

laba

ENVIRONMENTAL
OBJECTS :

dwelling on
PORTUGAL

EPFL_ENAC_LABA
Laboratoire Bâle
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1. urban nature: towards an environmental aesthetics in architecture

LABA's orientation Urban Nature has the mission to question the age-old opposition between architecture and nature — the object-sculpture and the landscape-background — in light of today's ecological crisis. At present, the idea of Nature as something nurturing, autonomous and in continuous renewal is being questioned by both the natural and the social sciences.¹ How can architecture contribute to this larger ontological debate? The Anthropocene has proven and doubled down on William Morris' renown statement that "everything except the desert is architecture".² It demands that architecture should no longer stop at the threshold of the window sill or at the edge of the building plot. It asks us to question the fundamental opposition between architecture and nature and to disrupt the relation of privilege between the meaningful object-sculpture in the foreground and the unconscious landscape background. Amidst wider struggles for environmental justice and nature-rights, we need ways of integrating ecology into architecture as more than just a collection of techno-engineering fixes (green roofs, solar appliances, energy efficiency plans) but also through the promotion of an environmental architecture as a collection of aesthetic principles and values.

1. SEE, FOR EXAMPLE: WILL STEFFEN, PAUL J. CRUTZEN, AND JOHN R. MCNEILL, "THE ANTHROPOCENE: ARE HUMANS NOW OVERWHELMING THE GREAT FORCES OF NATURE?" (*AMBIO*, VOL. 36, NO. 8, DEC 2007) PP. 614–621; AND PHILIPPE DESCOLA, *BEYOND NATURE AND CULTURE* (CHICAGO AND LONDON: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2013)

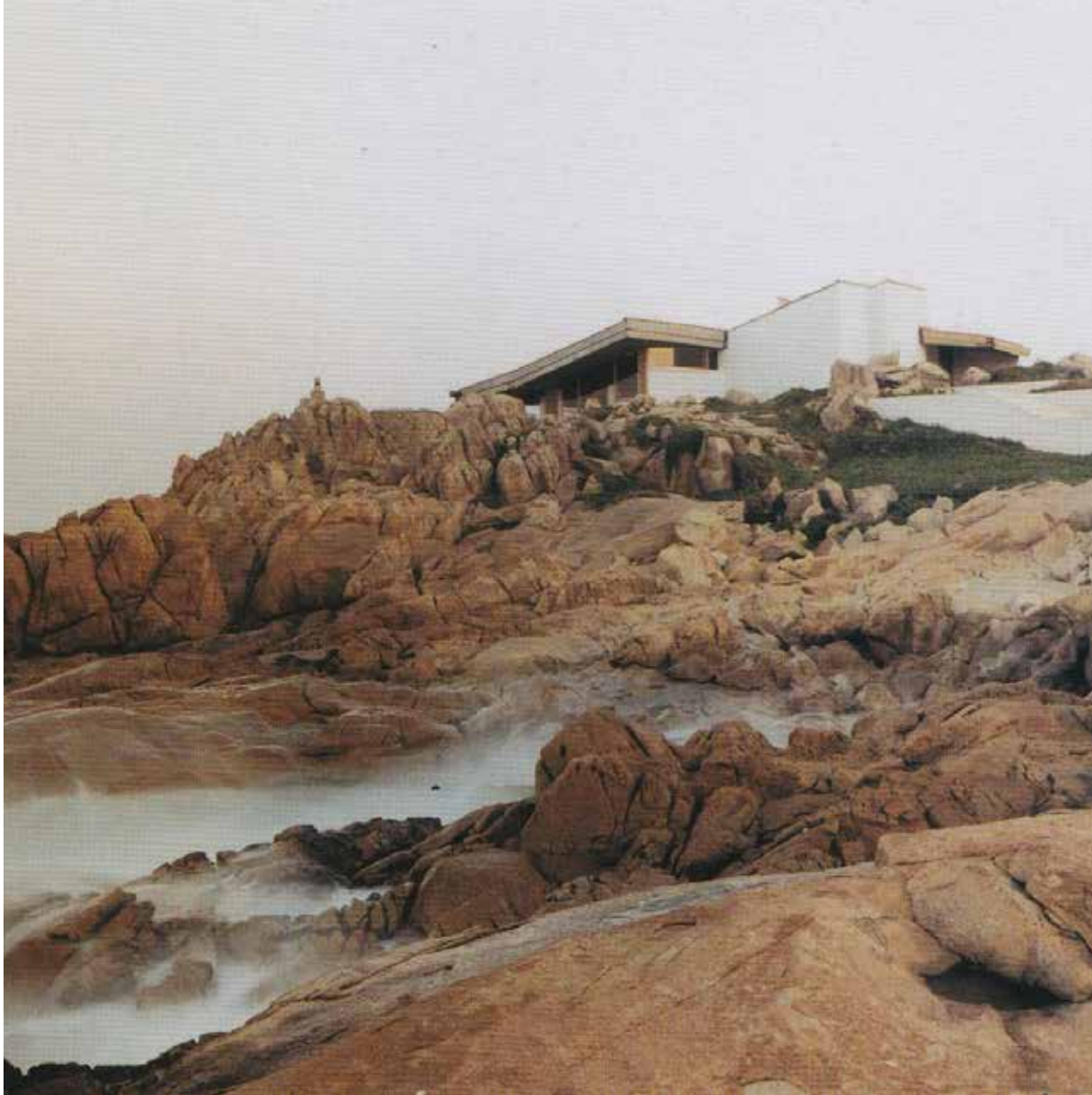
2. WILLIAM MORRIS, *HOPES AND FEARS FOR ART* (WORCESTERSHIRE: READ BOOKS) 2012 [1882].



