

ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: ARC2013-0752

**Athens Institute for Education and Research**

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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series**

**ARC2013-0752**

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URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

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**ISSN 2241-2891**  
28/11/2013

## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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This paper should be cited as follows:

**Machado, C. (2013) "Àlvaro Siza and the Fragmented City" Athens:  
ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: ARC2013-0752.**

## **Álvaro Siza and the Fragmented City**

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### **Abstract**

In Álvaro Siza's work between 1970 and 1980 the presence of the ruin results from of his quest for a methodology that included city's past and its remains as an important starting point to embrace reality in its broadest sense. Ruins found in the place were preserved as important references for the project to come. Proposed new forms were sometimes fragmented, with the broken line used to relate or to bring together different aspects of reality. But there were also invented ruins, intended as such and built as mediators between the pre-existing and the new.

Alvar Aalto and Fernando Távora, both important in Siza's formation, had previously treated the same theme – the Muuratsalo experimental house by Aalto and the Quinta da Conceição Park in Matosinhos by Távora are good examples of it. They paved the way to Siza's practice as a mature architect.

For Siza there is no difference between architecture and urbanism. His design process is also related with that of Aldo Rossi who defended the same idea, speaking of the transformation of monuments in city's spaces and of the city distinguished by its various parts, studied and designed as such.

The transformation of urban monuments in time and the conviction that the understanding of the city must come from the multiple inter-relations of its different singularities, also explain Siza's fascination with the fragment and the collage, thus allowing to interpret his sketches where broken angels and architectural fragments dialogue and interact.

**Keywords:** Álvaro Siza, City, Fragment, Ruin

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1.

In Álvaro Siza's work as from 1970, the fragment and the ruin appear as the result from the quest for a methodology of the urban project that might include the past of the city and its remains as a starting point to embrace the reality in its most comprehensive dimension. Ruins found at the place were preserved as important references for the project to develop. New forms were sometimes fragmented, using the broken line as a means to bring near or correlate different aspects of the same reality. He also proposed invented ruins built as mediators between the pre-existing and the new.

Alvar Aalto and Fernando Távora, important names in Siza's formation, had already treated the same theme – the Muuratsalo experimental house by Aalto and the Quinta da Conceição in Matosinhos by Távora are good examples of it. They remained important influences not only in his years of learning but also in his later practice.

The Quinta da Conceição (1956-60) by Fernando Távora, an urban park in Matosinhos, near the harbour of Leixões, is a work where the remains or ruins of an old convent are the starting point to the organization of the farm as a public leisure area. Old and new complete each other. The remains of the convent are incorporated as part of a whole that was necessary to reorganize and complete, without the need to rebuild it as it was.

The fountain with three-square ponds in front of the south entrance receives, in the interior of the larger pond, a baroque statue to which a new pedestal is designed. Also the red niche, placed in order to accomplish one of the box tree walks which frame the remains of the old cloister, recomposing the space of the galleries, lodges another sculpture, this one incomplete or mutilated. There is also a small rebuilt door aligned with the north entrance and, farther south, a portal in the Manueline style which Távora sets in a concrete wall, turned west as the beginning of a walk at the low elevation.

It is a reconversion open to the past, where the will to render explicit the insertion of the new work into a collective, long-duration process becomes manifest, recognising the need to work from the extant, integrating it in some way or other into the project. Távora is always more interested in what unites architecture along the time than in the own characteristics of each period. This is what the Quinta da Conceição enunciates and will remain as a recurrent theme in Siza's work.

The fragment arises in Alvar Aalto's work through the use of the broken line and the division or partition of the bodies into independent though aggregated units. The Muuratsalo house (1952-53) is an example, with the various bodies placed on the ground as fragments evoking a ruined building. In the Enso-Gutzeit building (1959-62), the parallelepipedic volume is excavated on the side turned to the Byzantine Cathedral, as if it were the result of a collapse in order to open a passage to illuminate the inner court, whereas in the Nordic Bank Union building (1960-65) the broken line allows the interlinking of a seven-storey façade with the adjoining three-storey house. In this and other

Aalto's works one identifies a way of interlinking or connecting different things without a single moment of change, thus dissolving into a successive transition.

This is a practice Siza will use in a number of his works. The finial of one of the beams in the house of Manuel Magalhães (1967-70) disappears or *flows*, with an undulating motion, into the ceiling of one of the rooms (someone described it, I wonder if the author self, a *spring which disappears in the desert*), a subtle and recurrent way to draw, introducing suspension, not necessarily choosing a sole moment of passage, but rather a prolonged transition. These episodes, although in some cases single or detailed ones, participate in a more general idea which has to do with the careful projecting of the moments of transition as if everything had to be united by a sometimes tenuous string, which organizes an uninterrupted spatial sequence running along the whole work and projects itself to the outside, to the garden, to city and to nature.

In the same way, but at a different scale, two houses at the northern end of the Caxinas housing estate (1970-72), come closer or are connected to each other to shape one of the sides of a small square which limits the sea-front esplanade – a large elongated space in front of the row houses foreseen as the union of both nuclei Siza designed and built. In this case the broken wall is an allusion to the idea of ruin (or fragment) used as a transient motive to make the above mentioned side façades of both houses come closer to each other. At the southern end, the multifamily building is built upon the remains of an extant construction, underlying the compatibility of architectures along the time.

