

Autonomous Architecture, Postmodernism and Álvaro Siza

Álvaro Siza, *Postmodernism*, Manfredo Tafuri, Peter Testa, *Autonomous Architecture*

/Abstract

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several authors—drawing, whether directly or indirectly, upon the aesthetic legacy of Immanuel Kant—sought to bring architecture closer to the realm of “pure” art. They advanced the view that architecture constitutes an autonomous discipline, governed by an internal logic independent of practical function or social circumstance. This conception of autonomy left a lasting imprint on architectural theory, particularly from the 1960s onwards, when its translation into architectural practice revealed enduring tensions between the freedom of form and the constraints of material and social reality. In the following decade, autonomy emerged as one of the defining themes of postmodern discourse, as various thinkers radicalised the notion by proposing a self-referential architecture—one that explored the inner logic of space and form as an autonomous system of meaning. Yet this Kantian understanding of architectural autonomy did not remain without its critics. Theorists such as Peter Bürger and Manfredo Tafuri argued that the idea of absolute autonomy is, in itself, an illusion, for architecture is unavoidably enmeshed in economic, political, and social contexts. This article argues that the Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza occupied a singular position within the architectural culture of those years, participating in the debates on autonomy that, at the time, animated the postmodern controversy led by figures such as Colin Rowe in the United States and Manfredo Tafuri in Europe. It is a debate that, even today, continues to define the essential question of architecture’s role and its ethical responsibility.

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The Idea of Autonomy

The term “autonomy,” as a prominent theoretical concept in architectural discourse and as a disciplinary strategy for architecture itself, was virtually absent from disciplinary debate until the mid-1960s. However, its use within the architectural field – at different times and with various interpretations – dates to the consolidation of aesthetics as a specific branch of philosophy in the late eighteenth century. This development is largely attributable to the growing separation between artistic production and everyday life, which, in the following century, radically transformed the system of art production.

These developments consolidated the idea of artistic autonomy, which would later, with the *l’art pour l’art* (art for art’s sake) movement, support the notion that art exists in and of itself and should be valued solely for its intrinsic beauty and the aesthetic experience it provides – without the need to serve external purposes, whether moral, political, social, or functional. With this conception, art relinquished its traditional role, distancing itself from the concepts of mimesis and representation, as the notion of autonomy came to legitimize its new condition – one more closely aligned with the idea of artistic expression and self-expression.

It was the philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his work *Critik der Urteilskraft* (*The Critique of Judgment*, 1790), who consolidated aesthetics as a distinct branch of philosophy and associated it with the ideas of autonomy, disinterestedness, and what he called “Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck” (purposiveness without purpose). Beauty, according to Kant, has a form as if it had a purpose, yet without serving any functional end; the object or work appears well-organized and harmonious, but serves no specific function – it pleases solely through its form.¹

Kant also employed the term “autonomy” in the field of ethics, defining the autonomy of the human will as the supreme ethical principle and the foundation of all moral judgment. In his view, the autonomy of the will was a necessary component in the metaphysics of morals, ensuring that rational agents are responsible for their own decisions. However, Kant distinguished aesthetic judgment from other types of judgment, namely moral and logical. When we say that something is beautiful, we are making a judgment of taste. This judgment is subjective, as it is based on the subject’s feeling, and does not depend on concepts (it is not rational) nor on interests (it is not useful). In other words, the beautiful pleases “without interest” – it is a subjective, disinterested, autonomous, and purposeless appreciation.²

For Kant, the autonomy of the human will as the supreme ethical principle was fundamental to his conceptualization of artistic creation. Fine art is a form of human creation that imitates divine creativity. It is the product of the artist’s genius who, through talent, transcends established rules and conceives new

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critica da faculdade do juízo* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1992), 127. All the translation in English were done by the author.

² Kant, *Critica da faculdade do juízo*, 263.

aesthetic ideas. With this conception, the German philosopher acknowledged the intangible values of art and emphasized the power of imagination and the autonomy of the language of artistic forms.