2. ecological contextualism: architecture as environmental object

The word 'environment' comes from the French *environer*, meaning 'to surround, enclose, encircle'. The word object comes from the Latin *objectum*, meaning 'thing lying before, opposite' (the mind or sight), from *obicere*, 'to present, oppose'. The environment envelops the spectator; it is infinite but its perceptual limit is the horizon. It is real but immaterial, ethereal. It is the *milieu*, the 'mid-place', the medium in-between. The object, on the other hand, is finite. It confronts the environment by creating a limit, a form. It is objective, meaning it has intentions, it occupies a position. In its delineation, it encloses an inside and excludes an outside. In doing so, it creates a subject, a point of view and a sense of belonging in familiarity set against the strange otherness of the outside.

To think of architecture as an environmental object means to question this very opposition by analyzing some of the inherent dichotomies of separation here at play — figure and ground, inside and outside, autonomy and analogy. By refusing them, we hope to replace separation with confrontation, and segregation with coexistence. If ecology is the 'study of the house' (from the Greek *oikos*, 'house' and *-logia*, 'study of'), it must also be the practice of thinking the threshold of the house — who do we live with, who do we extend our hospitality to? How high should our walls be? In an ecological sense, the *hortus conclusus* of the paradise garden seen as an ideal enclosure of moral and natural purity, is obsolete.



