

PORTO ACADEMY

2026
20–27 JULY
ESAP

BeAr

AMBIGUOUS COLLECTOR

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SIZA'S MOTHER

Kersten Geers

Somebody once told me that Álvaro Siza visited Robert Venturi's mother's house a couple of years after it was built, or at least sometime in the second half of the 1960s or early '70s. It might be important to get the rumour confirmed, and as far as I can remember, I heard it not long after visiting the house myself.

In many ways the serendipity of a sequence of events seems more telling than just an account of a visit. It seems to confirm a hunch I always had about Siza, one that makes him escape from the rather limited reading of him as the genius of the European South who in almost complete isolation developed a style in direct relation to the context he inhabited. It puts into question the theory of sublime regionalism and presents Siza as a sneaky internationalist, operating fully aware of the international context of architecture.

But might this mean something other than a recognition of his acknowledgement of a broader context, which is not that strange for a man of the world? Perhaps this: Siza's work has much less to do with Portugal than many like to believe. More than anything, he reworked elements he found in architecture from all over the world that fascinated him. These fragments were often there in a more latent way, made slightly less visible by the spotlight shone on many of these important pieces of (then) contemporary architecture.

Seen from this perspective, Siza becomes a collector who finds, manipulates and reworks architectural themes and then imports these into the Portuguese context, with an indifference to the place. As an ambiguous collector, the disguise of contextualism has always served him well, for it was the perfect cover for a highly indifferent practice – one that is more Soane than Aalto (but then again, Aalto is

perhaps more Soane than Aalto himself). It brings us back to Venturi's mother's house, which is *vintage Siza*, but made *before* Siza discovered what he was really about.

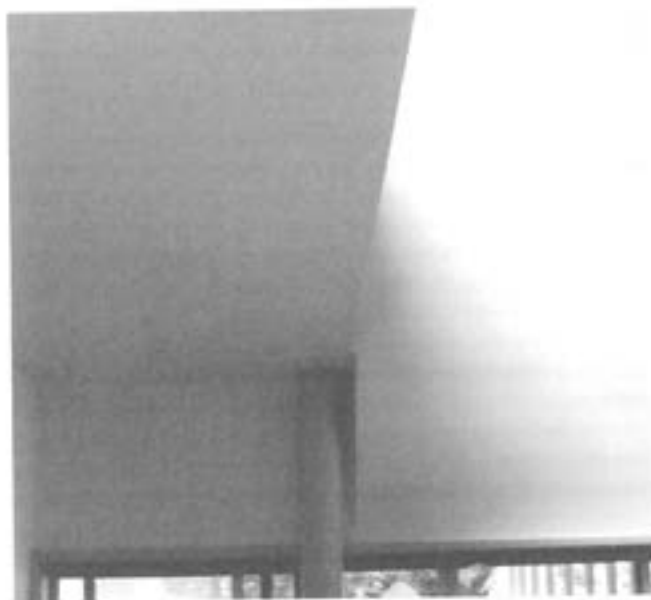
Maybe we have to understand Siza as a better Venturi, one who found the energy to actually build the spatial ideas that were promised alongside the ducks and boxes, doing so in full awareness of these theories but without the necessity of reminding us of them. Venturi's buildings are often (though not always) disappointing in reality. The idea of the buildings, their "image", somehow precedes the buildings themselves, thereby limiting the bandwidth of the in-person experience. Venturi's discourse made us see images first and buildings second. The prolific images of the buildings are so ubiquitous that their power makes visiting the buildings themselves often feel somehow *after the fact*, as if it were a second-rate experience perpetually taken hostage by the discourse's simplification of things. To be able to see the movie one has to forget the trailer. (And when you finally manage to forget it, the film becomes more rewarding.)

Siza's buildings present the potential of Venturi's work, when one forgets about the discussions connected to it. They present a rhetorical architecture that has no desire to speak: no manifestos, no statements, no show. Siza's architecture is so subdued that one tends to forget even its very existence – that is, unless chance takes you to Portugal.