## 2.

In the Alcino Cardoso house in Moledo (1971-73) the idea of an invented ruin arises for the first time particularly in the sketches of the project and in the accompanying text. This house is usually interpreted as juxtaposition between the extant and the new work based on opposition and difference (interpretation legitimated by the author's words when he says that 'the extant and the new elements establish a clear contrast and interpenetrate themselves violently'. (Siza, 1979: 72, in Cianchetta, Molteni, 2004: 72)

In our opinion, the opposition is mainly a planimetric one. The same description also refers that 'there was an endeavour to recover the character of the [existing] buildings and of the landscape' (Siza, *ibidem*). This *recovery* includes equally both the extant and the new. We think that this work can be interpreted as a compatibilization so to speak *by sympathy* among the extant agricultural buildings and the projected enlargement. A non-mimetic sympathy, but clearly formulated in many of its aspects; the covering of the new body replicates the height of the extant arbour, maintained as vegetal *brise-soleil*. The framework is based on a traditional pattern – the sash-window – and encloses the three sides of the new body. This kind of framework is usual in countless cities in the north of Portugal (large multi-coloured glass panes

formed by the succession of closed verandas characterize often the interior of the blocks).

In the Alcino Cardoso house there is a plentiful of different motivations presided by the problem of the *character of the buildings and of the landscape*. And it is exactly because of this that the disturbing and fascinating episode of the swimming pool makes sense, situated at a lower level near the southern limit of the property.

*The swimming pool, projected later, was designed as an invented ruin from the memory of a number of things belonging either to the landscape of Minho or to other landscapes. It is oriented according to the course of the sun and intends to relate itself with everything that surrounds it, "new and old" as if it were an intermediary or an (im)possible synthesis. (Siza, ibidem)*

It is to mark an *(im)possible synthesis* that the ruin is present. The whole work lives that ambiguity which was not looked for, but was encountered along the project and its construction.

In the Campo Alegre art gallery (1973-74), the unfolding of planes, a characteristic of cubism, allows the representation of a fragmented world. Considering the multiplicity of *scales* of the stairs to the basement, it also evokes the restlessness caused by an immeasurable space (the Piranesi prisons arise to memory) which is multiple and irreducible to the objective laws of perspective.

In the Beires house (1973-76) the façade is designed as if large marquises, those traditional *pans de verre* referred to above, appeared among the fragments or the remains of a ruined house. It is a singular and unrepeatable operation, almost uncommon or extravagant, but that heralds future developments that will confirm the rightness of that response.

### 3.

In the renewal of the Senhora das Dores area, operation S. Victor, SAAL (1974-77), many of the themes previously referred to come together. There is here not only a composition starting from the remains or fragments such as in the Quinta da Conceição park, but this project may be the one where the idea of the *non distinction between architecture and urbanism* (title of one of the interviews led and edited by Dominique Machabert and Laurent Beaudoin in *Álvaro Siza, une question de mesure*) becomes more apparent and utterly developed. (Siza, 1996 in Machabert, Beaudoin, 2008: 163-174)

Superimposed to the ruined walls which circumscribed the old *ilhas* (dispossessed and demolished for a parking lot by the municipal administration), a long row of houses with the orientation north-south and parallel to the S. Dionísio's street opens a second front turned to the interior of the block that Siza intends to render permeable and open to the extant city.



*Ilhas* (in Portuguese), or *islands* (in English), is the name used in Porto for speculative occupation of inner areas for jerry-building for migrant population arriving into the city as from the industrial revolution. They are organized in single or double rows and have one only façade).

The S. Dionísio's and Senhora das Dores's streets have a central role within this strategy – particularly the second one, a cleft halving the area, a street/alley which is also an *expansion joint* allowing the north-south crossing as well as the access to the interior of the block.

Siza will also endeavour to restore old relationships of proximity and neighbourhood he considers necessary to preserve.

*The other face of the stimulating communitarian life of the ilha is – just like the word indicates – the separation of the population into small isolated units. For this reason, the population as a whole repudiates the image of the ilha. But to repudiate that image and what it implies in terms of separation and misery does not necessarily mean to refuse the system of topographic adaptation with everything it has of positive for that communitarian life. (A. Siza, 1976, in 1976b: 101)*

Thus the *island* frees itself from its usual aspects, particularly the unacceptable ones – lack of sewage, insufficient areas, isolation and occultation –, in order to mean in a broad sense the maintenance of communitarian forms aggregated by strong formal and spatial relations, although opened and permeable to the whole city so that the city may look upon itself, in a formal, spatial and civil sense, and grasp the different local communities that make up its whole.

The tradition of ancient inner occupations of the medieval city is thus recovered. Lewis Mumford refers the idea of *island* as being coeval with the formation of the medieval city. The *ilhas* of Porto may remit, even through their name, to an unsuspected historical dimension, which, although not justifying these interventions, allows us to consider them under another more comprehensive and promising point of view – which opens ample perspectives to the Siza's proposition uttered in 1976, namely to consider *the proletarian island as the basic element of the urban tissue* (Siza, 1976a: 80-93).