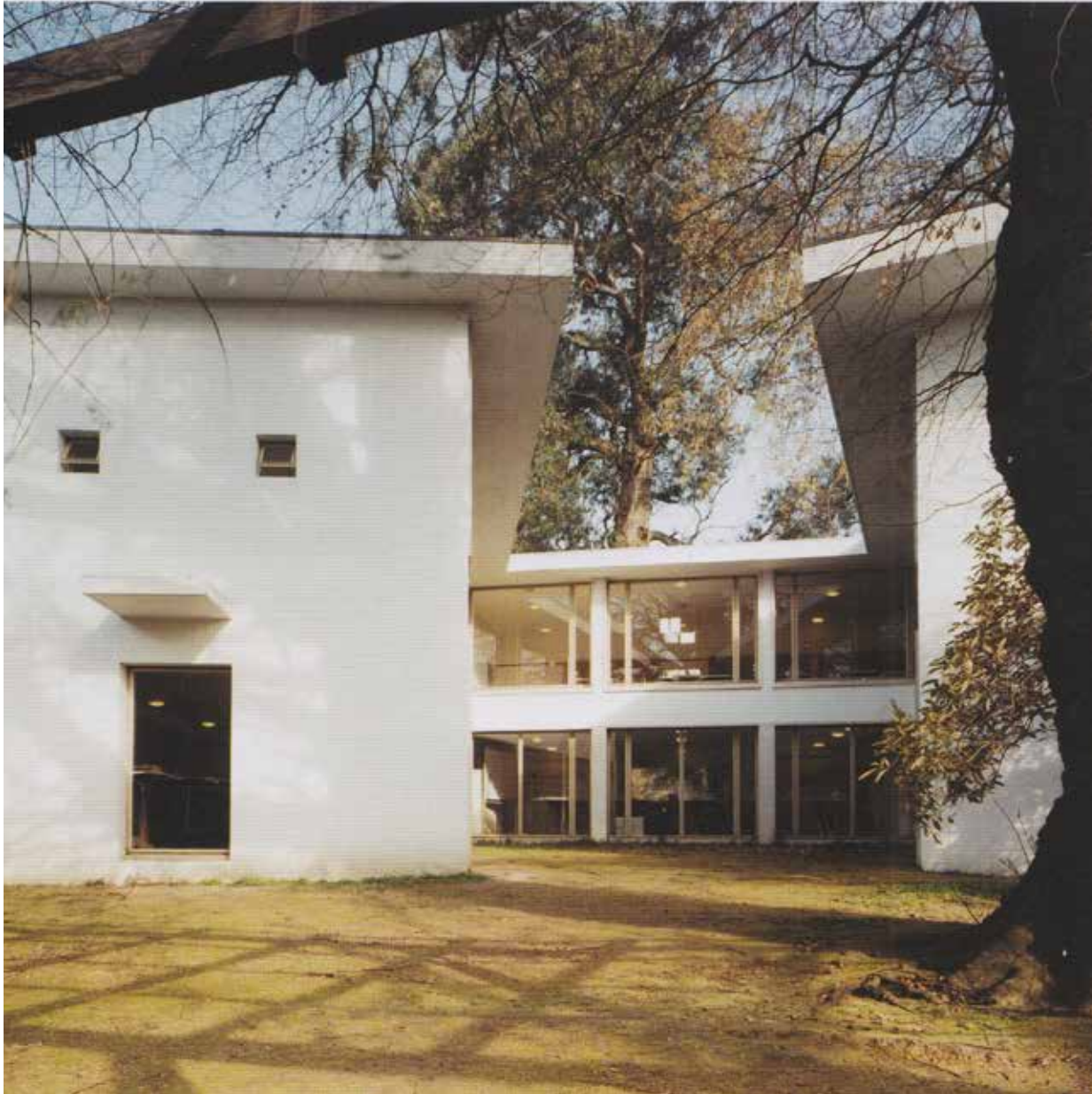
ÁLVARO SIZA, CASA DE CHÁ DA BOA NOVA

2.1) conscious environments: foregrounding the background

In his 1920 publication *Creative Confessions*, Paul Klee stated that “art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible”. Making visible, or *Sichtbarmachen* in Klee’s original term, is the act of attuning to the environment, revealing it and rendering it conscious, foregrounded. It does so by revealing the site’s archaeological traces, what Vittorio Gregotti defined, in his 2007 *Thoughts on the Works of Álvaro Siza*, as “listening to the real”. In doing so, architecture becomes the opposite of the iconic landmark, assuming instead the role of a frame.

*I have always had the impression that Alvaro Siza’s architecture sprang from archaeological foundations known to him alone — signs invisible to anyone who has not studied the site in detail through drawings with steady, focused concentration. Later on, those signs come together because they convey a feeling of growing out of something necessary, of relating, connecting, establishing and constructing, all the while maintaining the tender uncertainty of hypothesis and discovery. The construction is slow and intense. It is made of the discrete, if not downright secret, signs of an attempt to start anew, based on establishing some creative and apparently simple and explicit signs of a universal design system. Siza’s work is characterized by just that sense of architecture as a means of listening to the real, in that it hides at least as much as it shows. Siza’s architecture makes one see, and it reveals rather than interprets the truth of the context.*³

3. VITTORIO GREGOTTI, *THOUGHTS ON THE WORKS OF ALVARO SIZA*, 2007, ESSAY WRITTEN FOR THE HYATT FOUNDATION UPON SIZA’S AWARDING OF THE PRITZKER PRIZE.