At least that is what happened to me. The rather minimalist and even spectacular images we've been presented with in the aftermath of the celebration of the regionalist superhero somehow discouraged any real confrontation with work that was seemingly too indebted to the soil and texture and delineations of Portugal's spartan landscape. In retrospect, only the potent collection of publications issued mid-career in the 1980s (*Professione poetica*, etc.) revealed in fragmentary fashion an architecture composed of idealized collected architectural debris.

If we were to exclude the early projects in Matosinhos, it might be possible to perceive Venturi's mother's house as Siza's first project. Built in 1960 (and designed in the late 1950s), the house for Venturi's mother is placed at the end of a long and narrow plot in perpendicular fashion. The narrow structure has a wide front and slim sides. In a counter-intuitive gesture, a wide and somehow panoramic relationship is forced upon the house and its entranceway. The gesture curiously puts emphasis on the smaller side façades, as they are low and compressed,

Vanna Venturi's House,
Robert Venturi, 1959.
Photograph by Kersten
Geers



and open to their immediate context. The house's front and back act like mirror images of each other. Both are punctured surfaces defined by a precise geometrical composition. The front façade – historically the emblem of the house – is both decoy/false friend (in the sense of having a familiar though wrong emphasis) and the conscious result of a specific set of cuts and placings defined from the inside of the house on top of a stretched two-dimensional canvas. Inside, the narrow space of the house defined by the parallel elevations is entirely organized by the stair and the vault-roof. The vault's existence, which is not noticed at first (and is highly illogical), is emphasized with a single round column supporting the flat part of the ceiling right next to it. Together, vault and column elegantly emphasize the view toward the porch on the short side of the house with a view onto the more intimate side of the garden. The volume of the stair organizes both the entrance and the living room, and incorporates a fireplace. The stair is both volume and hallway in a place without real corridors. The stair/entrance and other auxiliary spaces are pushed to the perimeter of the house in order to invest in the main space of the living room and to mediate its borders. The stair is a highly particular "invention". It is narrow at

the bottom and gets wider toward the top. Midway it touches the window that is placed atop the entrance door. The stair has no handrail and presents itself as a sculpted volume seen from the living room. Its changing width suggests maximal accessibility; the light of the window above the entrance maximizes privacy, as if it were a stair to nowhere. In the room above the living room – the bedroom – a similar theme is developed in a more literal way. There another stair abruptly stops and forms a well-considered composition with the lightbulb and door/window opening, a kind of discomfiting still life. Vault, stair, column and entrance are (what would later become) typical of Siza, and the almost Loos-like high plinth and the bookshelves, elegantly cut at forty-five degrees to fit the slightly-too-big window, also foreshadow many shelves Siza would build in the equally awkward corners of houses he designed the following decade.

An abundance of talent can be the cause of profound indifference, and Siza is perhaps the most talented architect of his generation. The ability to compose the most complex of spaces with seemingly simple elements and gestures is a disturbing gift.

In Siza's work, lines and materials, stairs and railings, walls and columns, perimeters and windows are time and again activated in a complex composition that does not present itself as a tour de force. Compositions are extremely complex but seldom feel forced; (in his best projects) gravity is not defied. Elements and pieces, as far-fetched as they may be, seem to achieve a natural balance and are, strangely enough, describable in (more or less) pure form.

Still, the true problem of the gifted craftsman is a lack of obstruction: if everything is possible, if everything is smooth, then everything is meaningless. To avoid producing just another incarnation in a perpetual showcase of architectural skills, obstruction is fundamental.

The only true challenge for Siza, therefore, has always been to invent his own programme or his own project, in order to counter his potential disengagement, which is the natural result of a situation in which "everything is possible". This potential disengagement always risks becoming outright indifference. Rather than problematizing this danger, Siza has always celebrated its potential, to the extent that each of the series of buildings he tackles seems to slightly overdo things by means of some sort of hidden meta-project. As a self-declared programme, the meta-project carries the root of each of his then-current "collections". Through the programme, indifference becomes an

asset, one capable of surmounting the actual context of the building; almost like a Venturian strategy in reverse, the project comes through the building, not the other way around. Perhaps you could say that for Siza, the building precedes the image.

