

The Otherness of Álvaro Siza: Vittorio Gregotti and the Sense of Place as Hypothesis for the Future

Álvaro Siza, Vittorio Gregotti, Otherness, Context, Critical Dialogue

/Abstract

This article investigates the profound and enduring intellectual relationship between two pivotal figures in European architectural culture, Vittorio Gregotti and Álvaro Siza, framed by the concept of Siza's "otherness." Gregotti was instrumental in introducing Siza to the international scene, starting with his 1972 article in *Controspazio*, establishing a critical matrix that interpreted Siza's work through its distance from prevailing ideological and dogmatic trends. The paper traces the origins of this elective affinity back to the Italian-Luso-Iberian architectural meetings (*Pequeños Congresos*) of the 1960s, highlighting how Siza's context-specific practice resonated with Gregotti's critical position, particularly his focus on "anthropo-geography". A central argument is the reciprocity between small and large scales, demonstrated by Siza's design process, which uses drawing not merely as representation, but as a slow, multi-scalar tool to reveal the latent potential of a place. Gregotti promoted this perspective through exhibitions (Venice Biennale 1976, Milan 1979) and through his editorship of *Casabella*, notably by publishing Siza's large-scale project for the Quinta da Malagueira in Évora, showcasing a concrete alternative to normative urbanism. Finally, the article explores Gregotti's interpretation of the ideas of "tradition" and "foundations". Siza's architecture is presented as embodying a "critical distance" from reality - a search for the "hypothesis of the future" rooted in the empirical conditions of the context, rather than in abstract theory or historical consensus. Ultimately, the otherness of Siza, defended by Gregotti, affirmed architecture as a "project of critical dialogue" - a model of social commitment rooted in the reality rather than utopia.

/Author

Carlotta Torricelli
Università Roma Tre
carlotta.torricelli@uniroma3.it

Carlotta Torricelli, PhD Architect, is an Associate Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Department of Architecture, Roma Tre University. She holds a PhD in Architectural Composition (Luav - University of Venice School of Doctoral Studies, 2011) and graduated from the Milan Polytechnic in 2006 with a thesis focusing on the city of Porto, where she conducted research and studies at the FAUP (2002-2003, 2005). From 2011 to 2023, she served as Adjunct Professor of Architectural and Urban Composition at the AUIC School of Milan Polytechnic. She is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Architectural Composition Curriculum Board at the Luav School of Doctoral Studies. In 2012, she was a research fellow at the "C.M. Lericci" Italian Institute of Culture in Stockholm. Her research focuses on the poetics of the "other modernity" and the critical relationship between theme, figuration, and architectural place. She contributes articles and essays to international journals and architectural series. Her recent scholarly contributions include: the translation and critical edition of Fernando Távora's *Da Organização do Espaço* (Milan: nottetempo, 2021); the organization and curatorship of the international conference *TÁVORA 100. In continuità. Pensiero e opera*, held at the Politecnico di Milano in May 2023 (with Martina Landsberger, Angelo Lorenzi, and Stefano Perego).

Introduction. Mirroring

Much has been written about the close and profound bond between two of the most important figures in contemporary European architectural culture: Vittorio Gregotti (Novara 1927 - Milan 2020) and Álvaro Siza (Matosinhos 1933). Critics and historians unanimously credit Gregotti with first introducing the work of a young and virtually unknown Siza in 1972, within the pages of the Italian magazine *Controspazio*¹. On that occasion, the Portuguese architect's work was framed through a critical reading that would long be considered a sort of obligatory matrix for its circulation outside the Portuguese context. The article has been translated and republished numerous times, in some cases with different titles than the original. The first was in 1976, when *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* published the dossier: "PORTUGAL an II"², with the aim of outlining the state of the art of architecture in Portugal after the revolution of 25 April 1974. The pages dedicated to Siza's work open with a double article: "La passion de Álvaro Siza, selon Vittorio Gregotti et Oriol Bohigas". This comprised a comparison of two articles published respectively by Gregotti in *Controspazio* and by Bohigas in *Arquitectura Bis*³ (March 1976), united by a new editorial title that makes direct reference to the ending of Gregotti's text:

And also of his patient, profound passion for architecture, full of trepidation: he has certainly found an internal point of reference: now he verifies the qualities of the margins with his hands, even though he knows that everything that is essential lies beyond: to the right, to the left, above: outside.⁴

Among the many authors who have reflected on the relationship between the two architects, I refer directly here to Nuno Grande's article⁵, which credits Gregotti with having translated what could have been a simple and natural 'cultural proximity' into a genuine 'elective affinity'. As in a process of mirroring, this paper begins with parallel considerations to investigate why, throughout his publishing activity - considered an essential component of his commitment as an architect - Siza's work remained a constant reference point for Gregotti, even in the diverse outcomes of the Porto master's design research. This "alterity", precisely in its distance, defines the inescapable counterpoint for the affirmation of the idea of architecture as a "project of critical dialogue"⁶ with reality. A dialogue which, from time to time, re-established the terms of the relationship, without ever crystallizing into abstract theory, always operating in the tension between freedom and responsibility, between the possible and the necessary.

¹ Vittorio Gregotti, "Architetture recenti di Álvaro Siza," *Controspazio*, no. 9 (1972): 22–24.

² *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, no. 185 (May–June 1976): 2–81. It is important to note that Bernard Huet was the chief editor of the journal at the time.

³ Oriol Bohigas, "Álvaro Siza Vieira," *Arquitecturas Bis*, no. 12 (1976): 11–18.

⁴ Gregotti, "Architetture recenti," 24. All the translations in English were done by the author.

⁵ Nuno Grande, "Vittorio Gregotti e Álvaro Siza: afinidades electivas entre dois arquitectos contemporâneos," *Estudos Italianos em Portugal*, no. 12 (2017): 15–33.

⁶ Vittorio Gregotti, "L'altro," in *Álvaro Siza, Immaginare l'evidenza* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1998), 10.

