Research for a Language – Álvaro Siza in Berlin

Filipe Lacerda Neto 1

1 University of Beira Interior, Calçada Fonte do Lameiro, Edifício II Engenharia, 6200-001 Covilhã, Portugal
fjln@ubi.pt

Abstract. One city, one international exhibition of architecture, one neighbourhood and one project all closely connected. The City is Berlin, the “Internationale Bauausstellung” means international architecture exhibition (IBA); Álvaro Siza Vieira is the project architect located in the Kreuzberg neighbourhood. Berlin is a city built in parts, but also thought by parts. With the IBA still in the years of the Wall, Berlin has been a place of experimentation on the idea of European city. It was in this context that Álvaro Siza was called on several occasions; the first ones out from his Portuguese experience. Siza built in Berlin-Kreuzberg a building usually considered a tribute to the Modern Movement. In spite of his organic influences, there is in building a look for another strand of the city history of architecture: to the reflections of rationalist language. For Siza, Berlin has become an occasion to deepen a research on the relations applied to the rationalist language. The present paper tries to find the way to look the radicality and vitality of the building “Bonjour Tristesse” that has taken the challenge of collecting the remains of rationalism in order to create a new formulation of the rational strand – new rationality.

1. Introduction - style Section

The greatest transformation into the city of Berlin and the redefinition of its image, acted almost exclusively with the construction or rehabilitation of public housing. In the most troubled part of Berlin, Kreuzberg, the "Internationale Bauausstellung" took advantage of the disorder to rethink the urban planning and the building politics. The intervention of Álvaro Siza Vieira, very widespread in the press, was made to complete a block that was intended to rehabilitate the existing buildings. The building reproduces and symbolizes the extremes in the controversy of the architectural forms, which is an issue debated today. Sobriety against exuberance, subtlety against prodigality, reason against feeling, self-discipline against freedom, history against nostalgia, humour against irony, resignation versus liberation. The battle waged now in Berlin is represented more than in any other intervention, which has taken the adventure of collecting the remains of rationalism after or during the postmodern storm, which Siza Vieira has lived as a protagonist.

The object of study in this paper is the tribute to the building Bonjour Tristesse by Álvaro Siza to the rationalist tendency - new rationality - an interpretation whose supposed condition and relation, which will be confirmed or denied in the course of the investigation. We have tried to extract strategies and analysis found in historical facts already concluded – we reinterpret them and attempted to formulate a new reflection about the rationalist language in this building.

Kreuzberg and the Bonjour Tristesse building are presented as a new formulation of the planning and investment politic. From an urbanistic point of view, the Berlin experience of Siza seems decisive, the
subtlety of the method used was demonstrated in this project which has critical potential and is still valid - this historical and critical role justifies our choice.

2. Block 121 – Schlesisches Tor

The building in the corner, located between the Schlesisches Straße and Falckensteinstraße streets ‘figure 1’, represents the first work built by Álvaro Siza Vieira outside of Portugal. It was a contest to honor the Internationale Bauausstellung where Siza worked in the Altbau-IBA sector, especially oriented into the recovery of Kreuzberg.

![Figure 1. Place where the Bonjour Tristesse was built, [1]](image)

The rehabilitation of the city advised by IBA consisted in one action block-by-block: we were at the beginning of a new tradition, where it was no longer necessary to destroy what our previous generations had done. The tasks to be performed consisted in recovering parts of the existing buildings. Siza won the contest to recompose and complete two blocks - three buildings were built in Schlesisches Tor: a new kindergarten, a center for the elderly, and the housing building that we will (re)interpret.

Next to the Wall - today in Berlin center - the project tries through a series of sutures to collaborate in the recovery of Kreuzberg that was degraded and inhabited until then, mainly by Turkish emigrants, who had some customs that generated intense transformations in the existing urban fabric. There were incidents with neo-fascist and xenophobic groups, because the program advocated the dialogue with immigrants, figure 2. Just shortly after it was finished, a graffiti that said “Bonjour Tristesse” appeared at the top of the curve of the façade, just below the eye-shaped opening in the top, figure 3. There were a lots of graffiti at that time in Berlin, a lot of urban agitation, at first Siza didn't like the graffiti, but now everyone refers and know that building as Bonjour Tristesse. These graffiti became a symbol, "is one of those things that are born by accident, but the time ends up incorporating them into the memory of places" [2].
3. The legacy of Rationalism

Speaking about rationalism or any other architectural concept is rather misleading. First of all, it is necessary to clarify the term, which has very broad meanings in many cases, while in other cases more specific ones. The basis for raising a discussion about Rationalism in architecture is to understand it as a way of developing knowledge, through attitudes or approaches that demonstrate a trust in reason as a key to solve architectural problems, as well as the adoption of methods and techniques of reduction that assume and supplant the real complexity of architecture, which in these cases is simplified to those partial problems.