Although Kant identified autonomy with his aesthetic idea of the disinterested reception of art, initially he subordinated aesthetic values to moral will, suggesting that high culture promotes morality. However, this subordination was challenged by later movements such as *l'art pour l'art*, which advocated for absolute freedom of aesthetic judgment, leading the idea of autonomy to prevail in the 19th and 20th centuries. The complex relationship between morality and autonomy, however, was not confined to Kantian aesthetics; it continued to influence aesthetic theory in Central Europe and the United States, impacting thinkers of the past century such as the Austrian historian Emil Kaufmann, whose work was pivotal in consolidating the idea of autonomy in the field of architecture.

Architectural Autonomy

The idea of autonomy developed less obviously in architecture, unlike art, where the concept was more clearly formulated. During the 18th and 19th centuries, architecture was considered an art form, part of the field of aesthetics. The theories of the *École des Beaux-Arts* shaped the teaching and practice of architecture, promoting technical and artistic drawing as the main design tool. Architects were mainly trained as artists and buildings were idealized graphically, often without much concern for actual construction. This reinforced the “gap” between architectural design and the constructed building, an important idea for the concept of architectural autonomy. Over time, even without a movement equivalent to *l'art pour l'art*, architecture gradually began to be seen as an autonomous discipline, with its own artistic value, without depending solely on its utilitarian function.

In the 20th century, it was the Viennese art historian Emil Kaufmann who helped consolidate the idea of autonomy in the field of architecture with his book *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier: Ursprung und Entwicklung der Autonomen Architektur* (From Ledoux to Le Corbusier: Origins and Development of Autonomous Architecture, 1933), in which he draws a line connecting the visionary architecture of the 18th century to the modernist movement of the 20th century. This work was pivotal in the critical reassessment of 18th-century architecture, particularly in recognizing the role of architects such as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Étienne-Louis Boullée, and Jean-Jacques Lequeu, who had been relatively neglected by traditional historiography. Kaufmann regarded them as precursors of modern architecture, especially due to their use of pure geometric forms, the rational organization of space, and utopian concepts.

Kaufmann viewed architecture as a discipline with its own language and logic, not merely as a reflection of historical styles or social functions. His notion of architectural autonomy was predominantly formal, based on geometric purity

and rigor, as well as freedom from architectural precedents. This interpretation was grounded in the theory he developed, according to which the history of architecture could be understood as an evolution through three spatial systems: the organic system, characteristic of Gothic architecture; the classical system, present in the Renaissance and Baroque periods; and, finally, the autonomous system, inherent to modern architecture, which had been anticipated in the pioneering work of Ledoux, to whom he gave particular emphasis.

Although Kaufmann's notion of autonomy was not identical to its equivalent in the arts, the idea was derived from Kant's concept of the autonomy of the will, emphasizing individuality, difference, and the architect's self-expression as a form of artistic emancipation, in a manner like the idea of autonomy defended by many artists. It was on this basis that Kaufmann described disciplinary progress as the result of individual will, genius, and creativity, enabling a break from tradition and the dogmas of the discipline.³

In the essay *Die Stadt des Architekten Ledoux: zur Erkenntnis der autonomen Architektur*, dated the same year as *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*, Kaufmann deepened his studies on Ledoux and established a broader theoretical framework regarding the evolution of autonomous architecture by drawing parallels between the 18th-century architect and modern architects such as Le Corbusier, seeing in both a pursuit of formal autonomy. This work, focused exclusively on the design of the ideal city of Chaux, correlated the architect's work with Kant's ideas:

At the time when Kant rejects all the moral philosophies of the past and decrees the “autonomy of the will as the supreme principle of ethics”, an analogous transformation takes place in architecture. In the sketches of Ledoux these new objectives appear for the first time in all their clarity. His work marks the birth of autonomous architecture.⁴

Architectural Autonomy in the USA

Kaufmann's concept of autonomy managed to extend beyond the narrow field of architectural history. In the United States, it influenced architectural practice, playing a key role in distancing American modernism from the social concerns that were central to the European architectural discourse before the Second World War. In Europe, between 1910 and 1930, there were significant social and cultural transformations, with major reforms, especially in public housing, promoted by liberal governments. At the same time, there was a strong architectural avant-garde, supported by an influential cultural elite. In the United States, however, this link between avant-garde and progressive social ideas was practically absent. Examples of architecture inspired by the European avant-garde of the 1920s were rare. Given this context, it is not surprising that modernism,

³ Tahl Kaminer, *Architecture, Crisis and Resuscitation* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 78.