The First Encounter. Italian-Luso-Iberian Consonances

Although the story has been recounted elsewhere, it is important to highlight specific circumstances surrounding the first encounter between Gregotti and Siza. The two met during the international meetings, known as the Pequeños Congresos⁷, conceived by Oriol Bohigas (1925-2021) inaugurated in Madrid in 1959 as the result of a desire for debate among architects from Barcelona and Madrid. The 8th Pequeno Congresso in Tarragona in 1967 expanded participation to the entire Iberian peninsula. Nuno Portas (1934-2025) - known for his editorial work in the Portuguese magazine *Arquitectura* since 1957 - was invited to participate and organize a Portuguese iteration of the meetings, held that December in Tomar. Beyond the meeting's importance in breaking Portugal's cultural isolation due to specific political conditions, it is crucial to note that:

In the field of built architecture and design, Álvaro Siza Vieira stands out as a revelation for Spanish architects⁸. Everyone was very impressed [...] by the visits to the Lordelo Cooperative in Porto and the Boa Nova Tea House and Leça Swimming Pools in Matosinhos⁹.

At the beginning of 1967, Portas published the article "Sobre la joven generación de arquitectos portugueses"¹⁰ in the Madrid magazine *Hogar y Arquitectura*, together with a long section dedicated to the work of Siza Vieira. Finally, in 1968, at the Vitória meeting (the 9th PC, entitled *Lenguaje y Tecnología*), Siza's architecture was exhibited in the context of a session named Exhibition and Discussion of Projects, accompanied by a lecture by Portas. In the same occasion Vittorio Gregotti and Peter Eisenmann were invited to lecture. Then in 1971, Gregotti had the opportunity to return to Portugal for a conference at the Faculty of Architecture in Lisbon, at the invitation of his friend Portas, and took the opportunity to meet Siza in Porto, visiting in person the works he had seen in the 1968 exhibition. This marked the beginning of a deep friendship and cultural and professional understanding that would accompany the entire careers of these two important figures in European architecture.

During those years, the architect from Novara had already developed an independent critical position, mainly through his work in architecture magazines. From 1953 - the year of the rebirth of *Casabella*, as *Casabella continuità*, under the direction of Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909-1969) - he worked on the editorial staff, then becoming editor-in-chief from 1957 to 1962. Gregotti always made explicit reference to the teachings of Rogers, whose assistant he had been since 1953 at the Faculty of Architecture in Milan for the course on Stylistic

7 Nuno Correia, "A crítica arquitectónica, o debate social e a participação portuguesa nos 'Pequenos Congressos' - 1959-1968," *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, no. 91 (2010): 41-57.

8 Oriol Bohigas, "A Portugal també els arquitectes fan la guerra pel seu compte," *Serra d'Or*, no. 101 (1968): 59-61.

9 Correia, "A crítica arquitectónica," 54.

10 Nuno Portas, "Sobre la joven generación de arquitectos portugueses," *Hogar y Arquitectura*, no. 68 (1967): 77-84.

Characters of Architecture. His 1963 departure from *Casabella* did not adopt the polemical tone of Giancarlo De Carlo's (1919-2005)¹¹, but rather represented the culmination of irreconcilable differences with the magazine's orientation. In a nutshell, the divergence concerned two major themes: the conception of the territorial dimension of architecture and the relationship with history.

From 1963 to 1967, with the series of monographic issues of *Edilizia Moderna* that he conceived - in particular with the double issue "La Forma del Territorio" (The Shape of the Territory)¹², no. 87-88 of 1966 - Gregotti prepared the ground on which to test the interpretation of the geographical theme in architecture, subverting the concept of scale and proposing an antagonistic reading with respect to the political and ideological one that animated the Italian debate on business centres and territorial infrastructure¹³. These issues, as is well known, find full expression in the book *Il territorio dell'architettura* (The Territory of Architecture)¹⁴, published in 1966, the same year as Aldo Rossi's *L'architettura della città* (The Architecture of the City)¹⁵, and in contrast to it. In this geography of Italian-Luso-Iberian consonances, it is important to remember that the fourth issue of the Barcelona magazine *Arquitecturas Bis* - founded in 1974 by Rosa Regàs, Oriol Bohigas and Enric Satué - is essentially a monographic issue dedicated to the opposition between Gregotti and Rossi, introduced by an important essay by Rafael Moneo (1937-) which narrates, in Plutarchic form, the parallel lives of the two eminent figures on the Italian scene, measuring the distance between them¹⁶.

The territory to which Gregotti refers is a geography laden with the signs of history, requiring architectural design to establish a form of interpretive reciprocity. This involves understanding how man transformed nature into culture, a process he defined as "anthropo-geography." These are the reasons why Siza's work, in its otherness, is particularly functional to the construction of Gregotti's cultural project, which opposed the idea of defining a single theory of architecture based on urban analysis and the possibility of a consequential link that between analysis and design, which Rossi himself circumvented both in his writings and in his works¹⁷.

Gregotti's many writings on the double tension between the architectural scale and the geographical one and on the understanding of the profound meaning of place, in which history is re-encompassed, will focus on the

11 In 1957, Giancarlo De Carlo resigned from the editorial staff of *Casabella*, in open conflict with the positions of some of the "giovani delle colonne," particularly Aldo Rossi (1931-97) and Guido Canella (1931-2009). For further discussion, see: Chiara Baglione, *Casabella 1928-2008* (Milan: Electa, 2008), 212-325.

12 "La forma del territorio," *Edilizia Moderna*, no. 87-88 (1966).

13 Manfredo Tafuri, "Le avventure dell'oggetto: architetture di Vittorio Gregotti," in *Vittorio Gregotti: Progetti e architetture* (Milan: Electa, 1982), 11.

14 Vittorio Gregotti, *Il territorio dell'architettura* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1966).

15 Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città* (Padua: Marsilio Editori, 1966).

16 Rafael Moneo, "Gregotti & Rossi," *Arquitecturas Bis*, no. 4 (1974): 1-4. For further discussion, see Alejandro Valdivieso, "Rafael Moneo's Writings for *Arquitecturas Bis* (1974-1985): The Figure of the Architect: Gregotti & Rossi (1974)," *Revista Europea de Investigación en Arquitectura*, no. 7-8 (2017): 279-95.