*The wall, with its outside moat both defines and symbolizes the city: it made it an island. (...) As in a ship, the wall helped create a feeling of unity between the inhabitants: in a siege or a famine the morality of the shipwreck – share-and-share-alike – developed easily. But the wall also served to build up a fatal sense of insularity: all the more because of the absence of roads and quick means of communication between cities. (...) The street occupied in medieval city planning a quite different place than in an age of locomotion. Except in the country, we inevitably think of houses being built along a line of predetermined streets. But on the less regular medieval sites it would*

*be the other way around: groups of trades or groups of institutional buildings would form self-contained quarters or "islands". Within these "islands", and often outside, as part of the connecting urban tissue, the streets were essentially footways: marks of the daily comings and goings of the inhabitants. "Islands" formed by the castle, the monasteries, or the specialized industrial section of the technically more advanced cities were characteristic features: they had their counterpart in the little internal "islands" one encounters in the Northern countries in the housing foundations for the aged or the poor. The Fuggerei in Augsburg is the most handsomely built survival of this mode (...). (Mumford, 1996: 53-56)*

Other interventions organize the Senhora das Dores block. Two parallel rows of houses to the west from the fields adjacent to the backside of the Fontainhas's street penetrate into the interior of the block, reproducing the ancient occupation of the *ilhas*. A varied group of small buildings, either habitational or not, fill up the void spaces, proposing openings or passages that allow the crossing of the area. It should be noted the way the house projected to occupy a void space at the S. Dionísio's street (B7 in the general plan), parallel to one of the neighbouring gables, interrupts the continuity existing in the face of the street and organizes two entrances to the interior of the block.

The row of new houses intersects ruins of old walls preserved as important elements in the organization of the interior of the block. Like a gesture of sympathy towards the another wall, which is perpendicular to the former one and crosses the row of houses at the moment their elevation changes, the small walls dividing the houses from one another are designed as fragments broken into two pieces, in order to make compatible, by similarity and through a broken and transitive form (just like at the urbanization of Caxinas), the wall that bears the change of elevation, the longitudinal ruin along Senhora das Dores's street and the new building facing it.

The sash-windows – formerly used at Alcino Cardoso's and Beires's houses – are present again. At the upper floor a vertical window marks the succession of the houses, whereas at the ground level floor, with wider void spaces, windowpanes with the same design recall once again the traditional architecture of the city.

Remains or fragments of former constructions will also be the starting point, at the south sector, to the completion of three houses, literally superposed, without solution of continuity, to old stone walls, fragments which, both physically and formally, bear its reconstruction (C2 in the general plan).

The ruins are thus a support to not necessarily mimetic reconstructions. It is an 'urban design trying to outmatch the criteria of a mere refurbishing or the physical elimination of the existing city.' (Siza, 1976: 89)

All of this also with obvious references to the rationalist *Siedelungen* of the twenties, particularly to Pieter Oud's work, not only as far as the use of the curved line is concerned (see the residential complex in Hoek van Holland, 1924-27), but also the rhythms and the articulation of the volumes.

One year after completion of the first phase of Senhora das Dores's area in Porto, Siza says:

*It is an essential problem to be able to link different things, since the present-day city is a complex whole of very different fragments. In a city the problem lies on making a whole with ruins, buildings of different periods, fragments... (...) In order to develop our methodology it is necessary to try and make a whole out of its parts, which is feasible (...). Now we recognize the complexity of the city and it is good that this complexity exists (...). (Siza, 1978: 37)*

Isn't this will to unite – simultaneously recognizing the fragmented condition of the contemporary city – in a way represented by the broken angels which start appearing in many of his sketchbooks? Or else, those ones which – hovering over such projects as in Évora, at the Malagueira residential quarter (1977-), *mutilated when flying* (title of one of his drawings) – in contact with the soil are already fragmented in a form that is no longer possible to represent or build wholly?

Up to which extent was this strategy shared by a group of architects interested in the unity of architecture and urbanism? Let us compare this will to link the extant and the new with Aldo Rossi's words in the text 'Fragments' published in 1978:

*(...) the term "fragments" seems to me to be adequate to depict the situation of the modern city, the architecture and the society. (...) In its physical meaning (broken things, mutilated elements) or in its general meaning (part of a complete drawing which went lost) it is beyond doubt that the fragments belong to architecture; and they belong to it almost as constructive elements, almost as theoretical elements. (...) This is perhaps the big dream of the great civil architecture; it is not the harmony in discord, but the beautiful and tidy city thanks to the wealth and variety of its places. It is because of this that I also believe in the future city as the one in which the fragments of something broken in its origin are rearranged (...). (Rossi, 1978:7-8, in Ferlenga, 1978: 7-8)*

Is this not the sense of the engraving *Ora questo è perduto* of 1976?