⁴ Kaminer, *Architecture*, 78.

which emerged in Europe during this period, was received in the United States primarily as a style devoid of its political and social motivations.⁵

This interpretation began with the *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) in 1932. It was through this exhibition and the influence exerted by the authors of its catalog, figures such as Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Alfred Barr, and Philip Johnson, that modernism was consolidated in the U.S. primarily as an aesthetic issue. This publication downplayed the progressive social content of the Modern Movement, as its authors at the time saw the architectural avant-garde as synonymous with originality, creativity, and a break from tradition, while disregarding its political dimension. For them, it was revolutionary only in the aesthetic sense.⁶ Thus, it is not surprising that Hitchcock and Johnson chose to highlight the stylistic aspects of the Modern Movement rather than its potential for social transformation. As Johnson would later state, the functionalist and Marxist aspects of modernism did not interest him, as he saw architecture primarily as a pure art form: "The functionalist part and the Marxian part [of modernism] left me cold, because to me architecture is a pure art, and it's art that interests me."⁷

Years later, historian Reyner Banham criticized this approach, arguing that although Hitchcock and Johnson helped popularize modernism in the U.S., they also hindered it by ignoring its utopian character and its vocation for social reform - elements essential to its understanding in Europe.⁸ However, this idea of the avant-garde, linked to the notion of autonomy, continued to dominate the discourse in the United States until the 1970s, when it moved to the forefront of the discipline as modernism came under scrutiny by postmodern criticism.

Architectural Autonomy in Europe

While in the United States Kaufmann's idea of autonomy was easily embraced, not only due to the specific context of the country at the time but also because the ground had been prepared earlier by the Museum of Modern Art, in Europe the influence of Kaufmann's ideas was felt in the Italian *Tendenza*, particularly in the theoretical work of Aldo Rossi, who brought this idea to the forefront of architectural discourse in the second half of the 1960s. Rossi shared with Kaufmann a fascination with Enlightenment architecture, especially the work of Boullée, and, like the Austrian historian, he viewed aesthetics and architectural form as the central aspects of the discipline.

The emphasis on discipline and the autonomy of form, proposed by Rossi and the *Tendenza*, was a reaction to the social transformation proposals of the modernist avant-garde, which, in its ambition to integrate architecture into the

social and urban fabric, gave rise to excessively functionalist, characterless, and impersonal architectural artifacts, with no links to tradition or historical context. Rossi believed that architecture needed a concrete margin of disciplinary autonomy to fulfil its social function. This involved distancing architecture from the avant-garde culture of the "new," on one hand, and from its submission to bureaucratic planning, on the other. Furthermore, disciplinary autonomy was intrinsically linked to the idea of architecture as knowledge and to the dialectical inseparability between theory and design. For Rossi, both were moments in a single process with a common cognitive purpose. The defense of the specificity of architecture and its disciplinary autonomy thus had not only an epistemological character but also a precise meaning in terms of ideological choices. In addition to opposing the commercialization of architecture and the city, Rossi was committed to the creation of a radically postmodern and non-capitalist society through the recovery of the architect's specific field in the study and transformation of the city. This involved promoting an "urbanism for architects," where urban phenomena were primarily considered from the perspective of architecture, as he argued in his book *L'Architettura della città* (The Architecture of the City; Portuguese edition *A arquitetura da cidade*, 1977).

With this work, he sought to define an "urban science" built on exclusively architectural parameters. This did not mean complete independence from political, social, or economic spheres; his intention was to draw on other disciplines (sociology, geography, history, economics) to substantiate urbanism, but always from architectural parameters.

To provide a "scientific" foundation for the study of urban and architectural "artefacts," Rossi turned to an idealistic conception focused on the analysis of transcendental architectural typologies. The Italian architect argued that the "type" was the only possible starting point for a rationally grounded architectural project, as it represented the logical, rational, and essential foundation of architecture, ensuring the specificity, transmissibility, and social meaning of the discipline within the context of its autonomy.

