a very powerful definition.

Another photographer I consider a master is Giovanni Chiaramonte, who was also involved in my thesis on Siza's work.

A lesson I learnt from him concerns his photographic project to describe the Leça da Palmeira Pool<sup>7</sup>. He says: "In the Swimming Pool of Leça I was faced with a space that was really not perspective with the full awareness that mine is a tool that gave me Renaissance perspective. This is the problem with the Modern. The Modern actually founds a new project that is not that of perspective, that is not that of the Renaissance order, that is not that of the world conceived as Cosmos. All the more reason I believe that Siza, who is a great modern in an age of postmodern imbeciles, he who has grasped the greatness of the modern from within, posits a space that is not perspective".<sup>8</sup>

This is also an important theme, in my opinion, for understanding Távora's work.

"In this building,' Chiaramonte says, 'I found myself in a labyrinth because the structure of the pool as I perceived it is just that. I arrived on a windy day on this street and I saw the ocean and the arch in a pool facing the ocean, in this, how should I say, direct relationship with infinity. Then

6 R. Collovà, "Action building Álvaro Siza", *Lotus International*, no. 37, (1983): 74-77.

7 Álvaro Siza, *Tidal Pool*, Leça de Palmeira, Matosinhos, 1961-1966.

8 Interview with Giovanni Chiaramonte in Alessandra Chemollo, "Storia Fotografica dell'opera di Álvaro Siza" (Degree Thesis, IUAV, Venice, 1995, advisors Marco De Michelis and Paolo Costantini).







5



6



there is the land in the middle. Siza has built this building that comes out about thirty centimetres from the earth on the street and forces you to go inside the earth because you have to go inside, you have to climb stairs, you find yourself in a navel, in a long, narrow funnel in which you can hardly even see the sky, underground, and he makes you go through a labyrinth, he makes you penetrate a viscera. After this closed, internal pathway, it returns you to infinity, this infinity that you saw before but that was only reachable through the pathway and there, whatever, it's genius".<sup>9</sup>

The last point that concerns my thesis is what Siza thinks about photography because it is interesting to understand the relationship that the architect has with photography. There are architects such as Richard Neutra, who controls the design process - which ends with the photo shoot - to the point of emptying the houses and furnishing them anew for Julius Shulman to photograph, and others who decide to leave the photographers free.

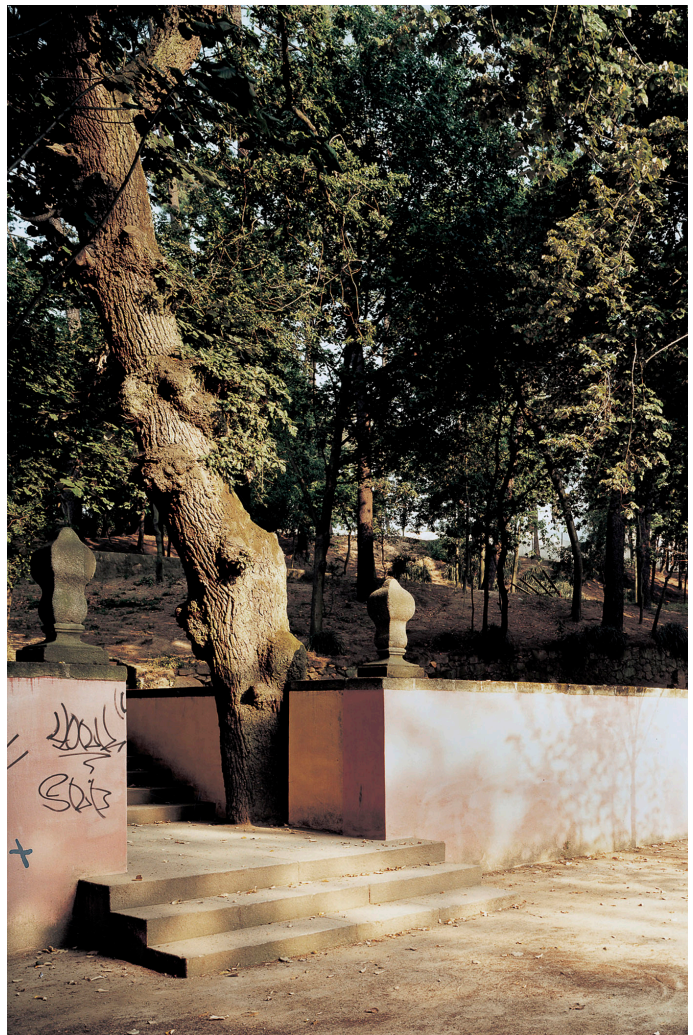
It is another theme of architectural photography, the freedom one is given or one takes.

I have always taken much more freedom than they gave me, but the issue is also the direction that that freedom takes because it is not true that all interpretations are interesting and I am a little critical of certain readings that, in my opinion, do not go in the direction of the fibre of the work but, in some way, distort it, add meanings that are not meaningful. One of Siza's first published works is the *Boa Nova*<sup>10</sup>, which he designed at the age of twenty-three while working in Távora's studio. It is interesting that Siza recalls how, for the first and only time, he accompanied a photographer to photograph one of his works and this one, Fernando Aroso, said "yes, beautiful, but I want to come back tomorrow morning with the fog". Siza comments, "Aroso was an Atlantic, not a Mediterranean". This idea of superimposing a personal language on the work I think was particularly clear to Siza.

