

Landscapes of Culture: The Body in the Land

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What is the connection between a culture (the interaction between people and place) and how that culture shelters the body in its landscapes?

Two architects whose work is of their culture are Carlo Scarpa and Alvaro Siza; both architects look for the specific of the place and not the universal. Carlo Scarpa is a Venetian being. He was born and worked in the Veneto region and was influenced by the local material and extended craft traditions of the area. His work also expresses the horizontal datum line of the sea, a specific and local tension. Alvaro Siza is Portuguese and has spent much of his life working in the Matosinhos area. His understanding of that place is deepened by each project sited there. Siza believes that the architect recreates his city and that "the unifying elements of a city consists in a fabric of continuous and apparently banal constructions, composed of repetition and contrast".¹ Both architects understand their work not as singular monuments but as engaged in continual place making. Both architects were born in the area in which they primarily practice(d). The years of study and years of practice bring with it a deep understanding of a place, its culture, and its land. This is even furthered by the contemplative working method of each architect that provides the time to understand the landscape in which they work. For Scarpa the questioning began as he maintained a distance from architectural circles. This allowed him to distinguish his views from the counterpoints of others. Siza's questioning began with a teacher, Fernando Tavora, who said what counts is the relationship between building and life, an idea which both architects explored. Scarpa and Siza explored building by drawing and resolved architecture in the detail, which evidences a belief in the importance of craft and tectonic experimentation. This design and building process reveals their agreement with Frank

Lloyd Wright's notion of organic unity;² Scarpa and Siza each related to work of Wright.

Carlo Scarpa began his career in 1930, detached from architecture circles, and followed his personal inclinations in his work and in his teaching. He felt that "the architect's profession is for the mature" and that an architect needs humility and an understanding of life. This removal from architectural theoretical inquiries led him instead to the world of the writer, the artist, the craftsman, the master builder and the glass blower. This self-reliance on a personal understanding might have led to his careful and contemplative working method.

Scarpa designed a landscape of interconnection for a family memorial, a place that deals with "the ephemerality of life".³ The Brion Tomb, in San Vito d'altivole, Treviso, Italy, provides a series of subtle transitions from the zone of life, as understood in the contemplation chapel in the lily pond, to the zone of death, symbolized by the tombs of Onorina and Giuseppe Brion. The memorial is an L shaped garden that wraps two sides of the existing village cemetery.

The garden, designed for and commissioned by the Brion family, contains both public and private functions. An Italian cemetery is truly a place of community. An Italian widow will visit the grave of her husband several times a week, maintaining the gravesite and maintaining contact with the past members of her family. The cemetery is not a place of mourning; it provides for social engagement while supporting the act of remembrance, the connection to the traditions and understandings of the culture.

Scarpa's garden illustrates the narrative of the funerary ritual. There exists a dual narrative that corresponds to the two main circulation paths and defined rituals. One

path leads from the public entry from the village cemetery, through the propylaeum, to the prato or public lawn, and then to areas for private visitation with relatives. Inside the propylaeum the visitor is facing east and oriented to the cardinal directions. To the left are the tombs, the body, and the public lawn reached by a set of generous stairs. To the right, a series of narrow and steep steps allows access to the zone of the spirit and the private space of the meditation pavilion, which is the last portion of the second path. This second narrative is the narrative of the funerary ritual itself, which starts at the funerary gate, leads to the public mortuary chapel, to the tombs and ends at meditation chapel. Both narrative paths follow the sequence of separation, transition, and incorporation of the body,⁴ acts which define rituals. In each case the transitional space is the circulation space, the space of the body in motion. The narrative structure, based on the funerary ritual, is tied to the body and completes the architecture. The primacy of the body is revealed.