For Rossi, the type is the very idea of architecture, the element closest to its essence. As a basic principle, it is a Platonic model that allows history to remain "incorporated in the monument or in the city long after its creation." While he believed in the existence of a "consciousness of the city" created by historical forces and "urban facts", Rossi argued that this consciousness exists "in the monument itself," rather than necessarily in the relationship between a set of buildings, comparing the latter to a work of art. In this sense, history endures in the form of the building even after its use has changed. Although Rossi asserted that typologies repeat across different moments and are "always imbued with a sense of history," their ideality and autonomy meant that the ideal typology is "separated from reality," situated beyond economic or social forces, becoming an idealist and transcendental category that exists beyond the contingencies of the passage of time.

⁵ Alan Colquhoun, *Modern Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 231.

⁶ Kaminer, *Architecture, Crisis and Resuscitation*, 79.

⁷ Kaminer, *Architecture*, 79.

⁸ Kaminer, *Architecture*, 79.

Although the logic centered on the type is prominent in *L'Architettura della Città*, Rossi's position evolved in several texts published during the early 1970s, incorporating analogy, seen as a compositional procedure linked to his "mental structure" and personal memory. This shift, influenced by the work of Carl Gustav Jung, resulted in the theory of the *La città analoga* (The Analogous City, 1976), in which the idea of autonomy began to coexist with analogical and autobiographical thought, combining history - now seen as an affective series of architectural fragments drawn from different times and places - with biographical aspects deeply rooted in the architect's personal life.

Rossi's theory, particularly the theory of the analogous city, marked a turning point in the critique of modern architecture and functionalism, and strongly influenced postmodernism in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, it was not without epistemological weaknesses that shaped the reception and critique of his work. Rossi placed excessive emphasis on the idea of typology, attributing it with an instrumental capacity far beyond what it possessed. His concept of the type was complex and not fully clarified in his writings, allowing his "method" to be reduced to simplistic formulas that his followers mechanically repeated (resulting in a new academicism that Rossi himself opposed). Moreover, he encouraged a focus on exceptional buildings, on the singular monument, often read as a work of art, leading to the gradual disappearance of concern for the city. Finally, there is a "qualitative leap" between analysis and design, with no logical continuity, which undermines the dialectical inseparability between theory and design that he advocated. Due to weaknesses such as these, his research did not result in a general and transferable theory of design, but rather in an explanation of how he personally made his own designs. For this reason, Rossi was met with misunderstanding and criticism from certain authors, some of whom were politically motivated. For them, the concept of autonomy, focused on the discipline itself, form, and the use of ideal historical typologies, as well as the transcendental and ahistorical approach to architecture, represented an aversion to the idea of progress, providing sufficient grounds to associate his work with "conservative politics."

Autonomy and Postmodernity

In the mid-1970s, during the height of the postmodernism debate, the idea of autonomy occupied a central place in architectural discussions, sparking passionate debates. The German literary critic Peter Bürger, in his book *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Theory of the Avant Garde, 1974), argued that the idea of autonomy could no longer be defended, as it conflicted with reality. During these years, modernist works of art, considered "purposeless," were achieving high market values, transforming autonomous art into a common commodity. This reality led Bürger to reassess the theory of artistic autonomy. Bürger distinguishes between the real autonomy of art - which emerged in the 18th century with the separation between art and everyday life - and the aesthetic theories that later

transformed this separation into an ideology that viewed art as entirely independent of society.⁹

Bürger argues that this idea is misleading: it contains an element of truth (the separation of art from practical life), but it becomes false when it assumes that this separation is the essence of art. Theories like those of the *l'art pour l'art* movement reveal this distance of art from everyday life, which allowed the historical avant-garde to critique the social disengagement of art. However, he argues that autonomous art has lost its critical capacity, as it is structurally disconnected from real life. Although avant-garde movements sought to challenge this autonomy, they failed to overcome this fundamental separation, which limited the political impact of art. Bürger notes that artistic autonomy does not prevent political positions but reduces their effectiveness.

Although Peter Bürger's theory mainly focuses on the visual and literary arts, his ideas also influenced architectural discussions during those years. Bürger points out that, if autonomy in art is already complex and contradictory, in the case of architecture - a discipline that, by nature, is deeply linked to everyday life and social structures - this complexity is even greater and less clear. While art can exist as an object separate from practical life, architecture rarely can detach itself from its social, political, and economic function. However, as we have seen earlier, several authors attempted to position architecture as a "pure" or autonomous discipline, focusing on form and architectural language, often disconnected from social needs.