Siza says he never accompanies photographers to photograph his works. "The architect's eye obviously has to be, has to be a very well-prepared eye to see relationships mainly with a double activity, analytical and synthetic. An architect learns by seeing, the most important learning for him is with his eyes. To see a lot at various scales,

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Giovanni Chiamonte in Chemollo, Storia Fotografica dell'opera di Álvaro Siza.

<sup>10</sup> Álvaro Siza, *Thea house in Boa Nova*, Leça de Palmeira, Matosinhos, 1958-1963.







8



9



the details but also the character of a city, to grasp all these things with different modes of vision – because one trains oneself for this as for everything, and the photographer is obviously an expert in observing – is indispensable. So I will say that the architect's eye is not special, but it is, without a doubt, specially trained to see, as is the photographer's eye. Clearly, for an architect the most important thing, more important than the objects and details themselves, is the relationship between things, but this exercise in seeing, not looking but seeing, should be a very important point in everyone's education."

This consideration leads him to conclude:

"In my opinion, it is impossible to understand architecture through photographs: perhaps that is why I do not make any recommendations to photographers today, because I think photography has its own autonomy and sensitivity - and sensitivities are different. You can understand a lot about architecture through fragments of the concept." – I find the expression an incredible synthesis – "This is perhaps richer than my youthful anxiety to show all the things I was consciously concerned about in the project because the reality of a work goes, I think, much further than what we consciously look for, many things escape. A photograph can be a surprise, we can understand with a photograph things we were not aware of, many times born by chance, subconscious," – another important theme – "the product of unconscious memories. The value of photography is quite autonomous, it is like an interpretation of reality: it cannot explain everything we want to say with architecture but it can discover other things. I really like an interpretation that is not contaminated by me because I believe that the works contain more than our conscious".<sup>11</sup>

Coming to Távora, the context in which Ivana Barbarito and I are working – Ivana will explain in more detail how we have worked together – is that of a book<sup>12</sup> that, using Távora's own words, comes to the conclusion of the cycle of his life; thus, with the awareness that he has of a final act. What amazes him, again using his own words, is the recognition of the end with the beginning, this his finding a coherence, through the reading that, with Antonio Esposito and Giovanni Leoni, we have provided him with, and that somehow gives him confirmation and amazement, I believe, together. His position with respect to architecture is one in which there is architecture understood as life, very different from the sale of the product. Much architecture photography today is related to the sale of the product. If we go and look at the history of architectural photography, which is very recent – because we start talking about it starting perhaps with Julius Shulman, one of the first who can really be said to do it for a living –, we see an impoverishment of language in function of selling the product. Instead, Távora's architecture is an architecture born of particular stories, of life mixed within architecture.

I hope that the photographs I have taken speak for me more than the words I use, and the books I have published seem to me to testify how my looking at

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Álvaro Siza in Chemollo, *Storia Fotografica dell'opera di Álvaro Siza*.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Esposito, Giovanni Leoni, *Fernando Távora. Opera completa* (Milano: Electa, 2005).



different things makes me almost a Zelig, an observer capable of becoming the thing he is looking at. And what I felt in front of Távora's work, what I have become, is his ability to develop an attention more for the things that were there before his gesture than for his gesture itself.

It is a fundamental character that I also find in the *Quinta*.

For the volume dedicated to Távora I worked with a Silvestri, with two warehouses, one for black and white and one for colour (in very rare cases the shot was the same): many times black and white was a choice to describe, let's say to take the attention of colour away from form, to systematise that idea. That is why I then asked to work on Souto de Moura only in black and white, precisely to focus on the idea of space rather than detail, whereas in Távora, very often, detail is important.

In the photos of the *Quinta*, I think this work of his emerges above all by looking at the place where he is, as a first action. He describes his long work in the *Quinta* starting from a being in the places like the prior of the convent, he tells how he stayed there for a long time, longer than necessary. The need for a walk that serves to understand, to get out of a productive cycle, to make a design part flourish that has non-functional needs. In his words: "an architecture that remains in its place of origin in a natural and unspectacular way".

I believe that this was a bit of my work, the sense of photographing Távora, and as I have been fortunate enough to do many books for Electa, it has resulted in what I consider to be, in my personal career, the best book on a monographic work by an architect. Working together with the authors of the written parts, and also the synergy with the graphic designer Paolo Tassinari contributed a great deal to a result achieved "by force of levare", as Michelangelo used to say, an art of levare also on Paolo's part, which I feel tackles well the challenge of a narrative that, first and foremost, gives value to the place.

I conclude my circle with the exhibition *Reduced Version*, created on the occasion of the honorary degree awarded to Távora by the IUAV<sup>13</sup>: eleven photographs of Távora's work, eleven of Siza's work and eleven of Souto Moura's work. An exhibition that I self-produced, which was inaugurated at Cà Pesaro and then went on tour. A moment of comparison of the works of these three architects who are so closely linked, and who, thanks to the occasion of the honorary degree, visited together.

Leaving the exhibition, Eduardo Souto de Moura took me under his arm and said: "I finally understood why I design this way; because when my girls were little I used to take them to the Távora Park".

It seems to me that "photography as a fragment of the concept" gave Eduardo his illumination and I consider this a great honour.

---

<sup>13</sup> Fernando Távora received the *Laurea Honoris Causa* from the IUAV in Venice in the Sala dei Dogi of the Doge's Palace on April 29, 2003. The degree, conferred by the then Rector Carlo Magnani, was proposed and strongly desired by Francesco Dal Co.