Within this framework, Venturi's mother's house is not so much a reference to be copied than it is a challenge, or a set of difficulties to overcome; it served as Siza's programme for a while as a project that could be appropriated as part of a series of projects (houses and banks in the 1970s, for example) that work in relation to it. So perhaps Venturi's mother's house informed Siza's work during a specific period, and then at a certain point Stirling's Cambridge library started to do the same, and then other buildings and fragments of them had a similar impact. Each of these architectural works was appropriated by Siza as fragments of his own work. For a true collector, objects and elements never fall out of fashion.

FRAGMENTS OF HISTORY

BeAr
Porto Academy 2026

Architecture is not invented from scratch. It is remembered, cut, and rewritten.

This workshop works with a limited archive of projects by Álvaro Siza from different periods. Fernando Távora remains present as a latent reference: not as a direct object of study, but as part of the architectural culture and chain of transmission within which Siza's work can be understood.

These buildings are not approached as references to imitate, but as territories to excavate: not only as works in themselves, but as assemblages of decisions inherited from previous architectures. Houses, pavilions, and public buildings are understood as reservoirs of fragments: a section, a threshold, a window, a corner, a joint, an encounter with the ground, a shadow.

The workshop begins with seven fragments selected and assigned by the tutors. Participants will work in seven fixed groups of three or four people. Rather than belonging to a single group, each fragment will pass through three different groups and three successive phases of work. Each group will receive the material produced by another group, act upon it, and pass it on.

The process begins with the precise study of the fragment as it exists. It

will be measured through drawing and reconstructed as a silent analytical model. The drawing is treated as an archaeological document: a careful reconstruction of what is there, not yet an interpretation. The model does not reproduce an entire building, but a precise architectural episode.

Only one model will be produced for each fragment. Its scale is open, but it must be large enough to allow the fragment to be properly understood, handled, and transformed. In every case, the model must fit within a maximum volume of **40 × 40 × 40 cm**.

At this first stage, the model will be entirely white and stripped of interpretation. It must be assembled using reversible taped joints, allowing it to be opened, dismantled, manipulated, and transformed during the following phases.

The fragment must be precise and bounded: section and thickness, opening and ground. It must be something that can be drawn without style and built without approximation.

From this point, the workshop shifts from reconstruction to rewriting. In the second phase, the fragment passes to another group and is reformulated as the beginning of a new space. Its program, scale, climate, orientation, material logic, or use may change. The aim is not yet to define a complete project, but to discover what kind of architecture might emerge from that fragment.

In the third phase, the fragment passes to a final group. This group will develop and define the new space, working with the original fragment and with the decisions inherited from the previous phases.

There will be no second model and no clean restart. The same model will accumulate the successive transformations of the project. In the final phase, the model will be dressed by its new architecture. The original fragment must remain white and recognizable, while all new elements will be incorporated using a clear and consistent colour code. The model will therefore make its own transformation visible: inherited material and new architecture will coexist without becoming confused.

The same logic of accumulation will structure the drawings. All drawings will be made by hand and developed through superimposed layers of tracing paper or translucent drafting paper. Each phase must preserve the previous one while adding new information, interpretations, and decisions.

The drawings are not separate representations of three finished moments. They are working documents that register the transformation of the fragment over time. Analysis, ideation, and definition remain simultaneously present and visible.

The fragment becomes a unit of design: a remainder, a rule, an active memory.

No group will be the sole author of a final proposal. Each result will be the consequence of several successive readings, decisions, and displacements. Authorship is replaced by transmission: every group receives an existing condition, acts upon it, and leaves it open for someone else to continue.

At the end of the week, the seven transformed fragments will be assembled into a collective space. Not as a decorative collage, but as an incomplete city: a constellation of pieces that do not fully belong together, yet hold each other in place.

A new architecture emerges from their friction — a space made of precise memories, rewritten by many hands. A domestic and Atlantic **Roma Interrotta**: a place composed of fragments that remain recognizable, but are no longer obedient to their original history.