In Aldo Rossi's architecture we also find projects deliberately broken or cleaved such as the residential quarter of San Rocco in Monza (1966). In the plan for the XIII Triennale, Milan (1963) or at the Piazza del Municipio of Segrate (1965), incomplete architectures are deliberately designed, hinting at archaeological excavation camps (in the pavilion) or to a mutilated or incomplete pre-existence (in Segrate). Note as well that the displacement of the two parts of S. Rocco surprisingly seems to evoke the cleft designed by the crossing of the Senhora das Dores's street in the residential quarter in Porto.

Beyond all the differences among their work, it is important to underline this moment of convergence. Both formulate a hypothesis of intervention in the city that refuses the *blank slate (tabula rasa)*, but also its exploitation as consumer goods or its transformation into a thematic park of formal shows without memory.

We must return to the projects of Caxinas e Senhora das Dores to resume the theme of the *non difference between architecture and urbanism*. Aldo Rossi also always defended the same idea, using as example the city of Spalato, where Diocletian's Palace is transformed in an urban area, thus showing the permutability and correspondence between architecture and urbanism. 'The city of Spalato represents an extraordinary reference to architects and to those who busy themselves with city and territory. This example denies any distinction between building and city, returns urban values to the womb of architecture and shows that the city is architecture in its own right.' (Rossi, 1972, in Bonicalzi, 2004: 480)

A *non difference between architecture and urbanism* which becomes manifest not only in the way the monuments transform themselves into urban spaces (cf. also the Arles amphitheatre), but also when the intervention in the city implies the consideration of all of its dimensions – from the house to the residential quarter, from the residential quarter to the city – and the pinpointing of correspondences among its different scales (and in this particular Siza also stands close to the need, defended by Rossi, to study and project the city by parts).

*To project the city by parts* means to accept the necessary partiality of the proposals, but also the possibility of aiming at the construction, although always incomplete, of a more general or global design that relates them with one another, through the interlinking of the different interventions. About the SAAL process, which includes the intervention at the Senhora das Dores area, Siza notes the need to respond to the dwellers recognition that 'local problems are above all a reflex of the contradictions of the city and the territory in their widest aspects' (Siza, 1976, in Tarragò, Beramendi [ed.] 1976: 101). Let us read again Aldo Rossi: 'I am thinking of a unity, or a system, made solely of reassembled fragments. Perhaps only a great popular movement can give them the sense of an overall design (...).' (Rossi, 1981: 18)

#### 4.

At both IBA Berlin competitions (1979-1980), Siza also projects the permeability of the blocks, incorporating existing inner buildings and crossings and in some cases proposing others so as to allow a more diversified and global utilization of the city.

Buildings and paths, both peripheral and interior, are designed in the continuity of the prevailing ones. In the renewal of one of the blocks of the Fraenkelufer competition, the buildings A, B and C occupy the interior, whereas building D, recomposing the perimeter at the corner of the streets

Fraenkluferstrasse and Admiralstrasse, originates, such as the small building at S. Dionísio's street, two passages to the interior of the block.

Building B also retrieves the strategy already rehearsed in the Senhora das Dores's area in Porto. With the shape of an L, inverted relative to what is usual in the city, it opens a new front in the interior of the block with a large curtain wall perforated by openings regularly distributed, having at its centre an excavated semi-elliptical negative. The F building, placed at the corner of Fraenkeluferstrasse and Kholfurterstrasse, with a ruined corner recomposes the perimeter of the block.

The profound transformation these projects propose, both in Berlin and in Porto, paradoxically implies the maintenance of the city simultaneously suspended and resting on its fragmentary condition, open and available to many uses, some of them proposed and designed, others unforeseeable.

In the Temple of Modern Philosophy in Ermenonville (Hubert Robert, ca. 1775) there is an inversion of the ruin as a witness of the passing of time, proposing it, on the contrary, as an unfinished work, left incomplete to symbolize that the process of knowing never ends. It is a manifestation of optimism but also a sign of doubt or uneasiness. Both at S. Victor and at Fraenkelufer, or rather still at the swimming pool/watering tank at Moledo, the invented ruin denotes an empathic relationship with everything that exists, *new and ancient*, seeking an *(im)possible synthesis*.

In all of these works one can identify a sense of expectation, an anticipatory pause that remits to the civil dimension of the city. It is an open and available architecture. Its goal is the unveiling of the world, of the infinite variety of its correspondences and relations, projected as a work still to become, necessarily incomplete. It imagines the rearrangement of the city from fragments, from remains (or even from clues or traces), from everything sedimented in history and in geography, because that is the only possibility to read and get to know the city in all its richness and complexity.

Thence the need to work from the particular to the general, to make different times compatible, unveiling ancient presences, marks or tracks witnessing the history of the city, big grooves through which different epochs superpose, adapting themselves among them. This is what sustains the new, evidencing the deep reasons the architecture must be aware of, perhaps at the service of new needs, but starting from the existing and transporting it in some way or other through the project. It is a matter of recognizing the world such as it is, but also its potentiality, that needs to be projected, that is, to be identified through imagination.

