

## **A praise of shadows: the Tidal Swimming Pool in Leça da Palmeira.**

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Fig. 1 – The Tidal Pool in Leça da Palmeira. Photograph by Eduardo Fernandes, 2015.

Looking out my window, as I write this text, I can see Álvaro Siza's Tidal Swimming Pool.

This view of an architectural object hidden in the landscape has accompanied my daily routine for over twenty years, motivating a recurrent reflection on the various ways a building can relate with its context.

In the drawings of the first proposal (presented by the architect in 1962), the intention of making the building of the pool changing rooms disappear was already obvious. Built at the beach level, approximately two meters below the coastal road, with low ceilings and very gentle slopes on the roof, the volume becomes almost imperceptible either from a distance or up close. This intention is also clear in Siza's words, when he stated that the building is "anchored, like a boat, to the wall of the waterfront", because he aimed to minimize the impact of the volume on the "three parallel lines" that dominate the site: "the meeting of sea and sky, the frontier between the beach and the sea and the long supporting wall of the marginal road" (Siza, 1980, p. 23).

"The idea is in the site" is a famous Siza's quote, written in a posterior text about his work at Malagueira, Évora (Siza, 1979, p.36). Yet, in Leça da Palmeira, many years before, he already assumed this premise and implemented it in a very emphatic way. More than a good relationship with the context, the Tidal Pool presents a fusion between the building and its surroundings, as the architect's intervention reinterprets the seafront support wall, dramatizing the relationship between the street level and the beach, which were clearly separated and are now connected.

The building is not just *anchored* on the wall of the waterfront; the building is a metaphor of that wall.

This analogy can be sensed from the entrance route: the ramp, with its variable width, defines an incomplete triangle; if we completed it, extending the alignment of the east supporting wall (the only element of the 1962 project which does not follow the orthogonal system of the design) it would have its vertex at the precise point where the new building starts. So, it can be argued that Siza's intervention split the wall in two; in fact, when we go down the ramp, we feel as if the wall has opened to let us through.

After descending, entering the dark space of the changing rooms, we feel that we are entering this pre-existing wall: it is an obscure and dense space, dominated by the black volume of the individual changing cabins and by the paced rhythm of the pillars and wooden beams, built in Riga wood darkened with burnt oil.

The obscurity creates a *praise of shadows*, an unusual atmosphere evocative of the book of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki:

"(...) we, the Orientals (...) do not feel any repulsion for the obscurity, we resign ourselves to it as something inevitable (...), we sink with delight in the darkness and discover its own beauty.

On the contrary, the Westerners, always on the lookout for progress, are always in a great agitation (...) in search of a more vivid light (...) to surround the smallest corner, the last refuge of the shadow."  
(Tanizaki, 1933, p. 65):