ÁLVARO SIZA, PAVILHÃO CARLOS RAMOS

2.2) perforated limits: inside — outside

In his 2008 article "Toward the Archipelago", Pier Vittorio Aureli states that "[i]f one were to summarize life in a city and life in a building in one gesture, it would have to be that of passing through borders. Every moment of our existence is a continuous movement through space defined by walls." He argues that architecture cannot aspire to define urbanization, the ubiquitous field of mutable flows. Nor, may we add, can it aspire to design the environment, the complex mesh of human and non-human life-worlds. "The only program that can reliably be attributed to architecture is its specific inertia . . . , its status as the manifestation of a clearly singular place." Architecture can have no other goal than that of delimiting the object. How it draws this line of separation — segregated and fetishistic or open and perforated — establishes the way we, as architectural subjects, relate to the world.

During my childhood, I was ill for a long period of time and I had to undergo a long period of rest . . . I lived in an old house that had a big balcony open onto the city, which was wonderful then, withdrawn and full of harmony . . . By the end of the first month of my stay, being unable to move beyond that balcony, I started to hate the landscape that hence became obsessive. I have thus felt increasingly the need for a connection between inside and outside that is not immediate and total, as it were in the origins, ambitions and practice of the architecture of the modern movement. . . . We have an extremely rich tradition of Arab origin that, especially in South Portugal, renders these transition spaces visible, in which light changes until it is lost in the intimacy of the interior. But this depth, this thickness, is being quickly lost, be it due to the need to build for a large number of people (thereby reducing areas), or because of an enthusiasm for new materials (glass or thermal insulation panels). . . . These transparencies can be found in extraordinary form in the projects of the venetian Andrea Palladio, whereby in the construction of a universe, all rooms communicate through openings placed along a single axis that is further extended onto the arrangement of the garden and the fields, losing itself in the distance. Hence the need for these pauses, which somewhat dematerialize the house and create a sense of continuity and soft transition between the inner dimension and the outer complexity.⁴

4. ÁLVARO SIZA VIEIRA, *IMAGINAR A EVIDÊNCIA* (LISBOA: EDIÇÕES 70) PP.45-47, TRANSLATED BY LABA.



FERNANDO TÁVORA, POUSADA DE SANTA MARINHA

2.3) ambivalent objects: autonomy and analogy

The architecture of Álvaro Siza displays an ambivalence between encouraging spatial identity through linguistic analogies with vernacular traditions, and the defence of formal autonomy through the introduction of foreign or abstract languages. In his essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism",⁵ Kenneth Frampton defines this position as an "architecture of resistance", one that is able to challenge both the commodification of the modernist artefact and the populist drive of post-modernist historicism. And it does so by ambiguously mediating between the dogmas of modernism's universality progress and the regressive nostalgia for a pre-modern past.

Siza's approach is part of a larger movement of mid-century Portuguese architects (loosely associated to the so-called 'School of Porto') who sought to critique modernism while also rejecting the nationalist aesthetics of *Português Suave*, the architecture style promulgated by the epoch's quasi-fascist regime. It also reflects the ambivalence of Portugal's semi-peripheral geographic position. Since the 15th century, Portugal has existed in two time-spaces simultaneously: the European and the colonial. Yet, in both of these spaces, its position has been peripheral. Portuguese colonialism was largely subordinated to the hegemonic control of the British Empire, and southern Europe has long been a periphery, subordinated in economic, political, and cultural terms to northern Europe and the core that produced the Enlightenment (a condition made more evident with today's financial crisis).⁶ Portugal in a strict sense, needs to be understood from this broad sense, if we are to understand its ambiguous position: between colonizer and colonized, between the wealthy North and the Global South.

Frampton's examples for his discourse on the architecture of critical regionalism are all geographically remote when considering their relative distance from the great economic and cultural centres of global modernization: Tadao Ando, Luis Barragan, Jorn Utzon, Mario Botta, Álvaro Siza. This distance provides a niche in which regional traditions can still develop and a critical ambivalence between continuity and rupture, analogy and autonomy, may occur.

5. KENNETH FRAMPTON, "TOWARDS A CRITICAL REGIONALISM: SIX POINTS FOR AN ARCHITECTURE OF RESISTANCE", IN: HAL FOSTER, *THE ANTI-AESTHETIC: ESSAYS ON POSTMODERN CULTURE* (SEATTLE: BAY PRESS, 1983).

6. BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS, "EPISTEMOLOGIES OF THE SOUTH AND THE FUTURE" (*FROM THE EUROPEAN SOUTH*, VOL. 1, JUL 25, 2016) PP. 17-29.



ÁLVARO SIZA, BAIRRO DA MALAGUEIRA

3. dwelling on portugal: forms of life

This studio is the first in a new series of *laba ateliers* dedicated to researching the hypothesis of architecture as environmental object, a theory for environmental aesthetics in architecture that focuses on modes of landscape contextualism. It is common-place to state that architecture defines itself in opposition to nature. But in the uncanny age of the Anthropocene, the celebrated trope of the Primitive Hut, inhabited in perfect harmony by the Noble Savage, has been exposed in its full nostalgic and colonial idealism. Natural harmony and nature domination have been replaced with hesitation and uncanniness; nature has become *Unheimlich*, estranged and 'unhomely'.

Surely, the fundamental role of the architectural object is to provide a separation from the environment, a place of permanence within the vast space of territorial flux. In spite of the ecological attempts carried out in the 1960's, architecture cannot design nor replace the infinite totality of the environment, it can only 'play' with it and reveal it. Creating architecture means to settle in a finite place, to reside (from Latin *re-sedere*, meaning to 'sit down, rest, linger') in a location (from the Latin *locus*, meaning 'place'). In his book *Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi defines locus as the "relationship between a certain specific location and the buildings that are in it. It is at once singular and universal." He explains that in the classical world, "[t]he 'situation' — the site — was governed by the genius loci, the local divinity, an intermediary who presided over all that was to unfold in it." The Romans had a cult of these spirits, and they called them *Lares*, also known as household gods. *Lar* is the Portuguese word for 'home' and 'hearth', the fireplace and social core house.

The house is the place where we attempt to divide the familiar from the unfamiliar, the domesticated space from the otherness of the environment, and where everyday affairs are ritualized into a spatial organization, a form of life. Its sense of permanence (residence) makes the confrontation and appropriation of the place all the more evident. It raises questions of limits and hospitality and naturalizes social reproduction, framing our point of departure towards the outside, our worldview.

For these reasons, the Portugal studio will focus on housing as



testing ground to investigate the confrontation between the object and the environment. The conception of housing implied here is flexible and stretched to include other types than the canonical private house (such as student, elderly and social housing, communal living, monastic complexes, holiday homes, hotels, etc.). Key points of focus will be, as enunciated before, the relation between background and foreground through architectural frames that reveal the site; the questioning of limits and the contamination between inside intimacy and outer strangeness; and the ambiguity between contextual analogy and autonomy.

The choice of Portugal as case study derives from its rich architectural history and from its peripheral position, from which a distanced critique of Western modernism and industrial capitalism is easier to ascertain. We find traces of these ideas in the architecture of the 'School of Porto', as asserted by the writings of Kenneth Frampton and Vittorio Gregotti, but also in older historical examples (such as Plain Style⁷) where a tradition of asceticism and Franciscan aesthetics already foregrounds a sense of 'environmentality' over iconic form and spectacle.

7. KNOWN IN PORTUGUESE AS *ESTILO CHÃO*, AND COINED BY AMERICAN THEORETICIAN GEORGE KUBLER, INDICATING A SPECIFIC KIND OF CLASSICIST PORTUGUESE ARCHITECTURE THAT IS CHARACTERIZED BY FORMAL AUSTERITY AND VERNACULAR INFLUENCES.