Bürger challenges this stance by showing that the supposed neutrality or "purity" of architecture can also be ideological - concealing its function within economic and social systems. Thus, architects who attempt to reclaim a critical and transformative role for architecture (such as some avant-garde movements or key figures of postmodernism like Rossi) face the same dilemma: it is difficult for architecture to have a real political or social impact if it continues to assert itself as autonomous. In this sense, the application of Bürger's theory to architecture raises a central question: can architecture truly be critical if it insists on its autonomy? Rossi would certainly have answered yes. His defense of autonomy can be interpreted as a form of critical opposition to the commodification of architecture and the city, but reconciling these realities in practice is not simple, which leads critics like Bürger to question how disciplinary autonomy aligns with the dynamic, historical, and economic realities that shape architectural and urban phenomena.

Álvaro Siza: between Autonomy and Social Commitment

The "discovery" of the architect Álvaro Siza by Italian criticism in the early 1970s, have enshrined the image of a relatively marginal architect in face of major debates in the architectural debates of the time. The critical reception

⁹ Peter Bürger, *Teoria da vanguarda* (Lisbon: Vega, 1993), 101.

of his work conducted by authors like Vittorio Gregotti was guided by the widespread idea that his work, initiated under the premises of the revision of the Modern Movement had no theoretical dimension. A few years later, Siza occupied a unique position in the international architectural scene, when participating in the debates about autonomy that at the time were already dominant in the Postmodernism controversy led by key personalities such as Colin Rowe in the United States and Manfredo Tafuri in Europe.

It was the Spanish architect Oriol Bohigas who, in 1976, in the French magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, explored Siza's work, framing it within the debates of Postmodernism. In the early 1970s, Siza had developed a highly poetic body of work based on the technique of collage, which revisited the linguistic foundations of rationalism while accentuating its "artistic aspects." Bohigas recognized in the methodology of the Portuguese architect an innovative trend in European architecture, placing Siza in tune with his peers in the international context¹⁰. Indeed, collage and citation were at the heart of the disciplinary debates of those years, allowing Siza a singular metalinguistic practice during that time. Siza articulated elements of the "place" with historical "dialects" of the modern movement, in a "Sizian" world of signs and images, which allowed dialogue with works and authors of his choice. Siza's method, which made no claims to scientificity and was based on an empirical intuition, was aligned with Rossi's theory of "analogous architecture" and positioned him prominently in the discussion of architectural autonomy, which, at the time, was already one of the most passionate debates in Postmodernism.

Colin Rowe was one of the first postmodern architects to propose an alternative approach that rejected the notion of architecture as a social tool, focusing efforts on the "creation of forms" and autonomy, where architecture referred primarily to itself. Following Kaufmann's idea of autonomy and aligning with the interpretation of modern architecture presented by the Museum of Modern Art in 1932, Rowe rejected the social reform agendas of the avant-garde, advocating for the need for alternatives to the dogmas of modernism, whose "traumatic authoritarianism" he completely rejected. He admired the aesthetic achievements of the 1920s, particularly the work of Le Corbusier, but regarded the "messianism" of the Modern Movement as a failure. In his book *Collage City* (1978), there is a particularly revealing statement of his defense of the autonomy of architecture: "In this way, we can enjoy the aesthetics of utopia without suffering the inconvenience of political utopia".¹¹

In Europe, as we have seen, the idea of autonomy was mainly promoted by Aldo Rossi, from Italy. It was also in Italy that this idea was most strongly contested, with the radical critique of Manfredo Tafuri. The Italian historian expressed interest in the concept of autonomy, converging even, though from a distinct perspective, with representatives of the so-called "critical" architecture/

10 Oriol Bohigas, "La passion d'Álvaro Siza," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 185 (1976): 42–43.

11 Rem Koolhaas, "La deuxième chance de l'architecture moderne," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 238 (1985): 2–3.

theory, architects such as Oswald Mathias Ungers and Peter Eisenman, in addition to Rossi himself. They framed architecture within a linguistic perspective, as an "autonomous language," questioning function, meaning, construction, visibility, and the mediation of architecture. Tafuri, on the other hand, conceived autonomy as a demand for sociopolitical engagement and participation in the economic, cultural, and political spheres, in opposition to the hegemonic capitalist system, positioning itself outside of the established institutions – and, consequently, already compromised – such as the state, political parties, or unions. It was, therefore, an extension of the class struggle. In practical terms, his notion of autonomy was to be expressed, notably, in the self-organization of citizens into housing cooperatives and direct action.