In modern architecture, a series of attitudes and approaches that have emerged over the last centuries have been classified as rationalist – from classicism to the rationalisms of the Modern Movement. The strategy that Álvaro Siza adopted in his building *Bonjour Tristesse* can be defined as an approach that is based on and claims rationalist ideas. Siza presents a rationalist discourse that is seen as an attempt of a rationalisation on conventional grounds. The proposal of intervention is based on a logical system of statements and moral axioms – an idea of order – as a synthetic result. The way towards these goals had been relentlessly explored by men such as Adolf Loos, Tony Garnier, Theo van Doesburg, and also Josef Hoffman. They led the way to the foundations on which Walter Gropius based his work.

As stated by Grassi, in architectural rationalism we can consider two types of approaches, according to the *utility* of the theoretical *terms* of reduction that are applied, and the rational *coherence* of the method adopted [5]. Siza rejects the rationalism itself, in the sense that he is not interested in addressing the knowledge of architecture using the methods and techniques of the rational logical-deductive research. This first approach focuses on the terms of reduction concerning the *shape* of architecture and tries to establish a classification or a coherent interpretative structure that provides the awareness, understanding and generalisation of the architectural problem, from the particular formal point of view adopted. Siza chooses the second approach, when he adopts the rationalism as an *attitude* – Siza sees it as a *strategy* – and he assumes that this rationalism is not a way of developing knowledge, analysis and logical-deductive projection, or if it is, it is just in a very partial manner. On the contrary, it corresponds more to a *moral* or *sentimental* [6] choice. Just like the approaches of rationalism, Siza’s attitude reveals a belief in reason as the best, or even the only way to address the awareness and creation of architecture. However, this does not mean that Siza tries to create a truly rational method of analysis and projection. His *strategy* consists of a personal choice or attitude that does not fully respect the principles of rational thinking.

Siza intends to use reason as a starting point, especially to promote the historical continuity of architecture and the permanent and immutable relationship the project holds with the historical experience of Berlin. The Portuguese architect sees the architecture of the past, that is to say, the tradition
of his own work, not only as an evidence of the idea of city, but also as a particular support that can encourage and foster the project ‘figure 4’. Rosaldo Bonicalzi said: “Our society is based on the recognition of the insuperable greatness of the Classical Antiquity. As humanity became aware of the greatness of the Classical Antiquity, a single idea has gathered great architects… The present is built on the past, and the past was built on the time that preceded it” [7]. For Siza, we cannot build anything if we do not take other things as a starting point, that is to say, the imagination of the person who builds works with things that were already observed. However, he believes that the tradition does not have to be necessarily the repetition and the specifically cognitive character of the project. Siza takes from tradition certain and general guidelines that serve as a guide for the process of the architectural creation.

Contrary to what formal rationalism generally defended, Siza does not simply minimise the architecture to its formal aspects. He does not consider the shape as the key and exclusive element of the complexity of architecture, nor does he try to turn the principles and characteristics of rational thinking into formal principles or aspects. Despite the wavy shape of the building Bonjour Tristesse, the project presents a direct formal clarity in relation to the city and Kreuzberg neighbourhood: formal simplicity versus exuberance, formal order versus dispersion, pure shapes and volumes versus complex or unclear shapes. Through curved lines, Siza demonstrates that straight and orthogonal lines – considered simple and clear – are unreasonably supposed to be the most evident expression of the principles of rational thinking. The direct transfer of the qualities of rational thinking to architectural shapes has been a constant in modern architecture. For that reason, Siza goes so far as to question whether those simple and elemental shapes, considered the clearest reflection of rational thinking in architecture until now, are eventually highly irrational, gratuitous or unfounded. In short, Block 121 shows us how formal rationalism has led us, insistently, to mistake simplicity for formal simplicism,
clarity for monotony, rotundity for heaviness.

