



A major name in the world of architecture, Álvaro Siza Vieira is the designer of the Setúbal School of Education (ESE/IPS), a project that occupies a top place in his extensive range of work, as he has publicly confessed.

It was his first school building, a challenging project that emerged from a direct conversation with an "enthusiastic" installation committee, which was recognised in 1993, the year of its inauguration, with the National Prize for Architecture.

He is the architect of many national and international projects, such as Casa de Chá da Boa Nova, in Leça da Palmeira, the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art and the Marco de Canaveses Church, and he was the first Portuguese to win a Pritzker Prize (1992) for his work as a whole.

His name is therefore inseparable from the history of the Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal, which awarded him the title of Professor Honoris Causa in 2022.

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In other directions, the light is channelled inwards by reflecting off the walls. Such is the case with the library's large window facing a wall.

In the amphitheatre, a large window/door on the side illuminates the conference table, avoiding the use of spotlights. And a very special skylight defines a cube so that, once again, the light is reflected before entering the room.

In the sports hall, the light seeps through the ceiling made of recesses and protrusions.

And the atrium is blessed once again, this time, by natural light. In addition to the previously mentioned glass wall to the SW, the unusual egg-shaped skylight directs the light towards the oculus, while it slowly projects elliptical geometric figures onto the floor and then onto the wall. Time is present here, through the movement of a piece of light. At night the effect is reversed: this egg is a black spot in the middle of an artificially-lit white surface.



In the Guard's House, the door that practically cuts through the wall faces SE.

The corridor to the NW is less illuminated than the corridor to the SE, which is illuminated by a series of rhythmically-distributed rectangular windows in ascending order (or descending, depending on the point of view).

From a long transparent wall, you can see the bar on the left and the resource centre on the right: an opposite "behaviour" to the light. The first is open to the exterior, light and bright, while the latter is closed in on itself, heavy and opaque.⁽⁶⁾

During the night, artificial light dominates the architectural space; the building becomes different, and its beauty can be seen from the outside. Whereas things are flat during the day, at night, they take on volumetric shapes.

The fundamental idea to retain is that the school, far from being a combination of styles, is rather a **creative work** that emerges from them; therefore, it is the result of a **reflection** on the history of Architecture, especially Portuguese architecture.

The building embodies the complexity of simplicity, an expression often used by the architect: "(...) I appreciate and seek clarity in architecture, just as much as I don't appreciate simplism. Simplicity and simplism are known to be opposites, just as unity and diversity are not."⁽⁷⁾

This architectural work of art, which allows for a poetic analysis, makes this only an introductory presentation in the universe of possible interpretations that each visitor may have of this building.



REFERENCES

⁽¹⁾ An interesting fact that confirms this is that, when the construction site was being set up, the contractor had to use more than one crane due to Álvaro Siza's specific request to not cut down trees.

⁽²⁾ The Guard's House is a small building designed to temporarily house visiting teachers.

⁽³⁾ Architecture PRIZE in the hands of Siza Vieira: with the School of Education. "Correio da Manhã" (5th December 1993), p.29

⁽⁴⁾ VIEIRA, Álvaro Siza - Comment Parvenir à la Sérénité in L'Architecture D'Aujourd'Hui. Paris. N 278 (December 1991), p. 60

⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾ VIEIRA, Álvaro Siza - idem, p. 62

⁽⁷⁾ On this aspect - "Inquirição a um Projecto: ESES" by Madalena Cunha Matos.



NATURAL SURROUNDINGS

"Nothing is 'natural' or 'obvious' in Álvaro Siza's architecture. The torture to which concrete has had to be subjected in order to adapt to a practical purpose is emphasised in every detail. This goes to show that 'fulfilling a function' is not a simple matter, but the product of a complex choice."

TEXT WRITTEN BY ANA NOGUEIRA

The Setúbal School of Education was built on the land's natural relief, respecting nature right from the start, without harming its environment⁽¹⁾. The building's U-shaped structure forms two opposed outdoor courtyards. The natural space is thus enveloped, becoming part of the architecture. The largest courtyard, to the NE, surrounds a large and ancient cork oak tree, making it the centrepiece. That nature - symbolised by the cork oak - **is honoured and revered**.