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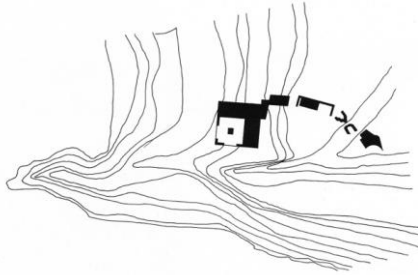
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**Figure 1.** *Fernando Távora, Quinta da Conceição, Matosinhos (1956-60); view of the red niche and view of the west sector*



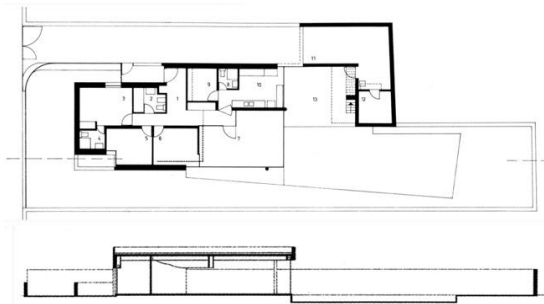
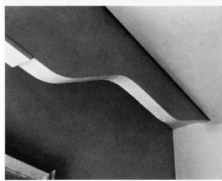
**Figure 2.** *Alvar Aalto, Summer house, Muuratsalo (1952-53); general plan*



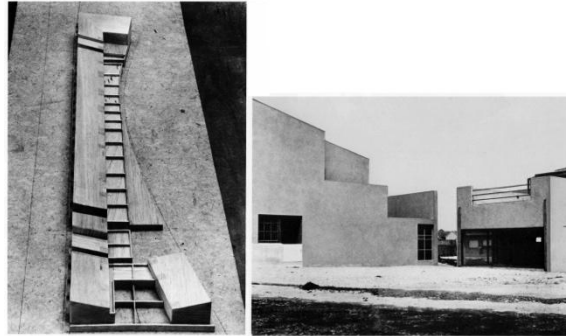
**Figure 3.** *Alvar Aalto, Enso-Gutzeit building, Helsinki (1959-62); aerial view of the side facing the Byzantine Cathedral*



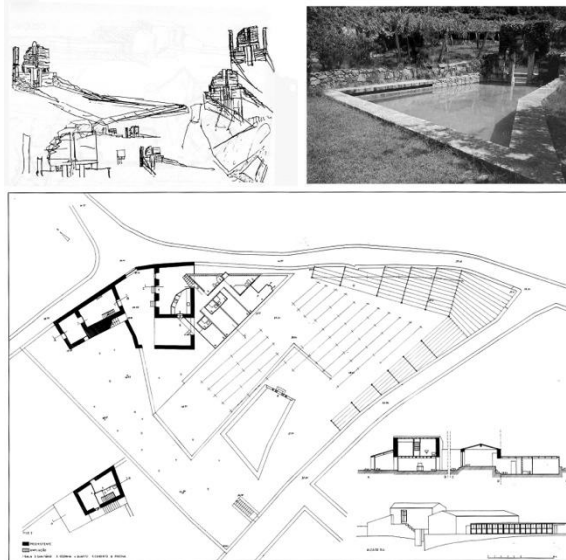
**Figure 4.** *Álvaro Siza, Manuel Magalhães house, Porto (1967-70); detail of a beam, plan and section*



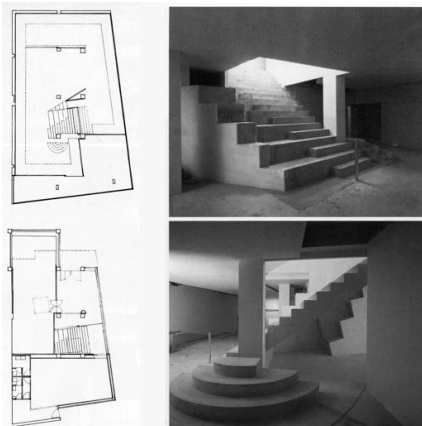
**Figure 5.** *Álvaro Siza, Caxinas housing estate, Vila do Conde (1970-72); view of the model; view of the north square*



**Figure 6.** *Álvaro Siza, Alcino Cardoso house, Moledo do Minho (1971-73); plans, section and elevation; sketch and view of the swimming-pool*