The arcosolium, an arched form that protects the sarcophagi of Onorina and Giuseppe Brion, sits at the corner of the plot. The circle in which the tombs are placed is cut into the earth, creating a tension in the ground plane and increasing the protection offered to the tombs. South of the tombs an elevated garden and lawn leads to the pool and the meditation pavilion. To the west, on a lower ground plane, are the family tombs and the mortuary chapel. Organized movement through the project helps the visitor understand the composition. This "syncopated movement"⁵ links the simple building forms into a complex landscape that is felt by the body.. This movement sequence is carefully articulated but is not a closed system. Space and circulation weave freely through out the composition allowing the visitor to chose and switch their individual paths.

The garden is also an allegorical and metaphorical experience as described through its use of material, space and water. Material is used as both symbol and space. Concrete is at times solid and dense or can be thin and light, as in a canopy. It can be read as either positive or negative space in the zigzag forms. Water also provides symbols and linkages throughout the composition. The transformation of matter as the water leads from the meditation chapel, in a series of chambers from wet to dry, to the tomb is seen as an allegory of the dematerialization of the bodies in the tombs.⁶ There is a balance of matter and space; nothing is treated as separate. The project describes the sensual reunion in death.⁷

Although much has already been written regarding the human figures in the drawings of Carlo Scarpa, most extensively by Frascari and Anderson, it is hard to ignore the drawings of the pavilion filled with bodies. This private and contemplative space, a space of the spirit, is still inhabited and defined by the body. An understanding of the body is apparent. In order to view the garden you must sit, or, if standing, align your self, as indicated by the drawn figures, with a slit in the fascia. The inclusion of the figures in Scarpa's drawings illustrates how the body motivates design decisions. "The figures in the drawings of Carlo Scarpa...show that the elements of architecture can respond actively to human gestures, that spaces shape themselves to affect sensations in particular ways, and that the human body is a direct agent of architectural composition".⁸ Not only are figures in drawings helpful in understanding scale and how a building might feel, but they also help the designer develop how a body moves through the space. Frampton agrees with the importance of "the imaginative, dynamic and involuntary projection of self into the architectural object, without which architectural experience would be purely intellectual or associative".⁹ Frascari has said that the body's habits regulate Scarpa's planning. This is evidenced by drawings of the pavilion and by the design that is clearly shaped by the body standing, seeing, and sitting. From this privileged place on the platform of the pavilion, connections are made beyond the walls of the cemetery to the landscape beyond.

This narrative and phenomenological landscape of the garden was developed, as all of his projects were, by investigative drawings. 'Drawing is the tool with which Scarpa hones and refines his work. In each drawing one senses a disclosure taking place, revealing the drawing as a construction in itself'.¹⁰ Various drawing views and scales are equally capable of imparting information and conveying expression, content, and feeling. His drawings emulate the act of construction and propose architectural realities. Scarpa's knowledge of the performance of materials, methods of craftsmanship, and his great respect for the craftsman are revealed in the depths of the drawings. He thought of drawing as an act of revealing.

There is a direct relationship between Scarpa's working methods and the projects he designed. Space and meaning overlap in his projects as well as in his drawings. There is a transformation of scale from plan, sections, and elevations to details in his drawings and in the built works. Drawing is a method of study. Scarpa drew to understand how to build; therefore his drawings are concerned with materials, construction, assembly and texture. His drawings also communicate the

experiential and lead to an architecture that is directly concerned with the body.

Alvaro Siza designed a landscape of transition at Lece de Palmeira Swimming Pool in Matosinhos, Portugal, just outside of Oporto. Here the transition is one from the line of the road to the line of the wave. Throughout the pool house project, like the Brion tomb, the visitor passes through a series of thresholds. The body and its shifting relationships to the landscape are carefully acknowledged. The experience of the body is heightened by the carefully articulated circulation sequences, the play of light and dark, and the shifts between spaces of compression and spaces of expansion. The circulation sequence leads from the road, below to the support facilities, and emerges, past a café and sunning platform, to the beach and two swimming pools. Circulation routes support the programmatic functions and lead to a rectangular adult swimming pool and a semicircular pool for children. The ramps, walkway walls, and the pools are made from walls of rough concrete which provide a line to be read against the jagged rock of the coastline. The pool house divides the swimmers from the road without disrupting the view of the beach and shoreline from the city.