In this courtyard, the rational and rhythmic arrangement of the cloisters and their parallel columns coexist with the spontaneous shape of the cork tree - an organic, naturally twisted and elaborate presence.

The presentation of the almond-tree courtyard to the SW (the smallest one) is the opposite of the previous one, in that it is completely man-made: it features a geometric arrangement of almond trees and an artificial limestone surrounding.



AREAS, CIRCULATION AND PATHWAYS

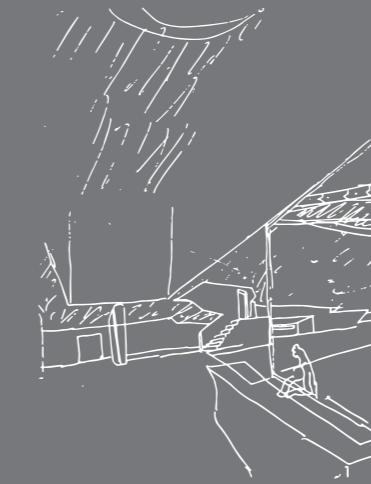
The naming of the areas, as well as their function, was conditioned by the programme that was established by the Ministry of Education. Siza designed a unique project based on these official premises, which were applied to all the Schools of Education.

According to the project, the building consists of nineteen theoretical and practical classrooms, three small workshops, a music room, an IT room, a laboratory, a sports hall, a drama classroom, an amphitheatre, an educational resource centre, offices for teachers, administration, management and student associations, as well as archives, toilets, a cafeteria, a storage room and the Guard's House.⁽²⁾

The smallest areas are distributed along the U structure, attaching the larger ones to it, such as the drama classroom, the sports hall and the amphitheatre to the NW, the cafeteria to the S, and the resource centre to the W. Freeing them from the "rigid" U-shaped structure enabled the manipulation of these sections in terms of volume.



"What surprised me was the distance between the architectural forms and that which is always the banality of fulfilling a function."⁽³⁾



There are two paradigmatic aspects in the school's architecture: the great level of communication and the variety of social areas.

The connection between the areas, their easy access, and the possibility of viewing the building inside and out, from various points of view, makes it live up to the concept of communicability - an extreme permeability of this architectural construction.

The social areas thrive in this variety of places: all the way from the two courtyards, the cafeteria, and the atrium - where people converge, cross paths, exchange conversations, and communicate through the oculus - to the smaller areas on the upper floor, the balconies, the patio... The building offers many places for large and small groups, but does not impose them. As Siza reflected on the social dynamics of an organization such as a school, he designed it for the diversity of social relationships, which often take place outside the classroom: *"Much of what we learn at school has nothing to do with lessons, it has to do with socialising, (...) a building must not hinder, but rather favour these complicated relationships."*⁽⁴⁾

LIGHT

To analyse the school's light, we must first look at its colour. Siza confesses to having some difficulty manipulating colours⁽⁵⁾ and he had this problem while selecting the materials to use.

On a two-dimensional level, this architectural complex could be seen as a painting, with the stone and painted concrete giving the building its white colour. The natural surroundings cover the rest of this "pictorial painting" in green. And the crimson red of the entrance tunnel livens up the painting.



On another note, and regarding the behaviour of natural light in the building's architectural space, Álvaro Siza says: *"I'm unable to separate light from other materials in architecture."*⁽⁶⁾ Much like concrete, stone and wood, natural light is also a material used in architecture.

An invariable feature of this building is the fact that sunlight indirectly illuminates its interior. In addition to the aesthetic significance of this kind of light behaviour in the architectural space, there is also a technical reason: the fact that Portugal has a strong and aggressive sunlight, especially in the South.

Starting with the school's position, it is facing NE-SW in order to avoid direct sunlight. This is why the most exposed areas are arranged in this direction. The windows and doors of the classrooms are located along the larger courtyard to the NE, and the glass walls of the atrium and cafeteria to the SW.