In the seminal essay "L'Architecture dans le boudoir: The language of criticism and the criticism of language", published in the same year as Peter Bürger's *Theory of Avant-Garde* (1974), Tafuri criticized, negatively, the works of postmodern authors associated with the return to language, presenting them as examples of a flight by contemporary architects from the "realm of the real" into the "universe of signs." This flight, which led to the conceptualization of "eroticized" spaces by means of a "self-isolated language" (and thus alienated), was symptomatic of an attitude that sought to restore the object-like dimension and the character of uniqueness to buildings, removing them from their economic and functional context, fixing them as exceptional moments - and thus surreal - placing them in parentheses within the flow of objects created by the production system.¹² It is in this sense that Tafuri criticized Rossi's idealistic approach, accusing him of emptying the meaning of historical forms by using them outside of their context. The result was an architecture of arbitrary signs, devoid of any historical or social content, which emphasized the singular object to the detriment of the urban context, denying or distancing the relationship between architecture and politics.

For Tafuri, the return to language was proof of failure, revealing the removal of architectural form from the realm of the everyday and the inability of contemporary architects to draw the necessary conclusions from the fate of the modernist avant-garde. The result was an architecture of excess and emptiness, symptomatic of the subjective alienation that had been reached in the post-war consumer society (in America, but also in Europe). It was little more than a pathetic repetition of the self-destructive project of the avant-garde, now relegated to the boudoir.¹³

In those years, Siza participated in the SAAL process, an initiative conceived in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution, within a context of popular participation and the expectation of social transformation. In the projects of Bouça (1973-1977) and São Vítor in Porto (1974-1977), Siza worked closely with residents and local associations, developing contextual solutions and reflections on

12 Manfredo Tafuri, "L'architecture dans le boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language," in *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 161.

13 Tafuri, "L'architecture dans le boudoir," 164.

the social nature of architecture. However, Siza viewed direct confrontation with the residents as an inevitable conflict, and in the brigades he coordinated, populist concessions were excluded from his lexicon. Siza drew a parallel between his commitment to the residents and the Brechtian notion of “distancing”,¹⁴ where representing their interests through architecture did not mean directly embracing their aspirations. The participation of the residents, although desired, was framed within a complex theoretical reference system through which Siza vehemently rejected the idea of autonomy while his practice revealed an artistic understanding of architecture. As he later stated, recalling the theory of the *l'art pour l'art* movement: “Architecture is art or it is not architecture.”¹⁵

This ambiguity regarding the issue of disciplinary autonomy, problematic considering Peter Bürger’s theory and Tafuri’s criticism, which places him in a heterodox position in relation to postmodernism, was analyzed during the 1980s by the American architect Peter Testa and the Portuguese historian Paulo Varela Gomes.

In 1984, Peter Testa analyzed Siza’s position regarding the idea of autonomy through works such as the Carlos Siza House (1976-1978), the Quinta da Malagueira in Évora (1977), and the projects for Berlin (1976-1983), as well as testimonies and texts from the Portuguese architect. Testa emphasized Siza’s singular position within the context of Postmodernism, as he distanced himself both from the dogmas of modern architecture and from more figurative postmodern practices, but also from regionalist proposals advanced by authors like Kenneth Frampton, which he interprets as a “reactionary traditionalism.”¹⁶ According to Testa, Siza’s experimental attitude, which does not separate from the demands of uses and customs, is not a form of localism or regionalism and is categorically different from the obstinately formal resignation of the “last” and “Post” modernists.¹⁷ It constitutes, instead, a dialectical process that relies on a creative dialogue with the context “as found” rather than relying on universal solutions or subjective inventions.¹⁸

Testa emphasizes that Siza implicitly rejects the notion of autonomous architecture. The theoretical position, which he expressed in testimonies and texts, and which Testa characterizes as a “non-imitative contextualism”¹⁹, suggests a process that operates not only within an objective reality, participating in the creation of the present cultural moment, but also within architecture, in “models” derived, at least in part, from the context and history, preserving its autonomy.