Multiple thresholds occur in both plan and section between the five elements outlined by Frampton: linear coastal highway, changing facilities, rock outcrop, inlaid swimming pools, and the sea.¹¹ In this project Siza allows the land to be not just the site but the space. The idea of making is inherent as we understand how the earth is cut and how walls or tectonic elements are carefully inserted. The transitions mark the shift from land to sea, from a constructed to a natural landscape, and from the road to the beach.¹² These multiple layers of space move the body from road to the beach, balancing between the scales of body, building, and the landscape. This architectural promenade is one of changing perceptions, views, and experiences guiding us to the sea. Bodily sensations are heightened along this journey.

The body is used as a measure, as one is led from the scale of the road and the city, through the intimate space of circulation and changing rooms, and out to the expansive sea. The sensual qualities of the body are protected until the connection to the sea is complete. The rituals of bathing and the Portuguese culture's direct relationship to the body are revealed. This is a place to celebrate life.

The landscape and the body are ever present. Materials are used to indicate the shift from public circulation spine to areas of privacy. The use of the wood frame

partitions in the changing facilities provides a comfort and tactility to the body, in direct contrast with the concrete walls. The low light level in the changing area contributes to the understanding of it as a place of quiet privacy where street clothes are shed and the body is revealed.

The thick concrete walls direct and focus the movement of the body and provide a connection between the space of the building and the landscape. The zigzag of the circulation gives the sequence an increased depth. The diagonal line knits the project into the site. "Siza's buildings seek to define the environments that they occupy and do not actually seek to heighten their natural tendencies so much as to render all the more apparent the conflicts generated by the act of design".¹³ Siza has understood the landscape to be the dwelling place of man and imagines man as the creator of the landscape.¹⁴ Man's presence in the land can be understood by Siza's proclamation to either "harmonize with the context of oppose it".¹⁵

Siza was born in Matosinhos in 1933, studied at the School of Architecture at the University of Porto from 1949-1955. His first built project was in 1954 and he worked with Fernando Tavora until 1958. Siza learned a working method from Tavora, his teacher and mentor. Tavora instructed architects to start by studying the Portuguese environment and to look at the local environment for the spirit of the culture. Each project of Siza's in the Matosinhos area provides a greater understanding of the place, which reverberates in his future projects. This understanding of culture and of self is apparent in his architecture; an architecture that is rooted in its land. It is an architecture that unites a modern international language in a local context and deals with abstraction and the everyday equally.

Siza, like Scarpa, uses drawing to understand his work, to verify tactily the uniqueness of the thing coming into contact with the construction; thus the body and the drawing are linked. The Siza's sketches are made at odd angles and with shifting views. His sketches include and document the movement of the body through space. Siza will draw without lifting his pen from the paper resulting in explorations that "store his restlessness".¹⁶ Siza started teaching in 1966 at School of Architecture and continues to combine teaching and practice (as Scarpa did). He instructs us to have "renewed attention to direct sources in nature: landscapes, passing clouds, clearings, bodies, movement, stability".¹⁷

Siza also instructs us regarding our practices and our relationships with our clients; a reflective practice is a practice that challenges the client's prejudices.¹⁸ Scarpa

echoed this sureness in thought. Carlo Scarpa had a unique relationship with his clients manifested by projects whose design and budgets were not presented or approved before construction and the revealing of the work began. Scarpa's clients joined him in this commitment to the inquiry without knowledge of an outcome. Certainly both architects engage(d) in a practice of reflection as they address(ed) the problem of what it might mean to create a shelter for the body. As Frampton suggests "the body reconstructs the world through its tactile appropriation of reality".¹⁹ How might we appropriate our reality and reconstruct our world in order to create an architecture of incremental moves, which stitches together fragments of our place and realizes a deeper connection to the land?