Siza rejects formal complexity, dispersion, exuberance and the ornament – characteristics of irrational shapes. He limits and simplifies the formal complexity of the building to a continuous line that unifies both façades ‘figure 5’. Therefore, this wit to design is an adequate strategy of reduction and it is in accordance with the rational awareness of architecture: it denies what is useless, superfluous and expensive.

![Figure 5. Drawings of formal studies, Bonjour Tristesse, Álvaro Siza Vieira, 1983 [9]](image)

Le Corbusier expressed very clearly the theoretical demands of rationalist thinking in relation to decoration and superfluous aspects. He demanded a redefinition of architecture seen as a language that is constantly renovating itself, as well as the conviction of eventually being able to define a new decoration. There is a long distance between Le Corbusier’s point of view and the way Siza sees the city and the building in Schlesisches Tor. Undoubtedly influenced by Adolf Loos and Tessenow, Álvaro Siza does not believe in a new ornament. He looks for confirmation in the past, in the history of elements and shapes. As previously mentioned, he is interested in the tradition.

With this discourse and strategies, Siza presents a building that exceeds what is homogeneous, through the invariability of logical themes. The theoretical methodology is literally complemented by the norms, starting from the city that already existed. It should not be forgotten that all rationalism implies a reduction of the complex reality to simple aspects. Therefore, although architecture may be understood and executed rationally, this does not exhaust the complexity of the building.
This residential building, built on a corner and designed by Álvaro Siza Vieira, suggests a strict rational approach – a starting point to create a new rationalism. However, this did not mean there was a reduction. Siza outweighs the narrow margin of rational knowledge, and simultaneously, he finds and exceeds the limits of the rational way of thinking. If we consider that the building *Bonjour Tristesse* can be the object of a rational analysis, of a rational formulation of rules, guidelines and their rational use in practice, we are admitting the rational character of the architectural knowledge and the practice of the project. This methodology is the essence of the rational thinking, it is the basis of Siza and modern culture’s intentions.

In short, the building *Bonjour Tristesse*, which was designed in the context of the *International Bauausstellung Berlin*, tries to create the bases for the development of a new rational theory of architecture; an attempt in which the three aspects that are associated with rational thinking – analysis, formulation of rules and rational practice – are presented as the source of the strategies Siza adopted.

4. New Rationalism

We still need an authentic rationalism, Álvaro Siza would have thought when he designed *Block 121* in Schlesische Tor. The result of this new rationalism was to put an end to the old burden of the rational thinking, which implied the “reduction” of the real complexity of the architecture to some of its constructive, structural and functional aspects.

Daniele Vitale stated: “Creating a new architecture does not only mean to make original discoveries acting individually; it also means, especially, to disseminate the realities already discovered in a critical way, and therefore, which were turned into a base of vital actions, an element of coordination and of moral and intellectual order”, [10]. Architecture has always presented itself with a specific disciplinary corpus – in precise, practical and theoretical terms –, composed of compositional, typological, distributive and urban problems. Siza knows that the corpus of architecture is composed of these elements, along with all the works that were imagined, designed and built and that we know. Therefore, according to the rationalist attitude regarding architecture and construction, Siza knew that, in order to reach a new rationalism, the foundations of rationalism would still be the valid method for research, understanding and intervention in the field of architecture.

In the eighties, Berlin needed a conceptual clarity and a progressive character. This led Siza to rediscover, almost instinctively, the rational subtlety of his architecture.

The dialectic rationalism-context was carefully developed during the intervention in Kreuzberg. Contrary to what seemed to happen in some of his previous attempts to exceed rationalism, his relationship with the city is never mimetic concerning the aspects that are directly formal and stylistic. On the contrary, there is a more complex procedure, where the limits of the building are in accordance with the urban form, but where the architectural style is autonomous and sufficient - capable of announcing a new rationalism.

The context of Berlin is gradually opening new perspectives that enable the emergence of the new rationalism, not only because it helps to create theoretical lines, but also because taking into consideration the topography, the urban design, or the typology of the building, helps to define which aspects are necessary and decisive for the intervention. This new rationalism requires unity and simplicity, and it represents a response that intends to be in contrast to the disorder of the modern city. It also intends to restore a character in the city, starting from the simplicity of the collective spirit’s needs and the sense of unity in the means to fulfil those needs.