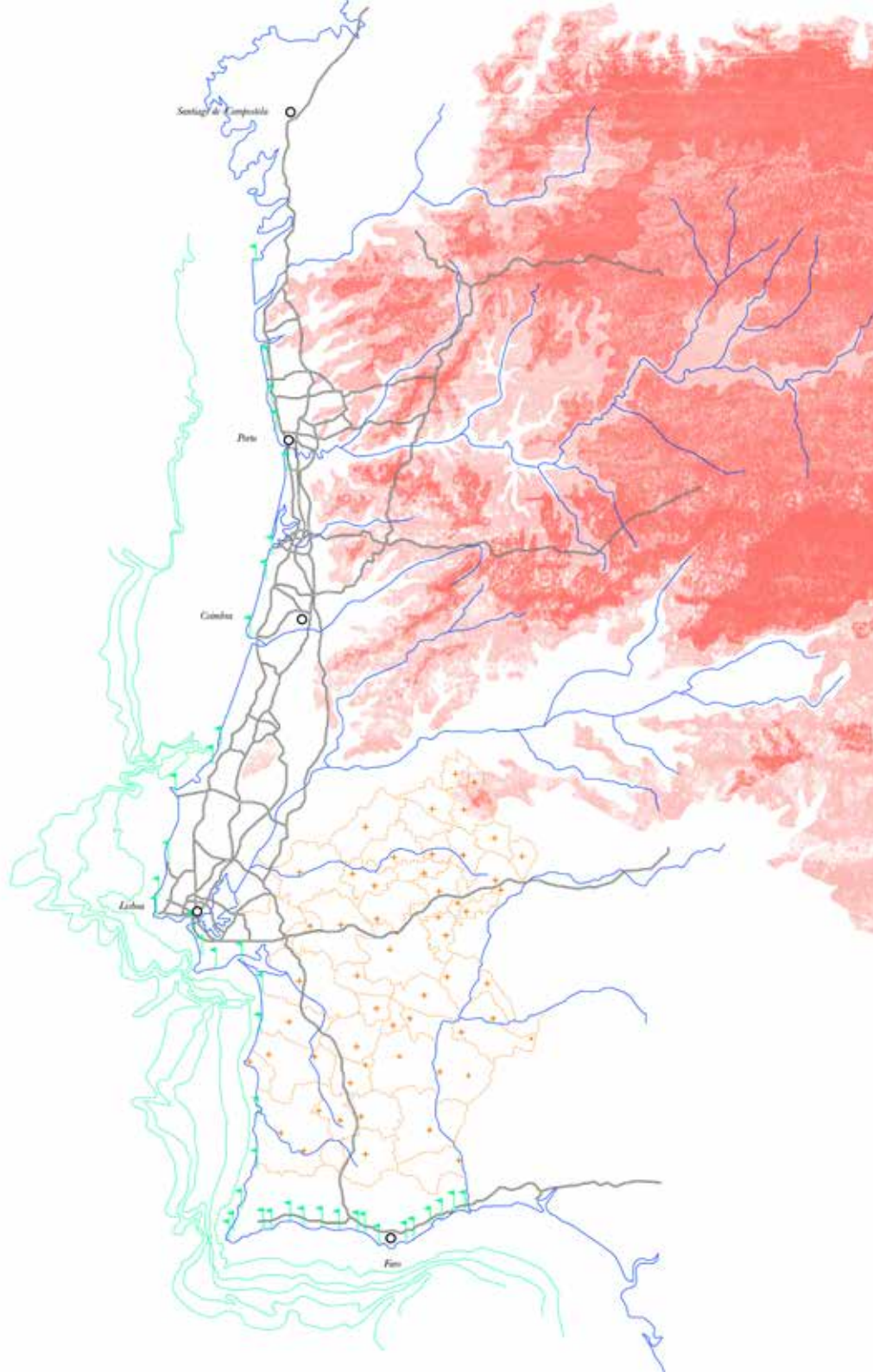


4. method: territory, field, architecture

laba's year-long studio is split into three moments that go from the territorial scale, to on-site field work, to architectural design. Its didactic goal is to bring the creation of the architectural object to a critical position in relation to the environment. The first part, Territory, is taught in the first semester and assisted by the Teaching Unit U – Cartography. The second part, Field, is located between semesters and consists of a trip to Portugal and a symposium/workshop to be held at the University of Porto Faculty of Architecture. The third part, Architecture, consists of the development of a site-specific and contextual architectural object that accurately responds the territorial reading developed in the first semester.

By expanding the field of architecture into territorial studies, laba aims to claim the urban system as part of the architectural object and the integration of the territory and the landscape into the site (the object's plot), both in a physical and an ideological way. In this way, laba hopes to foster an architectural engagement with 'the big picture', the larger scale of both abstract thinking and territorial construction.

