

THE SIMPLICITY THAT IS SLIDING AWAY

November 7, 2007

Коммерсантъ[®]

The exhibition of works by Alvaro Siza, the great Portuguese architect, has opened in the Museum of Architecture. GRIGORY REVZIN believes that his work is an alternative to the contemporary globalist architecture.

The highest standard for architectural exhibitions in Russia has been set by the last year Norman Foster's exposition in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. It goes as follows. Each work of an architect is represented by its model, his/her own drawings and high-quality photos; screens, projections, computers are used minimally and for reference only. Alvaro Siza's exhibition, a joint brainchild by the Museum of Architecture, Russian Avantgarde Foundation and the Portuguese Embassy, is organized pursuant to the same Foster protocol. In some things it even surpasses that – models of Siza's buildings have been made especially for the exposition, and that makes it the entirely exclusive product. In addition, unlike the Foster's exhibition, Russian Avantgarde Foundation has published the quite serious catalogue of four hundred pages. The only deviation from the high-level architectural exhibition protocol was in the absence of main players – Alvaro Siza, unfortunately, failed to come, his lecture in Moscow never materialized, also absent was Senator Sergey Gordeyev, founder of Russian Avantgarde. Less than a thousand people attended the official opening ceremony, too small a crowd for an exhibition at such level.

But while the protocol mentioned allows making an exhibition interesting not just for architects and critics, I would not say that the exhibition is comprehensible for all. On the contrary, it is the material quite hard to perceive. It is quite easy to imagine groups of students with their mentors in the Museum rooms these days, but is difficult to envision there characters from society pages for whom they had organized a special opening ceremony at the Foster's exhibition. Siza is quite a non-pop architect, he keeps the audience at arm's length, never trying to facilitate comprehension of what he is doing. His models – seemingly, the most graphic method to show architecture – constitute a representation of the architectural idea for professionals rather than an image of the building for rank-and-file viewers. They are generalized to the maximum, made entirely out of wood (you have to guess where concrete is in the real structure and where glass is there), the surrounding landscape is also made out of wood without any distinction between the ground and water. In other words, it is a pure plastic idea while the buildings created by the Portuguese are not abstract sculptures at all, for them the function is important as well as the textures, the reality of colors and light. His is a great architect but it is rather hard to perceive it at the exhibition. You should know it beforehand.

All in all, it is quite an interesting example of a contemporary architect refusing to play globalism. In the early 1990's, when the current system of architectural megastars formed, Siza already had the reputa-



tion that allowed him to be a confident player there. He had designed private villas pictured in all “in” magazines of the world that firmly positioned him in the world of allure. He had designed major residential communities (Saal in Porto), universities (the College of Education in Setubal, Faculty of Architecture at the University of Porto, the Aveiro University) that earned him the reputation of a socially aware architect. He had designed museums of contemporary art (Galicia Museum of Modern Art in Santiago de Compostela and Modern Art Museum/Serralves Foundation) without which an architectural star just cannot rise these days. He had designed bank and office buildings meaning that he was sufficiently involved in the money world. Beyond his native Portugal he had created buildings in the Netherlands, Spain, Brazil, becoming, in other words, an international architect. In 1992 he won the Pritzker Prize. Judging by all this, he should have been included in the line of Gehry –Foster - Hadid - Libeskind – Koolhaas. But it never happened.

He preferred to miss participation in celebrated international contests, never tried to burst through to Dubai, Berlin, China, to none of those places where the international jet set moved. His exhibition going on now in Moscow was never prompted by his bureau, as was the case with Foster, but by the Russian side, and the fact that he failed to attend the opening ceremony shows that he is not looking for clients here. He never got involved with contest committees and juries – and one cannot win them without that. Instead, he continued to build in his native Portugal where he was idolized, and he never asked for anything more. In the dialogue of globalism and localism he has chosen a surprising side. And this stems not from his personal traits but from the qualities of architecture. Today the buildings designed by international stars are attractions akin to fun rides. The mission of such attractions is to boggle minds at the moment of their opening, when they are photographed by the world media. They should glisten and clamor as a disco, amaze with technical innovations as a car showroom, promise adventures as Fort Boyard. Not many care about what happens to them after their launching. Often in just five years they start to resemble a merry-go-round left forgotten in winter.

For Alvaro Siza everything is quite contrary. The buildings are very simple. There is a minimum of technical gimmicks, just usual materials – concrete, glass, bricks from time to time. The buildings do not film too well, it is hard to describe them in words. In order to describe them one needs such slow and weighty words that silence spreads all around for a time. You know, when a child has just learned to talk and you, say, bring him up to a wall, he is silent at first, then says just one word: “Big”. And is silent again. This is such a direct discovery of a fact in life. The Siza’s architecture is all about the idea that there is a wall, window, entrance, hall. They are not spectacular and not ordinary, not beautiful and not ugly, they are just there. He is the master of material, weight, texture, proportion, space, light – all this, while still being itself, is turned into a sculpture in his hands.

It is very strange to watch people passing along his walls – somehow they become a sculptural frieze themselves. He is a great architect but in the archaic sense of the world, not in the today’s. Architect is such



a trade that he/she just has to shape our everyday living – the places where we go and how we do it, where we sit, eat, sleep – but with the shapes that become works of art. The daily routine is a vacuous thing, automatic actions requiring no thought, and all at once something turns up and you see that there is a lot of sense, since it is grand and beautiful. Well, as if you were just walking along a wall and it suddenly turned to be a frieze of Parthenon.

It is rather hard to understand this quality of architecture – it is easier to feel it, and it is even harder to understand it looking at abstract wooden models. But the enjoyment is worth it. We have now a lot of the global culture and all the architecture reaching us these days from the West is the architecture of globalism. And it is very nice to discover that there is something different there as well. ■