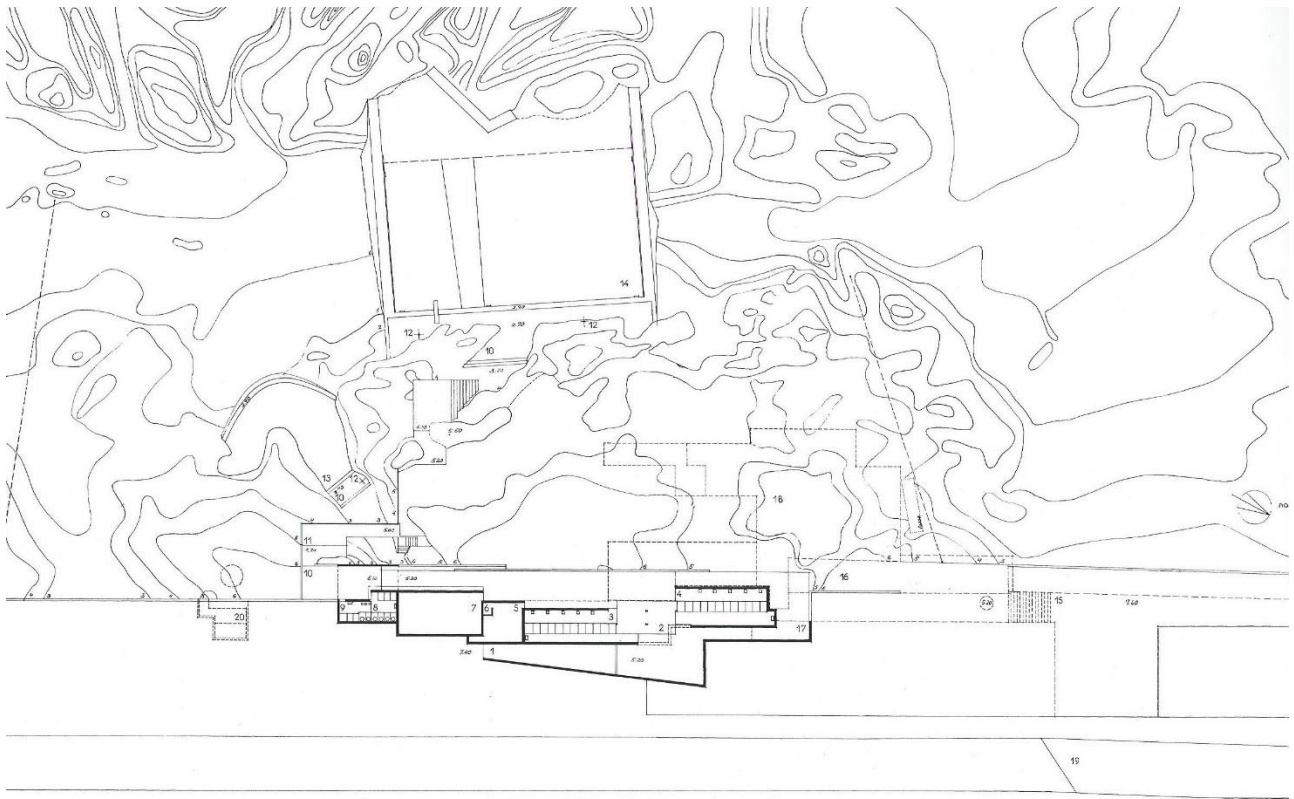


Fig. 2 – The Tidal Pool in Leça da Palmeira. Plan of the 1962 proposal by Álvaro Siza; photographs by Eduardo Fernandes, 2015.

In contrast to the bright light of the outside, the darkness limits our visual perception; we walk slowly, guided by touch, which complements our momentarily lack of vision. To enter the small changing cabin, it is the hands (and not the eyes) that show us where the door is and which way it opens; we change clothes slowly, while our pupils dilate and we get used to the dark.

The exit from the cabin is made through a second door, opposite to the entrance. We are now in the wet side of the building; it is still in a dark environment, but a few rays of light enter from the west, through the narrow spaces left between the top of the wall and the low ceiling; because our eyes are used to the darkness, it is enough to lighten the space.

Guided by the light, we find the exit and leave this enclosed and dark space, feeling that we finally got out of the long seafront wall; at this moment we became momentarily blind again, dazzled by the force of the light, reflected in the concrete walls and paving slabs. As our eyes adapted again, we discover that there is another wall to the west, separating us from the pool area; we still can't see it, but we can hear the sounds of the ocean and the voices of people, laughing and talking on the other side.

Then, looking south, we see a door; more precisely, we see the symbol of a door, an extension of the roof that lands on the west wall, marking a threshold. We walk towards this passage, under the strong sunlight; immediately after we pass this door, the west wall is interrupted, allowing the access and the first view of the pool, embedded between the pre-existing rocks, the concrete pavement, the sand and the sea.



Fig. 3 – The Tidal Pool in Leça da Palmeira. Photograph by Eduardo Fernandes, 2015.

Then, the previous sensory experience is quickly forgotten, replaced by other pleasant sensations, caused by the beauty of the landscape and by the contrast between the cold salt water and the heat of the sun.

Lying on the sand, when we look back at the bathhouse building, we can no longer see it; neither at close nor at some distance, from the adjacent beaches: the building disappears, integrated into the wall of the seaside promenade; a long straight line about a mile long, starting much earlier and ending long after the place where the building is located.

Finally, we can perceive another important factor which explains the perfect relationship between everything that surrounds us. The walls of the pool, as well as its pavement areas, strategically placed between the rocks and the sand, were built in exposed concrete; this concrete was assembled “with very little cement and reinforcement, but with a great binding over time” (Ferreira & Fernandes, 2021, p. 437), using sand from that same beach, formed by the partial decomposition of the rocks that structure the place. Hence, these rocks, the sand and the concrete are mere variations of the same material, decomposed by nature and recomposed by man; that's why the whole ensemble is so harmonious...

But the context of the Tidal Pool is also the Atlantic Ocean, a background in constant motion.

Seen from my window, in the landscape, the Tidal Pool seems insignificant, compared to the vast sea that surrounds it; but this small amount of water, imprisoned by three concrete walls design in articulation with the pre-existing rocks, is enough to serve its bathing function.

It is in the winter that this view is most impressive: when the sea is rough and the huge waves break on the rocks, flooding the pool, the building assumes its seasonal inadequacy, waiting serenely for the summer.

This image also motivates a recurrent reflection on the relativity of the utilitarian sense that we attribute to architecture; after all, the usefulness of this work goes far beyond its strict function: merging with the site, it organizes the landscape, providing a silent architectural lesson.

#### Acknowledgments:

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