

»»BOOK

ÁLVARO SIZA

Philip Jodidio
Taschen, £99
Review by Herbert Wright

Siza's half-century of work quietly commands solid volumes with light, to uplifting effect. On the other hand, this volume, with 497 pages weighing in at a hefty 5.6kg, is so heavy, it comes in a cardboard case with a handle so you can carry it around like a suitcase.

The size gives a big platform for the generous photography of 36 buildings, along with sketches, to stunning effect. That's not a given – as the book acknowledges, designs

by the master of Portuguese architecture and 1992 Pritzker winner often have atmospherics that only being there reveals.

A monograph should be more than just a glossy catalogue of images and sketches. It should also paint a portrait of the architect. In this case, Philip Jodidio does so with a brisk introductory essay based on interviews with Siza in 1998 and 2011. This succeeds in revealing much of the character of the man, who speaks unpretentiously and frankly. He reveals things, such as 'I am not able to work with computers', and 'if I could go back in life, I would like to be an agronomist'.

Passing swiftly through his education, the essay touches on the special conditions that made Porto's

School of Fine Arts a unique place to nurture a talent as exceptional as Siza's. These were the lack of separation between teaching painting, sculpture and architecture, and the exceptional presence there of Portugal's original master of marrying modernism with the local, Fernando Távora. Ironically, when the college separated the subjects after Portugal's Carnation Revolution in 1974 ushered democracy in, it was Siza who designed the Faculty of Architecture.

The first projects to demonstrate Siza's extraordinary talents were within a greater plan by Távora for the seaside town of Leça da Palmeira: the Casa de Chá (Teahouse) (1963), and a swimming pool (1966) built into the seaside rocks. The latter work must surely have informed the

greatest work of Siza's disciple and fellow Pritzker winner Souto da Moura, namely the Braga Stadium.

Siza's involvement with SAAL, the housing action programme scrambled up by activist architects in the heady days of the revolution, is almost a footnote in the text about his striking terraced Bouça II social housing project in Porto, composed in a palette of red and white. A vast amount of Siza's works is white and in and around Porto, but his works also stretch as far as Korea, and include the dreaminess of the Camargo Foundation Museum, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2008).

And he is more than master of merely the magnificent white concrete volumes that directly inspire Portuguese contemporaries such as

Aires Mateus. Indeed, Siza himself says here 'I have no predilection for white', explaining it can be a response to climate, or sometimes budget. The book illustrates mastery of other exterior materials, for example: brick (Aveiro University Library, 1995), granite (Galician Contemporary Art Centre, 1993), wood (house in Oudenburg, Belgium, 2001) and blue tiles (Bragança apartments, Lisbon, 2004). Disappointing is the glass Novartis laboratory (Basel, 2011), where he worked within supertight constraints on the envelope and produced a cold crystal block which internally is curiously high-tech in style as well as function.

It's a rare Siza work that fails to impress. When Blueprint visited the building in Porto where Siza

has worked since 1998, to meet Eduardo Souto de Moura on the floor below him (Blueprint July 2013), we described it as 'a nondescript post-war block'. It seems like a Siza potboiler, although the rusty pump placed as sculpture above the entrance steps is a magical touch. That sort of detail is sometimes missing from the book, especially internal details like fixtures.

Although Siza has often collaborated with Souto da Moura (the latter did the interiors of the monumental masterpiece of the Portugal Pavilion, Lisbon 1998, for example), Jodidio notes that 'he likes to control everything in his buildings down to the ashtrays'.

The book claims to be the 'Complete Works 1952-2013', rounding up everything in a chronological

picture summary at the end, but where are Siza's bungalows at Bom Sucesso Golf Resort, Obidas (Blueprint June 2009)? It's a quibble, but staggering is the relegation of Siza's New Orleans Building, Rotterdam (2010) to the back-page round-up. This project, with a 158m-high tower comparable in quality to Raymond Hood's Manhattan work when he was

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moving from art deco to modernism, demonstrates that Siza can stand cool and tall in a typography where starchitects jostle to dazzle.

The Taschen monograph was produced in collaboration with Siza. Is it, then, a final act of a great man, seeking a sort of professional closure after a lifetime's astonishing work, like Charles Correa assigning his archives to RIBA (page 46)? The book runs up to the Alhambra Visitor Centre, Granada (under construction), but actually the 80-year-old isn't finished yet. Just last year he executed a pavilion for the Venice Biennale, and announced a new project in the Azores. This book praises Siza, but cannot bury him. It succeeds as a stunning visual journey through his brilliance.

Below: Álvaro Siza
Opposite, clockwise from top left: The book cover showing Mimesis Museum, Paju Book City, South Korea; Iberê Camargo Foundation Museum in Porto Alegre, Brazil; Santa Maria Church and Parish Center in Marco de Canaveses, Portugal; Superior School of Education in Setúbal, Portugal; Meteorological Centre of the Olympic Village, Barcelona; swimming pool in Leça da Palmeira, Portugal



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