17 See Massimo Scolari, "L'impegno tipologico," *Casabella*, no. 509-10 (1985): 42-45.

works and projects of his Portuguese friend. Indeed, Siza's work would find ample space within the cultural project that he realized with the direction of *Casabella* (from issue 478, 1982 - where the project for the Quinta da Malagueira in Évora was published¹⁸ - to the last issue 630-631, 1996). Again in 2007, in a very short text published in *Casabella*, edited by Francesco Dal Co, introducing a dossier on young Portuguese architects, Gregotti took the opportunity to recall that:

One of the many things for which Álvaro Siza deserves credit is that he shifted the notion of the context beyond its more common and often obvious interpretations: those related to style, constructed based on a heritage of imagery specific to the place, or those reflecting the contemporary ideological conditions of architectural action. These are also part of the materials with which Siza works, but his poetic qualities are capable of concretely implementing their transfiguration that generates recognition of a deeper sense, over the long term, so long as to be projected as a hypothesis of the future.¹⁹

Setting an Interpretative Principle - The Necessary Distance

As already mentioned, it was thanks to Vittorio Gregotti that Álvaro Siza first appeared in Italian architecture magazines. In *Controspazio* n. 9 (1972), Gregotti proposed a selection of recent architectures by Siza, introducing them with a far-sighted essay, followed by an article by Nuno Portas: "Notes on the significance of Álvaro Siza's architecture in the Portuguese environment". The director of the magazine, Paolo Portoghesi, declares the objective of making the journal a meeting place for current architectural and theoretical research, even if different from each other, but united by the "perspective of constructing the dialectical premises for the formation of a *tendenza*"²⁰. In this context, the opening of Gregotti's presentation resounds provocatively: "Álvaro Siza y Vieira is an unfashionable architect: he has no theoretical apparatus, he has never tackled major themes of urban development [...] he has no technological or monumental veneration, he loves small things, subtle signs"²¹.

This is the perspective through which Siza enters the Italian scene, and it is significant that this is not the entry of an isolated personage: his figure is understood as a component of a plural identity, and the marginal condition from which he comes is interpreted as an opportunity to give substance to an authentic and autonomous research, unaffected by ideological superstructures and dogmatism, yet no less radical or operationally committed to the critical

interpretation of the existing condition. The specificity of the place, understood as history and as the physicality of the environment, is the supporting material of the project that through dialogue - and not mimesis - reveals its possibility of being inhabited in contemporary times. The architect's work is conceived as both a technical and artistic practice that engages with empirical conditions (what Gregotti defined as "context"²² and Fernando Távora as "circumstance"²³) as the vital and inescapable matter of their action. This way of understanding the design action has nothing provincial or dialectal about it; on the contrary, it is deeply rooted in the European culture and in the modern tradition and reopens the possibility of redefining the role of architecture from a universal perspective.

This interpretation was amplified after the *Revolução dos Cravos* of 1974 and in relation to the promotion of the experience of the SAAL program (remember the tournee of lectures in Italian schools - from Turin to Palermo - by Siza, Portas and Alves Costa in April 1977²⁴ and the issue of *Lotus* no. 18, 1978²⁵). But even after the revolutionary euphoria faded, the work of Portuguese architects, and of Siza in particular, continues to demonstrate that there exists a declination of the architect's social commitment, alternative to utopia, more concrete, rooted in the profession, re-establishing the connection between democracy, the city, and architecture. These, in summary, are the interpretative principles that will be widely shared by much of the international criticism, through the filter of that seminal article. It is worth examining Gregotti's concept of Siza's otherness, which emerges from these early remarks and is then reiterated several times on subsequent occasions, as a choice and, one might argue, an existential condition: "the clear certainty that what is essential is always slightly shifted from the chosen directions and possible explanations"²⁶.

The essay that serves as an introduction to the successful volume *Immaginare l'evidenza* (Imagining the Evidence) - published in Italian in 1998, at a time of widespread international recognition of the Portuguese master's work, and subsequently translated into various languages - is entitled "L'altro" (The Other)²⁷. Here, the Italian architect highlights above all the extraneity of his friend with respect to the hierarchies of values on which the architectural production processes of those years were based, but he does not miss the opportunity to reaffirm a deeper concept of otherness, as a critical distance from reality, which allows for a deep-rooted understanding of the context in which one operates:

Artistic practices frequently serve to represent institutional realities and are sometimes presented in the form of critical distance, rarely evoking

18 See in particular: Álvaro Siza Vieira, "Malagueira Housing Project at Évora," with an introduction by Jean-Paul Rayon, *Casabella*, no. 478 (1982): 2-14; Pierre-Alain Croset and Antonio Angelillo, "Schools in Portugal by Álvaro Siza," *Casabella*, no. 579 (1991): 4-20; Manuel Mendes, "Portuguese Architecture: The Recent Generation," *Casabella*, no. 579 (1991): 42-59.

19 Vittorio Gregotti, "Portogallo, Europa," *Casabella*, no. 760 (2007): 63.

20 Paolo Portoghesi, *Controspazio*, no. 9 (1972): 1.

21 Gregotti, "Architetture recenti," 22.

22 Vittorio Gregotti, "Realismo e contesto," in *L'architettura del realismo critico* (Bari: Laterza, 2004), 47-57.

23 Fernando Távora, *Da organização do espaço* (1962; Porto: FAUP Publicações, 1999).

24 See Roberto Cremascoli and Francesco Moschini, *Álvaro Siza in Italia: il Grand Tour 1976-2016* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, 2016); Susana Lobo, "Viaggio in Italia: O SAAL - Norte e os anos de chumbo," *Estudos Italianos em Portugal*, no. 9 (2014): 27-46.

25 Vittorio Gregotti, "Oporto. Note," and Alexander Alves Costa, "The SAAL Experience," *Lotus International*, no. 18 (1978): 64-103.