ON METHOD AND POSITION

This is not a workshop about authorship, but about transmission.

Siza is not treated as a figure to be admired or imitated, but as a precise constructor of architectural knowledge. His works are approached as technical documents: built thoughts that can be measured, dismantled, passed on, and reassembled.

Távora remains in the background as part of the architectural lineage that makes this way of working possible. His presence is not explicit in the selection of fragments, but latent in the workshop's understanding of architecture as a continuous process of inheritance, adjustment, and transformation.

The fragment is not an abstraction. It is always specific:
a wall has thickness,
a window has depth,
a joint has a sequence,
a threshold has a temperature.

To work with fragments is to work against generalization.
What is extracted is not form, but decision.

ON FRAGMENT AS INHERITED MATERIAL

The fragment does not belong to an author. Nor does it belong to the first group that studies it or the last group that transforms it.

The fragments extracted from Siza's work are not understood as original inventions, but as moments within a longer chain of disciplinary transmission. They are already inherited fragments: decisions that originate in previous architectures — anonymous, vernacular, or historical — and that have been reinterpreted, adjusted, and reused.

Working with these fragments therefore involves several successive displacements:

- * first, the displacement already performed by Siza when appropriating and transforming pre-existing architectural logics;
- * second, the displacement produced by one group when extracting, measuring, and reconstructing the fragment;
- * and finally, the subsequent displacements introduced by the groups that receive, reinterpret, and reactivate it.

The fragment is therefore not a citation, but a tool.

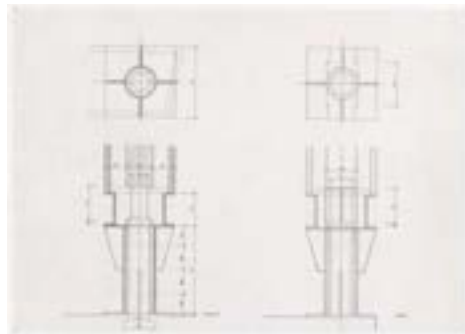
The aim is not simply to learn from Siza, but to understand how he works with what already exists: how he selects, adjusts, and recombines inherited architectural material to produce something new.

The workshop proposes to continue this chain collectively.

The fragment is not an origin or a finished object, but an intermediate state.

F01
Fragment 01

Centro Galego de Arte
Contemporânea (CGAC) /
Santiago 1993



Suggested bibliography

- * Kenneth Frampton, Álvaro Siza: Complete Works Phaidon Press, London, 2000.
- * Philip Jodidio, Álvaro Siza 1954–2024
- * Nuno Grande, Álvaro Siza. Obras e Projetos
- * El Croquis 68/69 + 95 (Álvaro Siza)
- * CGAC Archive
- * Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). Álvaro Siza Fonds