Siza looks at one of Berlin’s features in a purposeful way: a city substantially made of distances. “Berlin is made of distances, because what matters in the city is the repetition and continuity of its divisions, rather than the repetition and continuity of the buildings. What is important to perceive as the image of that city is the abstract combination of gaps in their chained forms”, [11] states Manuel de Solà-Morales. So, Siza’s new rationalism adopts an interstitial strategy, of objects embedded in empty
and expectant spaces, avoiding the application of generic principles to act from a particular opportunity. He holds on to the folds the city hides: the proposal considers the historical continuity of the morphology of the surrounding blocks that are part of the city block, but he uses all his formal expression in the flexibility of the architectural language that clarifies the volumes.

During the period of creation and development of the residential building in Schlesische Tor, Álvaro Siza definitely adopts the linguistic laws of rationalism. For him, rationalism is still the most adequate way of understanding reality. This understanding leads the way to its transformation. Siza’s relative novelty lies in joining the pre-existing continuity to the practice of collage and bricolage, collecting the linguistic foundations of rationalism as a coherent corpus. That is to say, there is a coordination and a critical transfiguration that follows a procedure that is similar to the great transformation brought by Mannerism: it respects a close tradition, yet operational, due to its effective system of codes, but at the same time it is critical and it brings dissolution with its new use, where surprise and syntactic alterations are at the centre. Siza exceeds the boundary of rationalism when in the project he emphasizes “sentimental” aspects that engage in creative but logical transformations. This attitude was already present in the great masters of the Modern Movement – Le Corbusier, for example, from the first generation, and Alvar Aalto, from the second generation – who were able to assign the appropriate terms of aesthetic abstraction to methods that always had some clearly ethical starting point.

The building Bonjour Tristesse is the materialization of the new rationalism. It is a melody that is a surprise for its sobriety, it is that “singularity of obvious things” [12] that Siza mentions. The new rationalism that Siza creates in this building is not in the formal desire or in the extension of irrelevant lines of the immediate surroundings. On the contrary, it is in its contribution for a deep understanding and this makes architecture a place of expression through its unique sensibility. Siza does not seek novelty nor change, or at least he does not necessarily assume them. In any case, novelty is clarification, to convert what is complicated into something simple. In his architecture, this means simplicity, unity, symmetry and right propositions, typological clarity, homogeneity between plan and elevation, and denying the disorder.

Ivan Leonidov said: “if the shape is still necessary (the content should have a shape), then the shape should also be perfect” [13]. In this search for perfection, Siza only seeks to associate with the housing project in Kreuzberg a certain logical structure, a simplification that arises from its essence, that is to say, the aim is to make it express itself as intelligible and rational. Thus, in response to formal issues, there is a shy, clear and circumscribed curved line that reflects an idea of temporality, which, however, is hardly ever found in architecture.

The new rationality rises a controversy that consists in considering that the real complexity of architecture cannot just blindly accept the elements or parameters of reduction that are used in rationalism. Through his intervention, Siza claims that mere rationalism only implies an excessive and poor simplification of the architecture itself that just takes into consideration some of its components. For Siza, solving architectural issues is not just solving their construction, or their structure, or their distribution according to the program of needs.

According to Siza, logic and geometric regularity are not a limitation on the freedom of architectural expression. He sees it not as an artistic purpose itself, but as a necessary assumption to the way that lead us to a new interpretation of rationalism. Siza goes beyond the mere analysis, awareness and understanding of the architecture, formulated on the parameters of reduction until now. The new rationalism highlights the need for a unitary geometric system as a foundation of an architectural composition. However, it rejects the monotony, not only regarding the building itself, but mostly in relation to the urbanism.

Álvaro Siza can be fairly considered the father of the new rationalism in architecture. It is a new rationalism that is, nevertheless, far from all abstraction or radicalism of a perceptive nature. In this context, Bonjour Tristesse is a remedy for monotony in urbanism that was achieved through the logical formal diversity of the architecture. In spite of this break concerning the form, the intervention does not lose its sense nor the unitary aspect of the neighbourhood and the city. Siza does not seek diversity
through any kind of effort. The form of the building comes naturally, with no intention to force its shape. In short, Block 121 in Schlesische Tor is an explanation of the concepts and strategies adopted by Siza. His path has been nothing but a conscious search for all that evidence.