26 Gregotti, "Architetture recenti," 22.

27 Vittorio Gregotti, "The Other" (1998), in *Imagining the Evident*, by Álvaro Siza (Lisbon: Monade, 2022), 141-42.

that which is not in some way present, offering itself as an alternative possibility; not that of utopia or the future, but that of examining conflicts from the point of view of everyday actions, in the simple form they assume when they do not wish to resign themselves to the thickness of their human complexity. Because then it becomes possible to use experience again, without it being eclipsed by its representation²⁸.

These words express the desire to reaffirm the irreducibility of design, understood as a synthesis of disciplinary contributions, capable of interpreting real needs and conditions and rendering them in the “oblique” simplicity of the design: through the writing of the design, the parts, born of contextual reasons, are organised into sequences and paths which, “by discreet deviations”, lead to a necessary but not ostentatious diversity of spaces and forms.

In 2006, Marco Mulazzani structured a double interview with Gregotti and Siza for *Casabella* and, through his questions, explored the reasons for the affinity between the two friends, despite the strong differences in their architectural expression. In his answers, Gregotti addressed the theme of “alterity”:

As often happens, we are attracted by diversity. In my case not only in terms of method, but also in terms of its point of application. I was quite fascinated by the fact that Siza was capable of developing theories directly, by means of architectural form, without any deviation borrowed from the plastic or visual arts, as they are defined today. Siza is one of the very few architects who say things that can only be said through architecture²⁹.

Thus, once again, Siza’s work demonstrates the possibility of understanding the theoretical aspect as consubstantial with the architectural act, for which reason no deductive method can be asserted, but rather it is necessary that the “project of modification” respond to the conditions of the context it transforms and find, in its responses, its internal methodological coherence. In the pages following this double interview, Antonio Esposito’s translation of a touching article by Eduardo Souto de Moura is published, dedicated to his mentor Fernando Távora (1923-2005), who passed away the previous year. Souto de Moura writes: “Távora seemed to be interested in History, but what he loved was not History, it was the instant, the territory, the geography laden with history.”³⁰. The similarity with Gregotti’s horizons is strong, although not explicit. This brief consideration opens up a line of investigation into the affinities between Távora and Rogers’ thinking and the permanence of their teaching in the work of their respective students, Siza and Gregotti, which will be addressed in future researches.

28 Gregotti, “The Other,” 141–42.

29 Marco Mulazzani, “Álvaro Siza è un architetto fuori moda...”. Conversazione con Vittorio Gregotti,” and the parallel conversation published on the opposite page: “Modernismo senza dimenticare la storia”. Conversazione con Álvaro Siza,” *Casabella*, no. 744 (2006): 70–71 (English translation: 103); the two conversations conclude the presentation of a series of works by the new generation of architects from the Porto School.

30 Eduardo Souto de Moura, “Fernando Távora: ritratto dell’artista da giovane,” *Casabella*, no. 744 (2006): 75–76 (English translation: 106).

Reciprocity between Small and Large – Drawing as Foundation

The trajectory of Siza’s work is defined by a sensitive reading of reality through the practice of drawing, which is capable of revealing a place’s latent potential. This approach constitutes both a critique of urbanism - interpreted in its purely normative aspects - and a demonstration of a concrete alternative to the technocratic imposition of planning. The project affirms its theoretical condition: by reading circumstances, operational lines emerge that interpret the present for the future. But that future is defined by the invention and poetics of each author and cannot be predetermined a priori, since every piece of architecture is constituted “as a relationship with other built presences: of stone or of nature”³¹.

This point of view presupposes that the architect’s gaze pays dynamic and multi-scale attention to the reality it modifies. Siza’s “writing”, carried out through drawing, clearly demonstrates this specificity of his way of working. It is a work of slow approximation, which achieves such closeness that it eliminates the distance between sign and site. One might say it translates into drawing the profound intertwining referred to by the master Távora, whereby “knowing and being come to overlap”³². It then recovers the overall view and finds a synthesis - albeit open, in the form of a question - between the autonomy of the detail and the unity of the whole.

Gregotti grasped this peculiar dynamic of Siza’s poetics from the first two occasions he invited his Portuguese friend to exhibit his work in Italy: in 1976 in Venice and in 1979 in Milan, two crucial episodes that contributed to determining the beginning of Siza’s international notoriety.

In 1976, as part of the Biennale chaired by Carlo Ripa di Meana, when Gregotti was Director of the Visual Arts and Architecture Sector, architecture and art addressed a common general theme: “Ambiente-Partecipazione-Strutture culturali” (Environment–Participation–Cultural Structures)³³. The art section was curated by Germano Celant, while the architecture section was curated by Gregotti himself, who conceived three exhibitions for three different venues in Venice. At the Magazzini del Sale, 27 international architects/architecture teams came together in the exhibition *Europa/America. Centro storico-suburbio* (31 July-10 October 1976)³⁴. The exhibition was organised by invitation, with Gregotti selecting the European authors and Peter Eisenman the American ones. A moment of collective discussion was the debate, “What

31 Vittorio Gregotti, *Architettura e postmetropoli* (Milan: Einaudi, 2011), 5.

32 Fernando Távora, “Sobre a posição do Arquitecto,” in *Da organização do espaço* (1962; Porto: FAUP Publicações, 1999), 74.

33 The discipline of architecture was included in the Visual Arts Sector in 1975, under the direction of Vittorio Gregotti. The Architecture Sector only gained its autonomy from the visual arts in 1979. In fact, the first Architecture Biennale, curated by Paolo Portoghesi and titled “The Presence of the Past,” took place in 1980. For a thorough analysis of the ideological tensions that crystallized around this radical change in the direction of the Venetian event, see, among others, Léa-Catherine Szacka, *Exhibiting the Postmodern: The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale* (Venice: Marsilio, 2016).

34 *Europa/America: Architetture urbane, alternative suburbane*, ed. Franco Raggi (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1976). Franco Raggi is coordinator of the Visual Arts and Architecture Sector and plays a key role in the organization and staging of the “Europe–America” exhibition.