In the Brion Tomb, the tactile world is appropriated and represented to the visitor. The visitor is encouraged to feel the smoothness of the water and the walls, and to watch as the stillness of the water is gently disturbed by the glass door sliding into the water allowing entry to the meditation pavilion. This sheet of water mimics the spirit made new fresh, and alive. Life is light and ever present in the water garden and gradually gives way to weight, death, and the heat of the lawn as it moves towards the arcosolium. Here the roughness of the concrete and the descension into the ground are softened by the shade of the arched form. This calm protection is repeated in the dark blue interior of the family tomb.

Siza's Pool House offers a respite to the visitor from the hot steam of the city and the pavement. The coolness of the inner chamber of the changing room offers protection that is both visual and thermal. The wood elements offer a softness that encourages the visitor to relax and breathe cool energy before embracing the sea. The gradual extension of the long walls back to the landscape, and the sound and breeze from the surf, encourages the visitor to leave the road and city far behind.

These two projects might ask us to reconsider the primacy of the shape of space and dominance of visual qualities in our own culture. The material and tactile qualities offered to the body, as well as the acoustic and thermal characteristics of spaces, can provide encouragement and comfort to the body beyond mere proportion and scale. An architecture of tactility, that responds to the sense of touch and feel in the body, might be better tuned to the larger culture and the landscape beyond the body.

NOTES

- ¹ Dubois, Marc. *Alvaro Siza: Inside the City*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1998.
- ² Dodds, George. *Desiring Landscapes/Landscapes of Desire: Scopic and Somatic in the Brion Sanctuary. Body and Building: Essays on the Changing Relationship of Body and Architecture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.
- ³ *Carlo Scarpa: Drawings for the Brion Family Cemetery*. New Haven: Yale School of Architecture, 1984.
- ⁴ Stern, Michael A. "Messages in the Garden: An Iconology of The Brion Tomb". *Landscape Journal*. Vol. 13, no. 1, Spring 1994: 39-57.
- ⁵ Dodds, George. *Desiring Landscapes/Landscapes of Desire: Scopic and Somatic in the Brion Sanctuary. Body and Building: Essays on the Changing Relationship of Body and Architecture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.
- ⁶ Berrizbeitia, Anita and Linda Pollak, *Inside Outside: Between Architecture and Landscape*. Gloucester, Massachusetts: Rockport Publishers, 1999.
- ⁷ Frampton, Kenneth. *Studies in Tectonic Culture*. Cambridge: Graham Foundation, MIT Press, 1995.
- ⁸ Anderson, Alex T. "On the Human Figure in Architectural Representation". *Journal of Architectural Education*. 55/4, May 2002: 238-246.
- ⁹ Frampton, Kenneth. *Studies in Tectonic Culture*. Cambridge: Graham Foundation, MIT Press, 1995.
- ¹⁰ *Carlo Scarpa: Drawings for the Brion Family Cemetery*. New Haven: Yale School of Architecture, 1984.
- ¹¹ Frampton, Kenneth. *Alvaro Siza: Complete Works*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.
- ¹² Berrizbeitia, Anita and Linda Pollak, *Inside Outside: Between Architecture and Landscape*. Gloucester, Massachusetts: Rockport Publishers, 1999.
- ¹³ Frampton, Kenneth. *Alvaro Siza: Complete Works*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.
- ¹⁴ Frampton, Kenneth. *Alvaro Siza: Complete Works*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.
- ¹⁵ Siza, Alvaro. "Porto", *Architecture and Body*. New York: Rizzoli, 1988.
- ¹⁶ Siza, Alvaro. "Porto", *Architecture and Body*. New York: Rizzoli, 1988.
- ¹⁷ Frampton, Kenneth. *Alvaro Siza: Complete Works*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.
- ¹⁸ Siza, Alvaro. "Porto", *Architecture and Body*. New York: Rizzoli, 1988.
- ¹⁹ Frampton, Kenneth. *Alvaro Siza: Complete Works*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.

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