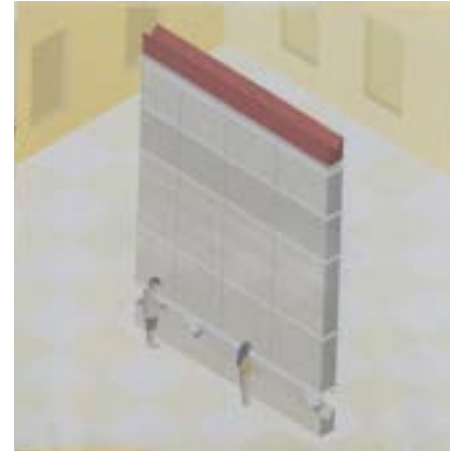
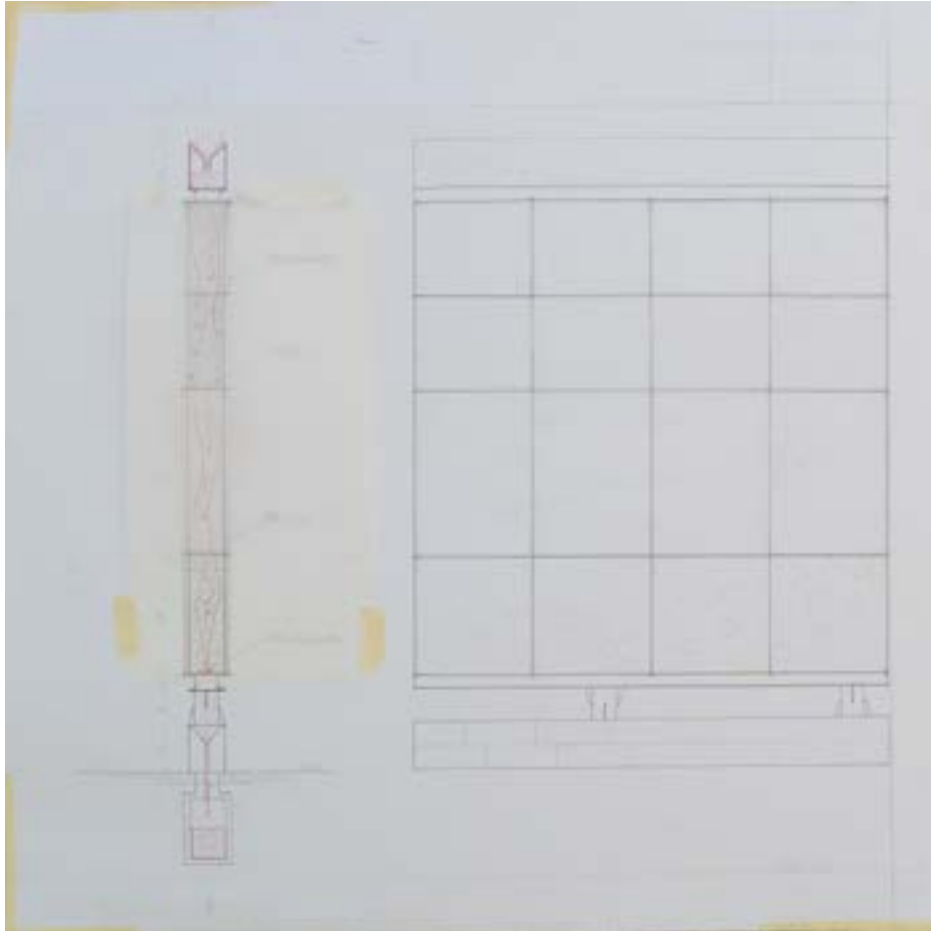




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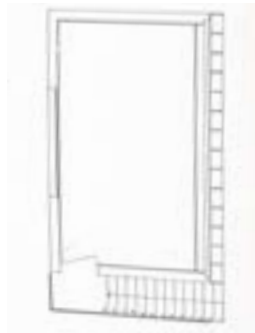
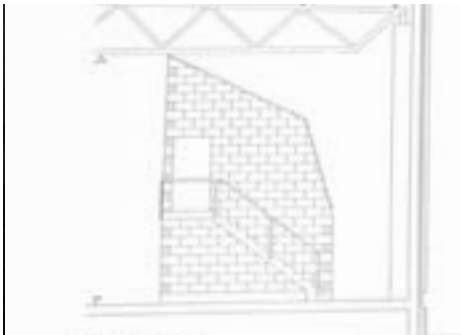


F01
TRANSFORMATION



F02
Fragment 02

Vitra Factory Building/
Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1994



Suggested bibliography

- * El Croquis 68/69 – Álvaro Siza 1986–1995. El Croquis Editorial, Madrid, 1994.
- * Frampton, Kenneth. Álvaro Siza: Complete Works. Phaidon Press, London, 2000.
- * Trigueiros, Luiz (ed.). Álvaro Siza. Blau / Gingko Press, Barcelona, 1995.
- * Vitra Design Museum. The Vitra Campus: Architecture, Design and Production.
- * Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). Álvaro Siza Fonds