Although Siza does not endorse the imitation of dead styles or casual borrowings of historical forms and schemes, his incursions into history intensified in

14 José António Bandeirinha, *O processo SAAL e a arquitectura no 25 de abril de 1974* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2011), 254.

15 Álvaro Siza, *Writings on Architecture* (Milan: Skira, 1997), 31.

16 Peter Testa, *A arquitectura de Álvaro Siza / The Architecture of Álvaro Siza* (Porto: FAUP, 1988), 33–34.

17 Testa, *A arquitectura de Álvaro Siza*, 145.

18 Testa, *A arquitectura de Álvaro Siza*, 75.

19 Testa, *A arquitectura de Álvaro Siza*, 130.

these years, becoming research into the very nature of architecture,²⁰ as can be seen in the second phase of the Haia project (1989-1993) or the interventions at Quinta da Malagueira in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This metalinguistic re-appropriation of architecture is characterized by a certain aesthetic pleasure associated with the experience of architectural forms, which the Portuguese architect acknowledged in 1993 when referring to the “severely controlled sensuality of geometric forms.”²¹ Beyond its evident Corbusian connotations, this statement echoes the already cited essay “L’Architecture dans le boudoir” by Manfredo Tafuri, in which the “escape” of postmodern architects from the “domain of the real” to the “universe of signs” is critically noted. In Siza’s case, the pleasure results not only from the aesthetic perception of forms but, above all, from the manipulation of the artistic means of architecture, whose mastery reached superlative levels in works from the second half of the 1980s, such as the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Porto (1985-1996) and the Higher School of Education in Setúbal (1986-1995).²²

In a text published in 1989 about Siza’s projects for The Hague, Paulo Varela Gomes saw in the pure and austere forms of that period traces of an architecture that asserted its autonomy by eliminating (and being hostile to) other forms of knowledge. In a clearly provocative tone, the Portuguese historian rejected the critiques of Bürger, Tafuri, and Testa, seeing in these characteristics an obsessive will on Siza’s part to expel all non-architectural references from his work. According to him, this liberation of the “essence of the architectural act and place” in an autistic attitude and *tabula rasa* approach aimed to restore architecture to its original place; a place that, in an idealistic plane, can only be the first because “architectural knowledge is inherent to its productive process.” In this sense, “the origin of architecture lies in itself, it is intrinsic to the very act of design.”²³ With this idealistic argument, which harkens back to Rossi’s transcendentalism, Varela Gomes justified Siza’s desire to assert the autonomy of architecture against all external temptations.

Conclusion

The gradual rise of the idea of autonomy in architecture from the late 1960s was vital for the revitalization of the discipline after the crisis of the end of modernist utopias and for the recovery of its cultural relevance achieved in the 1990s. The return to autonomy helped architecture adapt to a new socio-economic context - that of neoliberalism, which emerged in the second half of the 1970s, and whose cultural demands now focused on the valorization of the market and individualism. The work of architect Álvaro Siza, which rose to international

20 Testa, *A arquitectura de Álvaro Siza*, 174.

21 Siza, *Writings on Architecture*, 129.

22 Jorge Nunes, “The Internationalisation of Álvaro Siza and the Myth of the Traditional and Conservative Architect,” in *Intelligence, Creativity and Fantasy*, ed. Mário M. Kong, Maria R. Monteiro, and Maria J. P. Neto (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2019), 135.

23 Paulo Varela Gomes, “Per forza di levare,” *Architècti*, December 3, 1989, 34.

prominence within this context, is an expression of the tensions experienced by the architecture discipline during these years. Siza is recognized both for his formal sensitivity and for the grounding of his works in the social, historical, and cultural context. Although he works with a poetic and formally autonomous language, this autonomy is not detached from social reality. His work resists the reduction of architecture to mere style - as Johnson and Hitchcock did with the modern architecture - and offers a critical and subtle alternative to the current neoliberal and post-critical environment, refusing to yield to the rhetoric of formalism that has marked the work of many contemporary "starchitects," whose works have become symbols of global capitalism. His work keeps alive the possibility of architecture with critical awareness - one that, even starting from a rigorous disciplinary language, remains deeply committed to the lives of people, to the place, and to memory. At a time when architecture is often captured by capital and media superficiality, Siza represents a resistant practice, where ethics and aesthetics remain inseparable, as initially proposed by Kant.

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