Modern Movement?”, held at the Lido, Palazzo del Cinema on 1–2 August. Siza was, of course, among the guests, and in this exhibition, the Portuguese architect and Aldo Rossi found themselves setting up their works in side-by-side spaces, following a simple alphabetical sequence³⁵ [Fig. 1]. It was on this occasion that Rossi presented for the first time, together with Eraldo Consolascio, Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhart, the panel named *La Città Analoga*, which became internationally famous as a manifesto on the relationship between reality and imagination - or rather, on “the capacity of the imagination born from the concrete”³⁶.

On a series of 23 thin white panels, dynamically arranged in space to form a sequence of diagonals³⁷, Siza organises heterogeneous materials in space 9 of Hall II. Mainly sketches, but also drawings and photographs from his twenty years of professional activity: the group of single-family houses built in Caxinas, the Banco Borges Agency in Vila do Conde, the collective social housing in Porto as part of the SAAL operation (Bouça and São Victor)³⁸, together with drawings of other projects under study at the time, such as the layout of the coast road in Leça de Palmeira - through which he sought to integrate his best-known projects completed up to that point: the Boa Nova Tea House and the Municipal Swimming Pool [Fig. 2] - the office and commercial building that was intended to resolve the complex area of Avenida da Ponte, and the plans for the redevelopment of the central areas of the city of Porto (Barredo). He thus made his debut on the international scene through his own unique tool, not simply freehand drawing, but the almost filmic sequence of his progressive approach to the project, conveyed through the accumulation of quick sketches organized into large compositions. The short text accompanying the work in the catalogue explains:

I tried to select [...] material that could document [...] this process: continuous and patient research, the slow approximation of the design that corresponds to complex objectives and circumstances, which encompasses every job and all the work [...] The rapid sketches on display – a working tool like any other and not a romantic methodological proposal – rather than reflecting, help to create an awareness of the multiplicity of tensions involved in every hypothetical response to a concrete problem³⁹.

35 See Roberto Cremascoli and Francesco Moschini, *Álvaro Siza in Italia: il Grand Tour 1976–2016* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, 2016), 41–48; Roberto Cremascoli and Nuno Grande, eds., *Neighbourhood: Where Álvaro Meets Aldo* (Exhibition catalogue, Padiglione Portoghese, XV Biennale di Architettura di Venezia, 2016); Mounir Ayoub, “Siza et Rossi, rencontres vénitienes,” *Tracés*, nos. 13–14 (2016): 16–18.

36 Aldo Rossi, “La città analoga,” *Lotus International*, no. 13 (1976): 6.

37 See Ana Caterina Neiva, “Exhibiting Portuguese Architecture: Twentieth-century Curatorial Strategies” (PhD diss., Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto, 2019), 230–39.

38 Following the Revolução dos Cravos of 25 April 1974, thanks to the willingness of a group of architects and students to engage in the struggle for the right to housing, in a logic of democratization of public space, the SAAL (Serviço Ambulatório de Apoio Local) Brigades were founded. The SAAL program, whose parabola would be halted in 1976, materializes collective reflections on the relationship between the housing problem and the construction of the city.

39 Álvaro Siza, “Contributo,” in *Europa/America: Architetture urbane, alternative suburbane*, ed. Franco Raggi (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1978), 57–61.



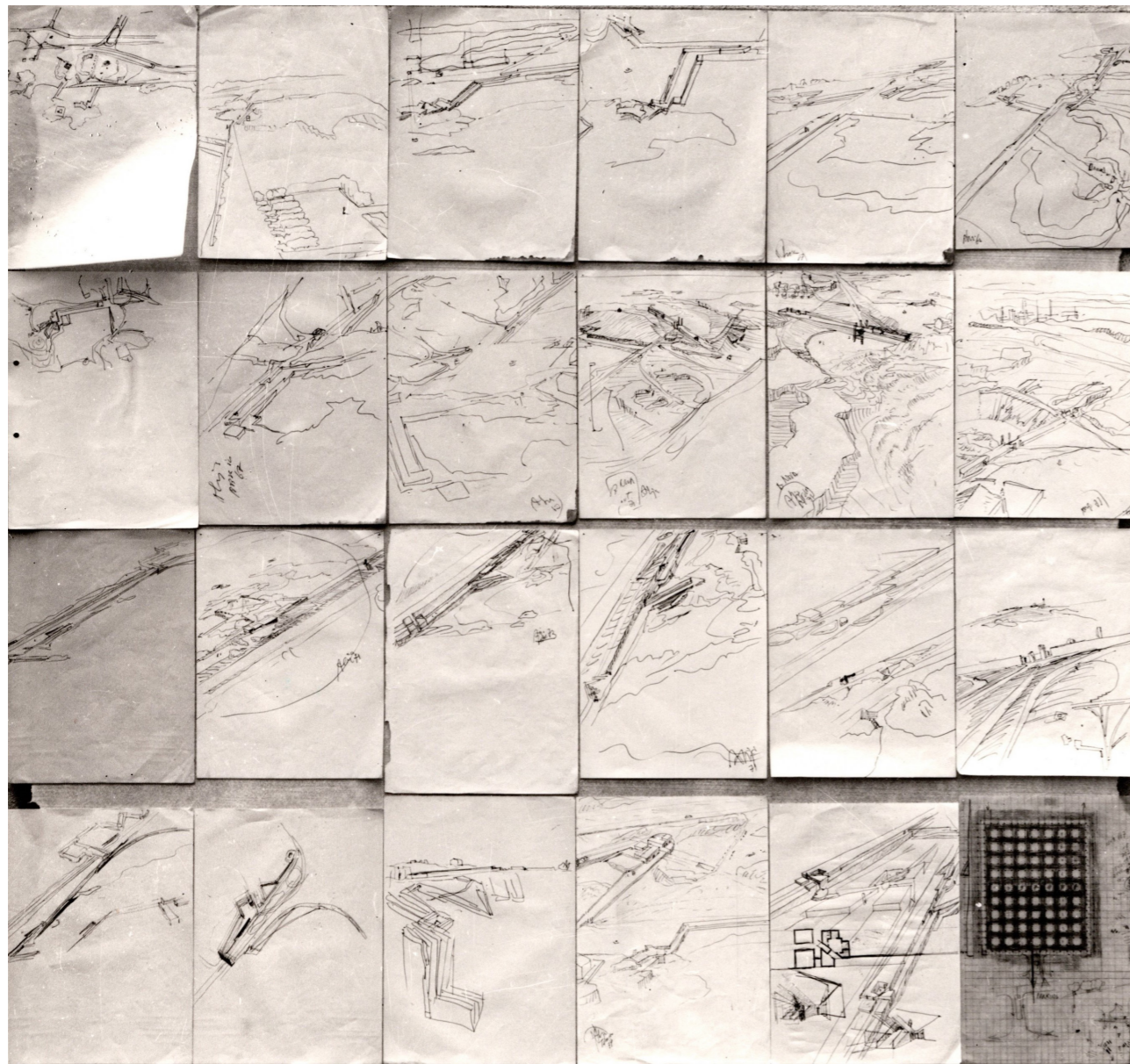
1979 was an important year for Milan's Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea (Contemporary Art Pavilion). After a period of closing, its reopening marked a rethinking of the institution's role as a public space open to research and experimentation. The programming was entrusted to Zeno Birolli, Germano Celant and Vittorio Gregotti. The first architecture exhibition curated by Gregotti, in collaboration with Italo Rota, was a monographic exhibition dedicated to the work of Álvaro Siza (1 March–30 April)⁴⁰, which departed from the materials of the 1976 Biennale, enriched and updated with new projects, bringing together all of Siza's Portuguese experimentation on the eve of his international breakthrough.

