
WINDOWS: 25 YEARS AGO *
Álvaro Siza, 1995

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The window is certainly a difficult element. Frank Lloyd Wright comes to mind when he said how wonderful and easy architecture would be if it were not for the problem of windows. We have all experienced the difficulty of a complex synchronic approach – a goal that is impossible to achieve. Yet I believe that today, in pursuing the complexity introduced by design, we are applying a fragmentary approach with the elements recomposed and set in relation to one another only at a later stage. We are no longer living in the age of Erich Mendelsohn, who made his initial sketches only after a preliminary meeting with the client whom he bombarded with very precise questions and then, perhaps while listening to Beethoven's *Eroica*, created his fabulous designs. I do not think you can work like that today – at least I do not know anyone who does.

All this is reflected in design, even that of the window. Sometimes the project seems to waver and lack an overall balance. Then, a possibility of contact between elements is spotted and this gives birth to the solution. For instance in a project for low-cost housing, budget and production constraints mean restricting the initial study stage. The window may be larger or smaller, but it is still a hole in which a standard element is fitted. When I was working in Holland, I saw that their priorities are different from ours in Portugal because the way of working is different. Although both countries are small, in Portugal you find considerable differences from one region to the next. In Holland, especially when designing low-income social housing, it is unthinkable to design a special window, both for reasons of cost and because of regulations forcing one to use windows available on the market. There are, however, a number of good-quality prefabricated components, so there is choice. More than once, my collaborators and I have gone around the streets pointing out the type of window frames, brick, or colour we most like from those used in other buildings. In Portugal, however, if I decide to work with wood, I cannot find any prefabricated elements. I am then compelled to concentrate on the detail and to take into account the different skills and working methods of craftsmen in Oporto or Lisbon. A number of things, therefore, influence the progress of a project. Whether we like it or not, architecture is increasingly becoming a job of assembling various components.

I think it is right to separate the project from the design of one special element. This means that I am more concerned with the relation between the various windows than with the window itself. The same window frames are turning up more and more often in my projects. This was unthinkable until a few years ago and I swear it is not because I am getting lazy.

It was while looking at Rudolph Schindler's work in California that I thought again about the importance of a physical relationship between interior and exterior. In the house that Schindler designed for himself (a house of impressive scale like those of Frank Lloyd Wright, where you can touch the ceilings as well as the windows), there is an ingenious, but simple device for opening windows. They are easy to open because they are extremely light. They are also fragile, do not insulate very well, and the stop is not technically correct, yet these windows have a great tactile quality that makes for an extraordinary continuity with the exterior. All this is being lost in the name of efficiency of energy saving. I am also struck by

the trend to standardise everything, even when there is no great need for efficiency as in a small, single-family house. You do not need technical perfection here, or sophisticated devices to regulate the air or modulate the light. The old kind of window provided a simple, correct solution of combining glass with shutters, blinds, curtains: a dense, deep presence. Of course, thinking along these lines is a little disturbing because it means taking the reverse direction from modern architecture, which has instead concentrated on rarefaction and lightness and tried to reduce depth in an effort toward neutrality achieving a more direct contact between interior and exterior by means of a large plate of glass. This is only an apparent continuity, because in reality glass separates, it does not unite. Just think of reflections. It is a world of quality entirely abandoned. There is no longer a culture that can regulate light, that can choose what to show by opening just a small section of a wall – something beautiful has been radically simplified.

Architecturally, the window is still linked to the idea of a hole in a thick wall. The thickness of walls is very important, just as the depth of houses is important. These are houses that relate to the place, to the climate. The climate in Portugal is an important ingredient in architecture. In a traditional Dutch house, you can see the garden at the back through the windows. This is acceptable where the terrain is rough and divided up, the rooms in a house are marked by different qualities: some rooms face outwards, some more intimate ones turn towards interior courtyards, and others have a verandah where you can meditate on the relation between light and countryside. The richness of architecture lies in the understanding of these details which it is vital we do not lose; otherwise everything becomes so schematic.