COASTAL METROPOLIS
INTERIOR MOUNTAINS
MONTADO LANDSCAPE
COSTA IBÉRICA



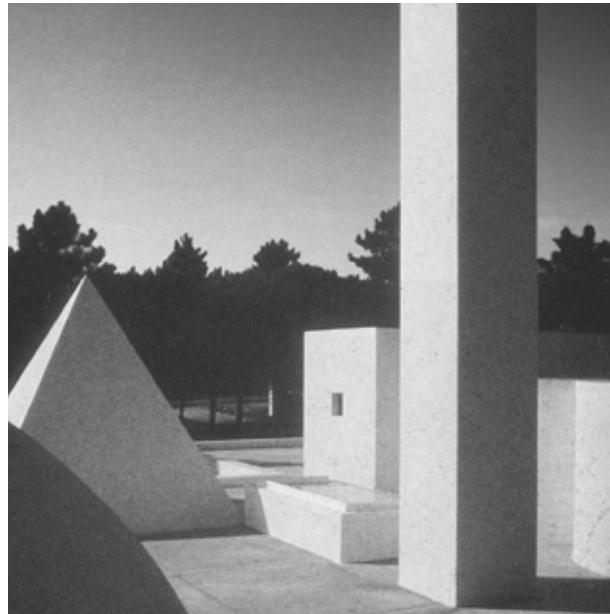
LABA, MAP OF PORTUGAL, 2017

4.1) territory: describing space

The term cartography is based on Latin *charta*, meaning 'paper' or 'map', and *-graphia*, meaning 'description', which derives from *graphein*, meaning 'to write' or 'to draw'. Swiss urbanism historian André Corboz defines description as something between the act of reading [analysis] and writing [designing]. He claims that there can be no description of a territory without a fiction of the territory, a positioning that contains a speculative and ethical critique.⁸ This is reminiscent of a sketch by Le Corbusier that defines a certain type of 'architectural gaze' as the smooth transition from the act of 'looking' to that of 'creating', stating: "*la clef c'est regarder... regarder, observer, voir, imaginer, inventer, créer*". The map-as-description is situated at the heart of this process that turns observation into action. Maps have the power to actually make the territories they represent because description, *-graphia*, is already a project.

Following this premise, laba's first semester is structured along three cartographic exercises that progressively narrow the student's scope of vision, from geography, to chorography, and finally topography (respectively meaning the description of *geo* - 'earth', *khora* - 'region', and *topos* - 'place'). The first exercise, Geography, describes the territory of Portugal by mapping out 4 general systems: landscape, industry, infrastructure, and settlement. The second assignment, Region, reshuffles those systems in order to describe 4 regions: the Coastal Metropolis, the Interior Mountains, the Montado Landscape, and the Costa Ibérica. Both of these exercises are carried out in groups of 5. The third assignment, Place, is carried out individually or in pairs and consists of the selection and critical description of a site chosen by the student(s) in order to later develop an architectural object.