40 Over the subsequent three years, the exhibition “Álvaro Siza Architetto 1954–1979” was restaged in many other European venues: Venice, Berlin, Lausanne, Helsinki, and Jyväskylä. Catalogue: *Álvaro Siza Architetto 1954–1979* (Milan: Idea and Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, 1979). See also Cristina Emilia Ramos e Silva, “A divulgação internacional da arquitectura portuguesa 1976–1988” (PhD diss., Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto, 2016), Appendix to Chapter 2: Illustrative Documents.

Fig. 1

Europa/America. Centro storico-suburbio, 27 Architetti contemporanei. Architetti Europei, Biennale di Venezia 1976, Magazzini del sale alle Zattere, Hall II – Space 9.

Some panels from the section by Álvaro Siza; in the foreground, note the photograph of the model for the project for the Avedida Marginal (coast road) in Leça de Palmeira; in the last panel on the left, in the background, you can see the beginning of Space 8, set up by Aldo Rossi; note the left margin of the *Città Analoga*, conceived and presented on this occasion. (Photo: ASAC. Courtesy of the Historical Archives of the Venice Biennale, ASAC)



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The setting, created according to Siza's direct instructions, is organised entirely in the space originally conceived by Ignazio Gardella as the "Galleria delle Sculture" (Sculpture Gallery), a continuous space, lowered by a few steps, with one side open towards the park, on which the five exhibition rooms are arranged perpendicularly. A long row of 18 panels, this time black and joined together to form a self-supporting V-shaped structure, forms the backbone that runs through the gallery space [Fig. 3]. The long line describing a wide curve leads to two ends: on one side, a base with the model for the Quinta da Malagueira neighbourhood in Évora, behind which a series of photographs are projected; on the other, two panels of photographs of works created at different times and a base with a composition of prototypes and design objects. On a separate island, in front of the large window, is the model of the social housing project in Bouça (Porto).

Fig. 2

Europa/America. Centro storico-suburbio, 27 Architetti contemporanei. Architetti Europei, Biennale di Venezia 1976. Álvaro Siza, composite of sketches for the Leça da Palmeira waterfront. The master plan integrates the Boa Nova Restaurant (1958-63) and the Swimming Pools (1961-66), representing a comprehensive design evolution spanning twenty years. The project's implementation was heavily influenced by the expansion of the Sacor refinery in 1965; consequently, the final intervention focused on preserving the coastal strip and its relationship with the urban fabric. (Photo: ASAC. Courtesy of the Historical Archives of the Venice Biennale, ASAC)

A dual narration, therefore, emerged on distinct levels. First and foremost, the one between design and project; Siza himself would later recall that: "in that context, I had considered placing final plans alongside preliminary sketches. A very long double panel would then have displayed the sketches on one side and the final plans on the other"⁴¹. Secondly, there is the scale of the architect's work: alongside the single-family homes and bank agencies built in the early years of his career, there were plans for working-class neighbourhoods that addressed increasingly complex urban issues. Together with the architectural works are two lamps, a mirror, a door handle and other small pieces. It was Mario Botta (1943-) who later recalled Siza's unusual choice with irony and wondered about the effect that the sight of those prototypes for everyday objects had had on the many members of Milan's high society who had rushed to the exhibition opening: "I think that this is symbolic of the architecture of Álvaro Siza, sometimes so simple and essential that it may seem banal. I believe, though, that it is simple and essential like the miracle of poetry"⁴² [Fig. 4].

In the exhibition catalogue, which can be considered the first concise monograph on Siza's work, Gregotti creates a sort of anachronistic montage: in the reprint of his 1972 article, he includes two sketches from the "study of the project for the expansion of the city of Évora (1977)", anticipating what would find full expression in the first issue of his editorship of *Casabella* magazine (no. 478, 1982).

In 1982, in fact, the opportunity arose to fully exemplify these methodological matters dear to Gregotti through the publication of the first project in which Siza addressed the topographical and territorial scale to define a new part of a city. As if fulfilling a tacit appointment with history, Gregotti opened the editorial project, which would have among its central themes a reflection on urban design as a critical modification of the context, with Siza's work for the Malagueira neighbourhood in Évora. Begun in 1977, the plan had at that point reached a stage where it could be fully described (with photographs of the completed parts and the foundations of the sectors under construction) and explained, both as a completed work and, at the same time, as an "opera aperta"⁴³. It is no coincidence that the pages following the thirteen dedicated to Siza's project feature the first of Bernardo Secchi's (1934-2014) many contributions on the theme of unity between "architecture and urbanism"⁴⁴. This marked either a completion of a cycle or the beginning of a new field of design - and thus, theoretical - experimentation.