![Figure 6. Bonjour Tristesse, Álvaro Siza Vieira, 1984 [14]](image)

5. Conclusion

Berlin is a city that did not go through a systematic reconstruction, it is the city of fragment that represents a duality between new and old city – each place is full of history: pleasant and unpleasant. Thus, all works undertaken by IBA did not intend to erase the urban structure of the city, through which it is possible to recognise in Berlin the virtues of a modern capital that, simultaneously, connects with the features of its initial structure in a deep way: "the strongly extensive nature of the city; a feature that not even the massive speculative operation carried out at the beginning of the century could erase. That is to say, the wide and spacious design of a big rural city that defines it", [15].

After all, IBA defends the traditional city against the modern city, and it is its duty to vitalize and preserve one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Berlin – Kreuzberg –, which could only be possible by respecting the past. That is exactly what Siza does – planning with history as a background, taking into account all the teachings and painful experiences that history brought. Through the rediscovery and preservation of the constitutive and historical elements of the city, Siza seeks to expand Berlin’s identity, adopting an attitude that reveals a willingness to gather the remains of a fragmented city.

We could ask: How do the rediscovery and preservation of the constitutive and historical elements of the city of Berlin influence the project Bonjour Tristesse? Siza would surely answer that mostly when it indicates a structure of the city, an establishment, a hierarchy of more important or less important facts, of permanent facts, and facts that are subject to a fast and continuous renovation. The project is developed in a particular way concerning this reality of urban processes; it is mostly defined by its relationship with the plan of the city, its structure, the buildings and residential buildings. *Bonjour*
Tristesse shows us that each architecture is always an answer to a problem, a practical problem, and that when we are dealing with the problem, everything else is secondary.

Siza considers that rationalism is still the valid method for research, understanding and intervention in the field of architecture. For him, this is the most adequate way of understanding reality. This understanding leads the way to its transformation – *new rationalism* – where having rational thinking as a starting point does not mean that its validity is limited to the aspects of *reduction*, nor to the establishment of general and right rules, in the limited context defined by that *reduction*. This is where Siza exceeds the validity of rational thinking. He assumes that the different *rationalisms* that over the history of modern architecture – a reflection of personal attitudes and beliefs – minimised the real complexity of the architecture, are no longer valid.

Siza believes in the possibility of an education that involves a systematic planning supported by a logical structure of thinking that is part of a system where the architectural shape can be free but at the same time logical. In short, the *new rationalism* is an extension of the rationalism, according to the reinterpretation of pre-existing *concepts* – it exceeds the mere reduction and urban monotony – and it represents a change in the field of architecture that corresponds to the discussion about some canons, or about some fundamental principles, which were considered unchangeable until now.

**References**

[1] Archive © Photo: FHXB Friedrichshain – Kreuzberg Museum.
[2] P. Torrijos, “Interview with Álvaro Siza – Jot Down”, Contemporary Culture Magazine, October 2015, (in Spanish).
[3] AA.VV., “25 Jahre Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin 1987 – Ein Wendepunkt des europäischen Städtebaus”, Deutsches Institut für Stadtbaukunst, p. 69, 2012, (in Germany).
[4] Archive © Postcard: FHXB Friedrichshain – Kreuzberg Museum.
[5] J. Calduch, “Temas de Composición Arquitectónica: Razón, Racionalidad, Racionalismo”, Editorial Club Universitario, p. 45, 2001, (in Spanish).
[6] Ibid. 46.
[7] R. Bonicalzi, “Arquitectura Racional”, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, p. 81, 1987, (in Spanish).
[8] AA.VV., “Álvaro Siza. Profesión Poética”, Editorial Gustavo Gili, p. 159, 1988, (in Spanish).
[9] AA.VV., “Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin 1987 – Beispiele einer neuen Architektur”, Ediciones Klett-Cotta, p. 271, 1986 (in Germany).
[10] D. Vitale, “Arquitectura Racional”, Alianza Editorial, p. 283, 1987, (in Spanish).
[11] M. de Sola-Morales, “De cosas urbanas”, Gustavo Gili, p. 116, 2008, (in Spanish).
[12] A. Siza, “Las ciudades de Álvaro Siza”, Malis, p. 8, 2002, (in Spanish).
[13] M. Scolari, “Arquitectura Racional”, Alianza Editorial, p. 203, 1987, (in Spanish).
[14] Archive © Postcard: Landersarchiv Berlin, n.º 304112.
[15] C. Martí, “Berlin IBA’87 – La Exposición Internacional de Arquitectura Nº2, A&V and S. G. V. (Sociedad de Gestión para la Rehabilitación y Construcción de Vivienda, S. A.),”, 1985, (in Spanish).