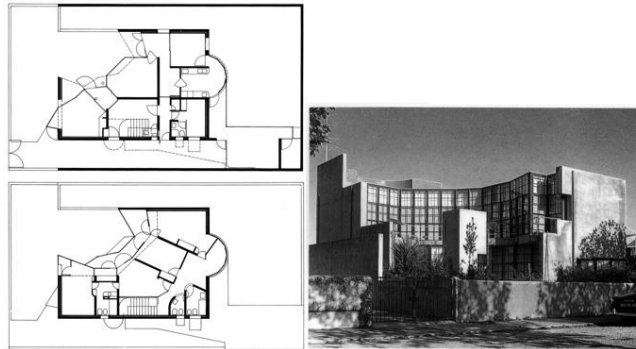


**Figure 7.** *Álvaro Siza, Campo Alegre art gallery, Porto (1973-74); plans and two views of the basement*

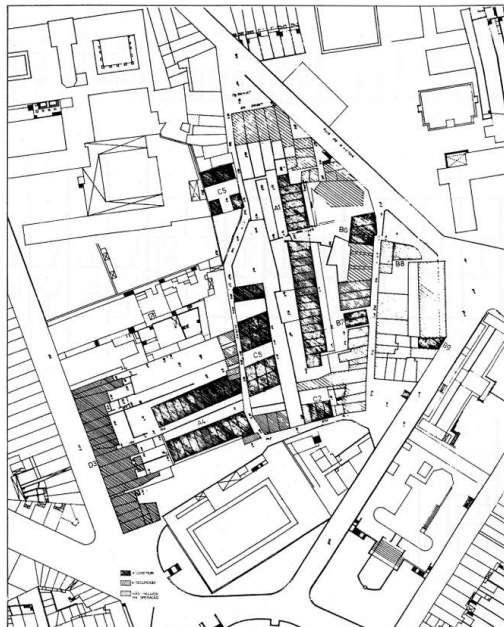




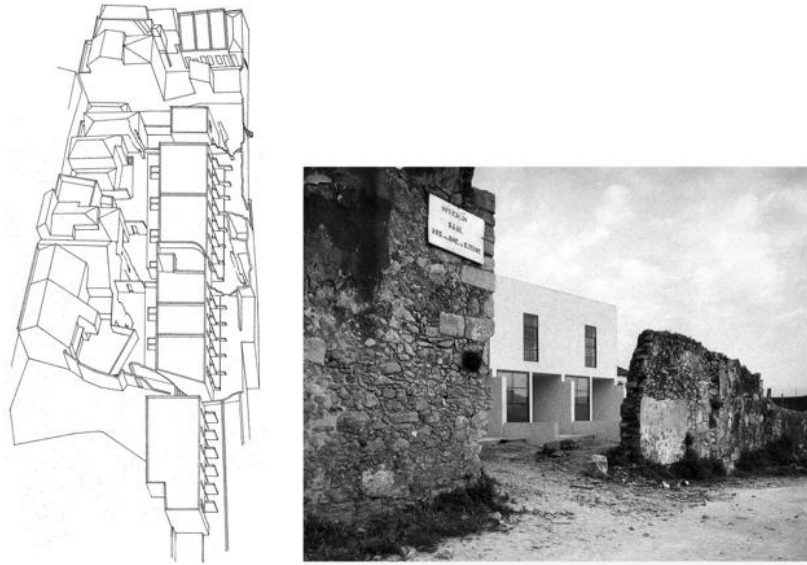
**Figure 8.** *Álvaro Siza, Beires house, Póvoa do Varzim (1973-76); plans and view from the street*



**Figure 9.** *Álvaro Siza, S. Victor Resident's Association housing, Porto (1974-77); general plan of the Senhora das Dores area*



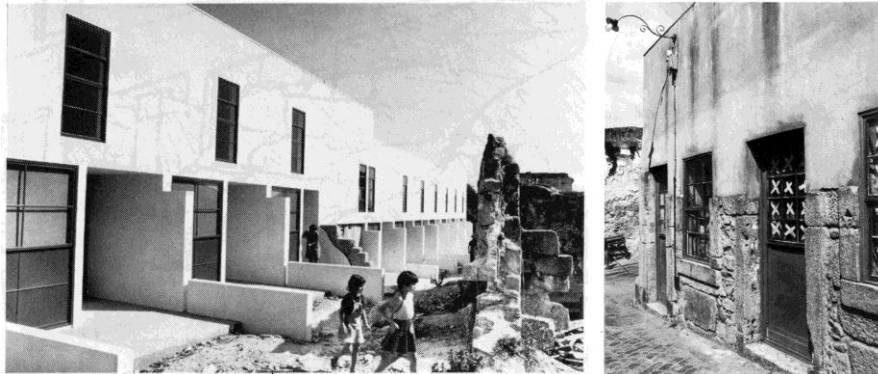
**Figure 10.** *Álvaro Siza, S. Victor Resident's Association housing, Porto; axonometric of Senhora das Dores east sector area and view of the row houses*



**Figure 11.** *Augsburg, 'Fuggerei' (1516)*



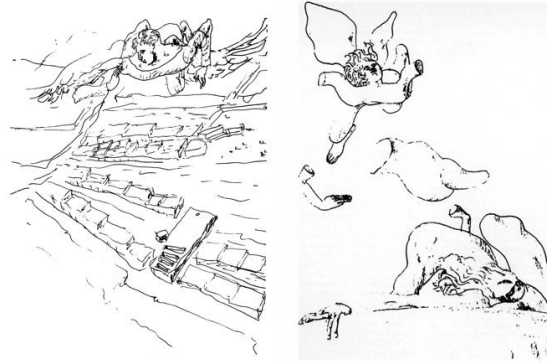
**Figure 12.** *Álvaro Siza, S. Victor Resident's Association housing, Porto; view of the row houses built on the east sector and the three houses rebuilt on the south sector*