Later on, Siza himself will reflect on the theme of the "plan" during the lectures he will give at the IUAV in Venice as a visiting professor in the academic

41 Siza, *Imagining the Evident* (Lisbon: Monade, 2022), 16.

42 Mario Botta, "Espelho Álvaro," November 1980, published online on January 15, 2020., <https://drawing-matter.org/espelho-alvaro/>. Accessed February 2026.

43 I use this term to reference the intense intellectual relationship that was established between Vittorio Gregotti and Umberto Eco, starting in the first half of the 1960s. See Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962).

44 Bernardo Secchi, "L'architettura del piano," *Casabella*, no. 478 (1982): 16-17.



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year 1986-87. The contents of these lectures will be collected and published as "Tracce di lavoro" (Working notes) on the occasion of the exhibition at the Masieri Foundation in 1988⁴⁵. The outline on the theme of the "plan" opens as follows:

My experiences with planning have been very useful. Before embarking on them, I was afraid that certain methods I had used previously might not work, and this was an incentive to accept this commitment. Secondly, in hindsight, because I believe it can be very useful to try your hand at

45 Álvaro Siza Vieira: *Casinò di Salisburgo, case e negozi all'Aja*, ed. Carlo Magnani (Venice: Fondazione A. Masieri – Galleria di Architettura, anno II, mostra n. 6, March 19–April 30, 1988). For a more detailed analysis of the Masieri Foundation experience, see Claudia Cavallo, "Una Scuola di Venezia. Luciano Semerani e il linguaggio dell'architettura", in *Biblioteca Stoá. Scuole/Schools*, eds. Marianna Ascolese, Marco Moro, and Viviana Saitto (Naples: Thymos Books, 2026).

Fig. 3

Álvaro Siza *Architetto 1954–1979*, Galleria delle Sculture, Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea, Milan, 1979. View of the 18-panel installation, which forms the backbone of the exhibition. The side facing the park, visible in the photograph, features the final project drawings. The opposite side, hidden from view, showcases the sketches illustrating the conceptual development of the designs. (Photo: Nanda Lanfranco. Courtesy of the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan)



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these different project scales, as I think as that designing a small house becomes something entirely different after having had a large-scale experience [...] A plan must be as flexible in the way it develops as the actual development of the city is unstable, as programmes and various ideas for development are unstable over time... The plan must coexist with political decisions, with the complexity and unpredictability of these decisions⁴⁶.

Finally, it is Gregotti again who returns to the theme of the dynamic of the scale in the aforementioned conversation published in *Casabella* in 2006:

Giving form to vast territorial spaces means precisely listening to 'the small things and subtle signs' that form the stratification of the an-

46 Pier Antonio Val and Álvaro Siza Vieira, "Tracce di lavoro," in *Álvaro Siza Vieira: Casinò di Salisburgo, case e negozi all'Aja*, Quaderni della Fondazione Masieri, no. 6 (1988): 5.

Fig. 4

Álvaro Siza *Architetto 1954–1979*, Galleria delle Sculture, Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea, Milan, 1979. In the left foreground, the exhibition features prototypes for design elements and everyday objects, such as a lamp and a mirror. These pieces complement the display, highlighting the multi-scalar approach inherent in Siza's design work. (Photo: Nanda Lanfranco. Courtesy of the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan)

thropo-geography of a territory. Constructing the ordering elements of large spaces starting with these things means avoiding the superimposition of abstract principles on a specific place, bringing out structural characteristics, things that have been there for a long time, giving them form by understanding the reasons behind the traces of their transformations and their meaning. To do this you must know how to see the small scale, amidst things. Large-scale design calls for lengthy exercise on details, which is re-absorbed in the form of the project. This is what Alvaro Siza has always done, and it doesn't matter if the scales were smaller. We can learn much more about the design of the territory from his pool of tides at Leça de Palmeira than from many urban designs: especially those that apply aesthetic systems drawn from supposed expressive urgencies of subjectivity.⁴⁷

The Obsession with History: Angels and Places

During his years as editor of *Casabella*, Gregotti repeatedly returned to the idea of exploring the physical resistance of a place - a concept that implicitly also refers to its historical density - thereby introducing a new design tension. In 1995, his editorial in issue no. 628 (which presented Siza's project for the reconstruction of the Chiado district in Lisbon, which also earned him the cover) was entitled "Foundations":

In the activity of the architect the foundation is, in the most evident way, the beginning, almost always concealed from sight for those who admire or use the architecture, the beginning upon which everything rests, and on which it remains. But that initial, secret surface of contact with the terrain, of support, of connection, which distributes forces and stresses, discharging them in the land, is also the result of a design. In a certain way the foundation is not the starting point but rather the product of a process of will, of a pursuit of compatibility and dialogue, it is a form of interrogation on the possibility of an existing state to welcome and sustain something new, to change⁴⁸.

In this geographical and topographical dialogue, Gregotti also reconciled his relationship with the past and, by extension, his interpretation of the concept of tradition, revealing continuity with the thinking of his mentor Rogers. As Chiara Baglione recalls: "Called upon to reconfigure the magazine almost twenty years after the latter's departure, Gregotti consciously draws on the editorial experience conducted under the guidance of his mentor and the theoretical content that characterised it"⁴⁹.

In Gregotti's vision, the act of modification stems from the recognition of the

47 Marco Mulazzani, "Álvaro Siza è un architetto fuori moda...": Conversazione con Vittorio Gregotti," *Casabella*, no. 744 (2006): 70 (English translation: 104).