8. ANDRÉ CORBOZ, *LE TERRITOIRE COMME PALIMPSESTE ET AUTRES ESSAIS* (PARIS: EDITIONS DE L'IMPRIMEUR, 2001).

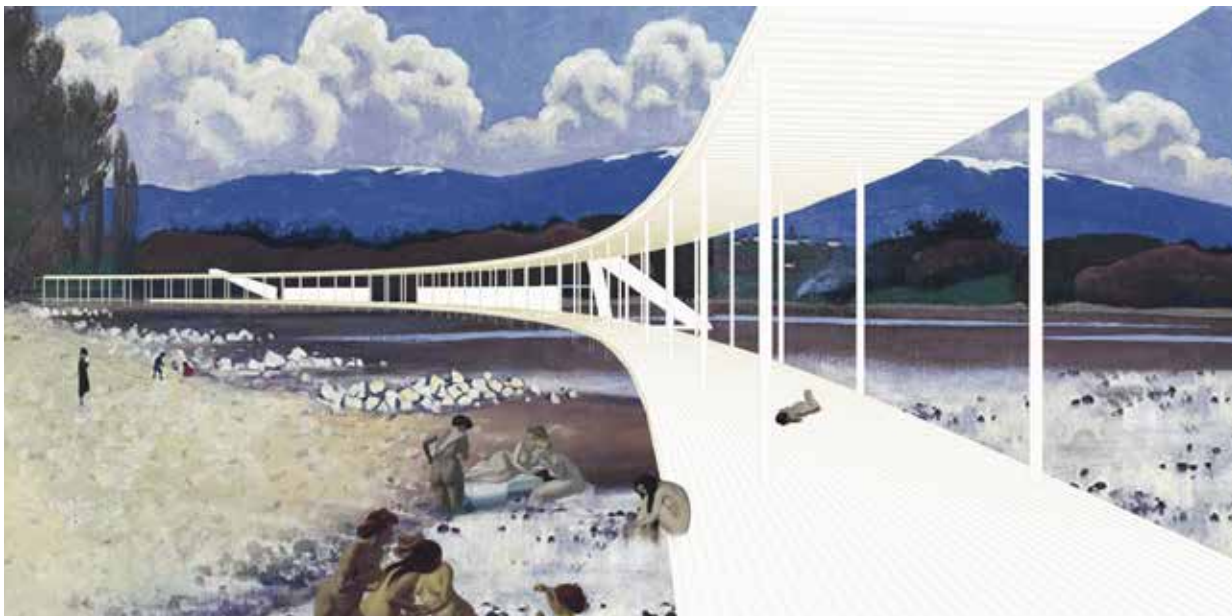


4.2) field: touring the context

In his 1980 text "Learning About Landscapes", J. B. Jackson states that he owes the invention of the discipline that he named Landscape Studies to his life as an avid traveller. "[T]here is a strong element of snobbery, it seems to me, in our criticism of tourist groups, the condescension of those who belong – who are at home – to those who are strangers without recognizable status. Yet we are all of us strangers, tourists, at one time or another . . . [and] I would say that the inspiration of tourism is a desire to know more about the world in order to know more about ourselves."⁹ The tour has an educational purpose that goes beyond mere frivolous entertainment. It allows us to evaluate our preconceptions of the territory as a patchwork of delimited geographical surfaces. Just like the map, the tour is a reading of the territory: one that exposes the nature of landscapes as culturally ambivalent, socially constructed, and historically specific interpretations among which particular images have collectively prevailed. This viewer-landscape relationship allows the students to render the project site as a meaningful context. It allows them to participate emotionally in the landscape and critically assess what has been previously interpreted on a more abstract level through cartography.

laba's field trip lasts around ten days and takes place at the end of the first semester. It is always combined with a workshop and a symposium, in collaboration with a local teaching institution, in this case the University of Porto Faculty of Architecture. This is the crucial moment where each student must pick a site on which to further develop an environmentally-aware architecture object.

9. J. B. JACKSON, *THE NECESSITY FOR RUINS* (AMHERST: MIT PRESS, 1980).



DAMIEN GUERRA, LABA DIPLOMA 2016
 MELISSA DE LA HARPE, LABA DIPLOMA 2014

4.3) architecture: inhabiting place

The goal of the second semester is that students start form a critical topography (description of place) of their chosen site, and then respond to its situation with an architectural proposal. This has to respond adequately to the program as well as to the environment, revealing the singularity of the object's site, its 'placeness', as well as the autonomy of the objects form and purpose. To this end, models will be the primary tool of work. The sequence of assignments follows a trajectory meant to highlight the process: place, space, ambience, object. The final project should reflect the overall yearly academic method and structure, thus reflecting a solid understanding of Portuguese territory and architecture. Students may work individually or in pairs.

The worst enemy of modern architecture is the idea of space considered solely in terms of its economic and technical exigencies indifferent to the site.

. . . Through the concept of the site and the principle of settlement, the environment becomes the essence of architectural production. From this vantage point, new principles and methods can be seen for design — principles and methods that give precedence to the sitting in a specific area. This is an act of knowledge of the context that comes out of its architectural modification. The origin of architecture is not in the primitive hut, or the cave or the mythical 'Adam's House in Paradise'.¹⁰

10. VITTORIO GREGOTTI, QUOTED IN: KENNETH FRAMPTON, *STUDIES IN TECTONIC CULTURE* (CAMBRIDGE, MASS.: MIT PRESS, 1995).