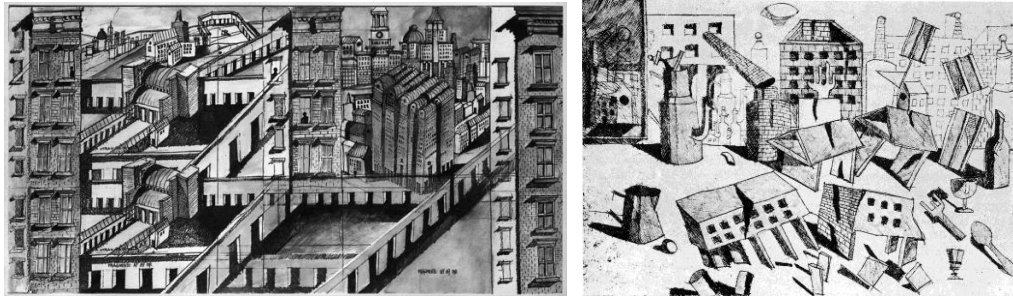
**Figure 13.** *Álvaro Siza, fragmented angels, drawing. S. Victor Resident's Association housing, Porto; the row houses built on the east sector*



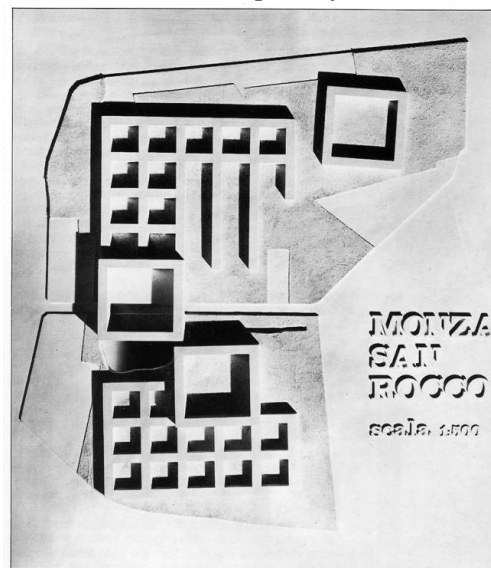
**Figure 14.** Álvaro Siza, *Malagueira district project, Évora (1976-), with a flying angel, drawing; 'An angel mutilated when flying', drawing*



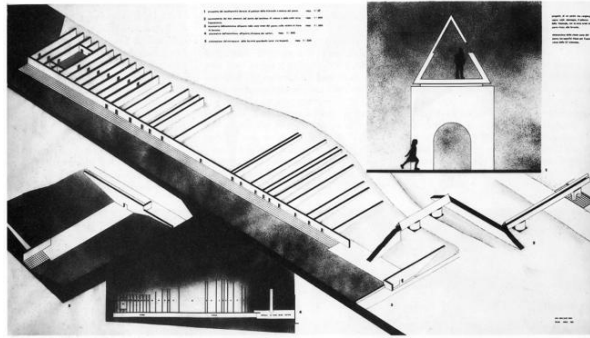
**Figure 15.** Aldo Rossi, *'Frammenti', drawing (1978); 'Dieses ist lange her / Ora questo é perduto', engraving (1975)*



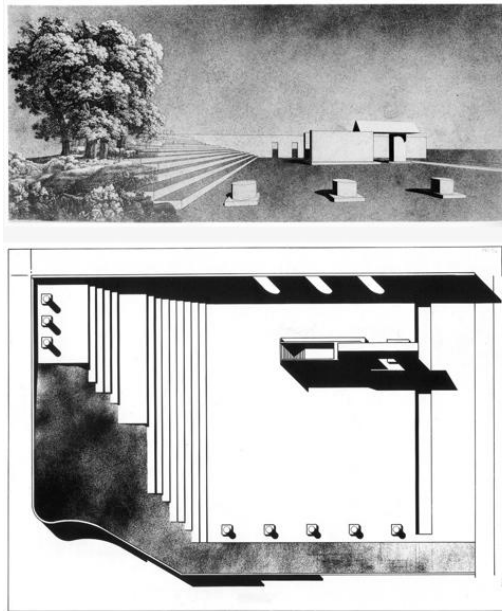
**Figure 17.** Aldo Rossi, *Residential Complex of S. Rocco, Monza (1966)*



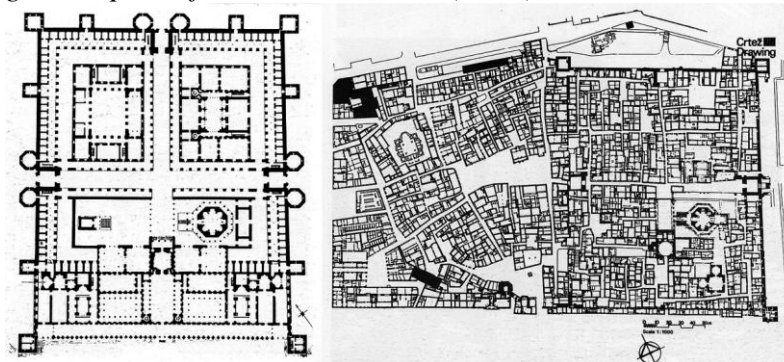
**Figure 18.** Aldo Rossi, *Plan for the XIII Triennale, Milan (1963)*