48 Vittorio Gregotti, "Fondazioni," *Casabella*, no. 628 (1995): 2-3 (English translation: 68).

49 Chiara Baglione, *Casabella 1928-2008* (Milan: Electa, 2008), 510-611.

other, of empirical conditions understood as the raw material of the project, of cultural stratification taken as the end of dialogue, but in no way can there be a form of deductive reasoning that, starting from the reading of contextual conditions, leads to the design solution, nor is it admissible to appeal to forms of legitimation for design choices merely by virtue of knowledge of the context and its history. These are the reasons why, from the very first editorial, "The obsession with history,"⁵⁰ he urges us to accept the conflictual and indeterminate condition in which contemporary design operates. The article is an open polemic against "La presenza del passato" (The Presence of the Past), the Venice Architecture Biennale curated by Paolo Portoghesi in 1980. The text concludes with an invitation to revert "to the uncertainty of reality," based on the idea that seeking consensus through a relationship with the past represents contemporary architecture's weakness. In fact, when it comes to history, the act of questioning is more fruitful than the anxiety to extract from it a model "to oppose the ephemeral present"⁵¹. Gregotti appeals to the Angel of History, portrayed by Paul Klee and commented on by Walter Benjamin. The previous year, Massimo Cacciari had reflected on the same image in the essay accompanying the facsimile reproduction of the issues of the magazine *Das Andere* conceived by Adolf Loos:

The past is transformed into the vision and listening of a living, incessant questioning -the problem par excellence. It is in this relationship, which unfolds through the longest deviations, the slowest waits, that we are torn towards the future. What we call the future, in fact, takes place in this dialogue.⁵²

Therefore, what interests us as architects is, in dialectical terms, to identify the hypothesis of the future inscribed in the site - a hypothesis that is neither obvious nor static, and which can never be reduced to a rule. In this regard, in the text published in the *Quaderno della Fondazione Masieri di Venezia* in 1988, Gregotti writes:

I have always had the impression that Álvaro Siza's architecture arose from archaeological foundations unknown to us but certainly known to him. These clues are invisible to those who have not devoted long and concentrated attention to the nature of the site through drawing. When they grow, precisely because they carry with them the feeling of growing on something, of linking and connecting, as well as establishing and forming, they seem to preserve all the tender uncertainty of a hypothetical discovery. It is a slow and intense construction, made up of discreet, if not secret, traces of an attempt to start again from the constitution of a few generative signs, apparently simple and explicit of an entire design system. For what characterises Siza's work is precisely this sense of ar-

50 Vittorio Gregotti, "L'ossessione della storia," *Casabella*, no. 478 (1982): 40 (English translation: 41).

51 Massimo Cacciari, *Adolf Loos e il suo angelo* (Milan: Electa, 1981), 10.

52 Massimo Cacciari explains how neither Karl Kraus nor Adolf Loos searched the past for an "eternal image" or a model to oppose the ephemeral present. See Cacciari, *Adolf Loos e il suo angelo*, 10.

chitecture as a tool for discovering reality for what it hides, at least as much as for what it shows. Siza's architecture reveals, shows even more than it interprets, unveils the truth of the context.⁵³

As is well known, Álvaro Siza has always rejected the idea of defining his architecture within the framework of a theory - and thereby the Porto School, of which he is considered one of the forefathers. In 1986, on the occasion of the publication of the first monograph of his work, *Professione Poetica*, he forced himself to crystallise his ideas into eight points, which are "taken almost at random", as if to express his discomfort at having to respond to the request to summarise his poetics in words. Two of the points deal with 'method' and 'tradition'. With regard to the former, Siza, citing the experience of the SAAL brigades, writes: "When that which is movement is adopted as a method, it degenerates into a comfortable alibi, an alienating moderator, loath to commit itself to re-formulating desire - ours, and that of others". Regarding the latter, Siza proposed his dynamic vision of the past, confirming continuity with Távora's thinking: "Tradition is a challenge to innovation. It is made up of subsequent inserts. I am a conservative and a traditionalist: that is I move among conflicts, compromises, hybrids and transformations".⁵⁴

Siza assumes the capacity - or perhaps the necessity - of remaining within conflicts as a permanent condition: a continually renewed aspiration that sustains projects and their fruitful investigative nature. Perhaps this is why his extraordinarily prolific production of sketches is populated by angels [Fig. 5], sometimes whole figures, flying over imagined architectures, as if to provide an overall view of the whole, sometimes mutilated, with broken limbs falling to the ground, perhaps heteronymous figures that multiply the architect's identity. Jean-Paul Rayon, who was tasked with writing the article and taking the photographs for the presentation of the Évora project in the first issue of Gregotti's *Casabella*, captured the message conveyed by these presences, deciding to conclude his article with a sketch of the "mutilated angel in full flight", whose "fragmented limbs rush back to their origins"⁵⁵. This tension between flight and rootedness embodies the Sizian "profound lightness" - if the oxymoron is permitted - which has resonated within Italian architectural culture thanks to Gregotti's mirroring operation over more than fifty years.

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53 Vittorio Gregotti, "Per Álvaro Siza Vieira," in *Álvaro Siza Vieira: Casinò di Salisburgo, case e negozi all'Aja* (Venice: Galleria di Architettura, 1988), 15.

54 Álvaro Siza, "Premessa," in *Álvaro Siza, Professione poetica* (Milan: Electa, 1986), 8-9.

55 Jean-Paul Rayon, "Introduzione al metodo di Álvaro Siza," *Casabella*, no. 478 (1982): 15.



Fig. 5

Álvaro Siza, page 39 of Notebook 34; from April 1979. (Drawing Matter Collections, collection number DMC 2531.39)

An angel looks down upon a natural landscape featuring several constructions organized around two orthogonal axes. Inscribed below: "comércio urbano geometria (defesa das forças incontroláveis da natureza) guerra à angústia de viver. This is my city, Rio natureza irregularidade." [Translation by the author: urban commerce geometry (defense against the uncontrollable forces of nature) war against the anguish of living. This is my city. Rio nature irregularity].

This drawing is not the one accompanying the publication of the Évora project (published on page 15 of *Casabella* no. 478, 1982, and mentioned in this article—likely clipped and gifted to Vittorio Gregotti); rather, it belongs to a notebook from the same period containing sketches for Malagueira (Fonte da Porta de Alconchel, Sede da Cooperativa) and the Banco Borges & Irmão in Vila do Conde (second project). While the drawing likely does not refer specifically to the Évora project, the essence of this sketch and the accompanying words perfectly synthesize the complex dialogue between architecture and context around which this paper is articulated.

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