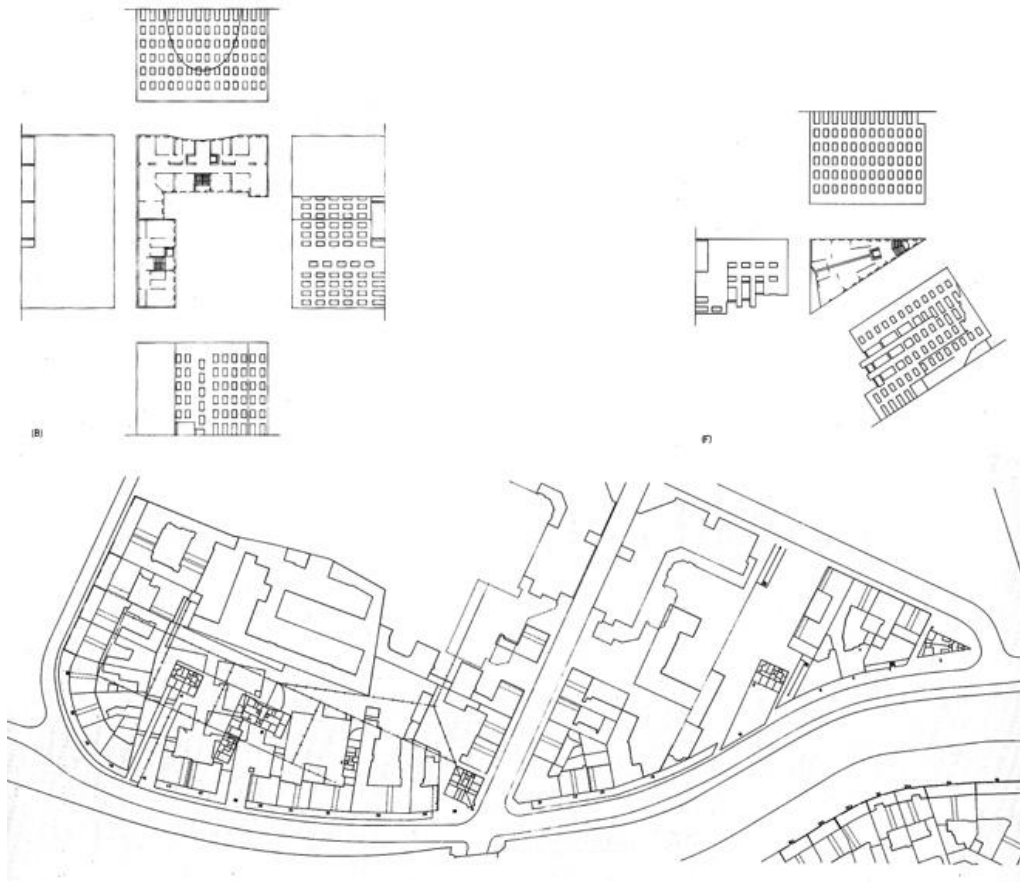
**Figure 19.** Aldo Rossi, *Plan for the piazza before the City Hall, Segrate (1965)*



**Figure 20.** Spalato (Split), *general plan of Diocletian's Palace (IV Century AC) and general plan of the historic center (1966)*



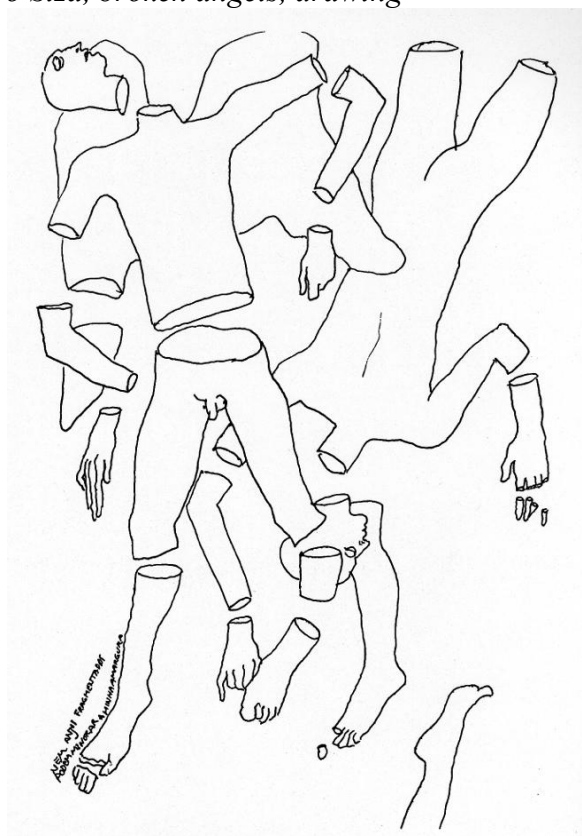
**Figure 21.** *Álvaro Siza, Housing in Fraenkelufer, Berlin (1979); general plan; buildings (B) and (F), plans and elevations*



**Figure 22.** *Hubert Robert, the Temple of Modern Philosophy, Ermenonville (ca. 1775)*



**Figure 23.** *Álvaro Siza, broken angels, drawing*



This work is funded by FEDER Funds through the *Operational Program for Competitiveness Factors - COMPETE* and National Funds through *FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology* within the project «PEst-C/EAT/UI0145/2011».