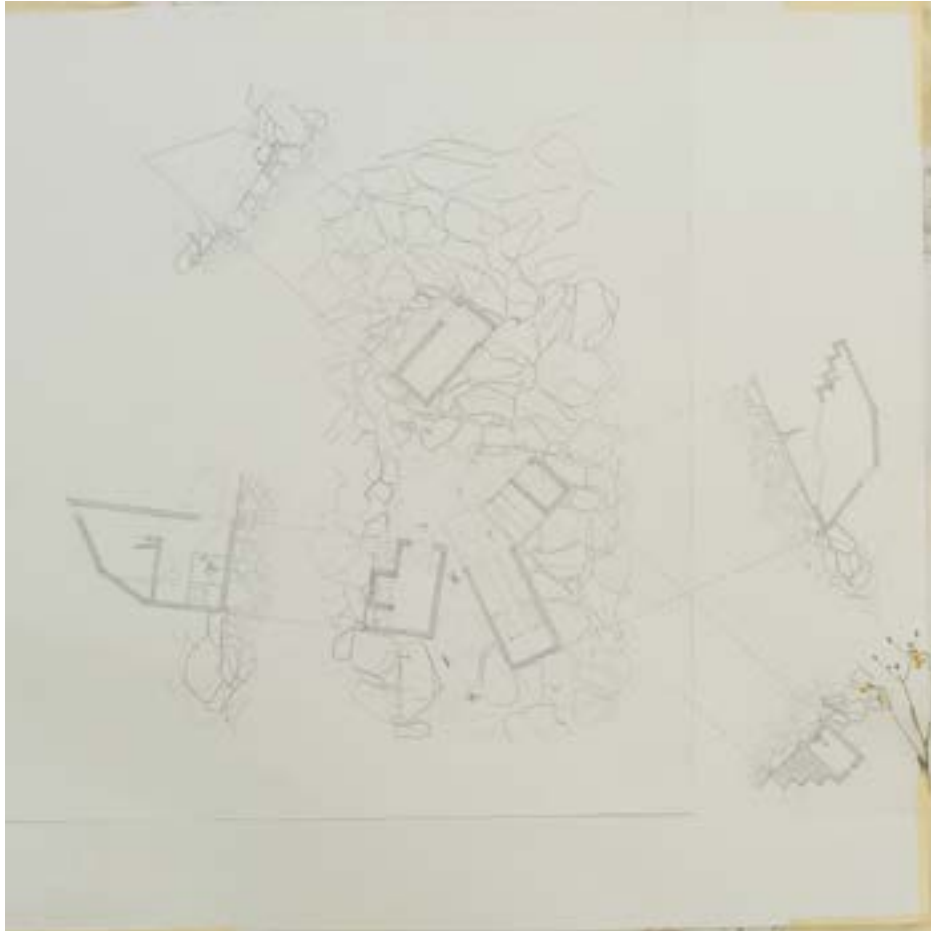


F02
TRANSFORMATION



Boris Artarski, Daria Grigoriu, Diego Pesqueira Ramírez

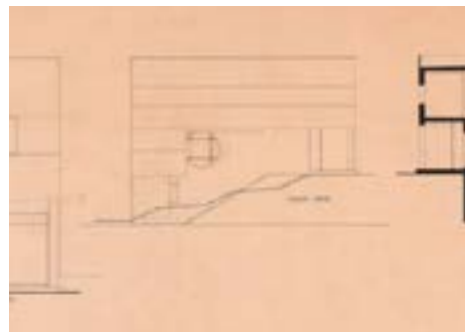
F02
TRANSFORMATION



Boris Artarski, Daria Grigoriu, Diego Pesqueira Ramirez

F03
Fragment 03

Cooperativa Unicoope Domus / Boavista, Porto 1971



Suggested bibliography

- * El Croquis 68/69 – Álvaro Siza 1986–1995. El Croquis Editorial, Madrid.
- * Frampton, Kenneth. Álvaro Siza: Complete Works. Phaidon Press, London, 2000.
- * Cianchetta, Alessandra; Molteni, Enrico (eds.). Álvaro Siza. Houses 1954–2004. Electa, Milan, 2004.
- * Siza Baroque. Siza, Baroque. Porto, 2024.
- * Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). Álvaro Siza Fonds.
- * Casa da Arquitectura – Álvaro Siza Archive.



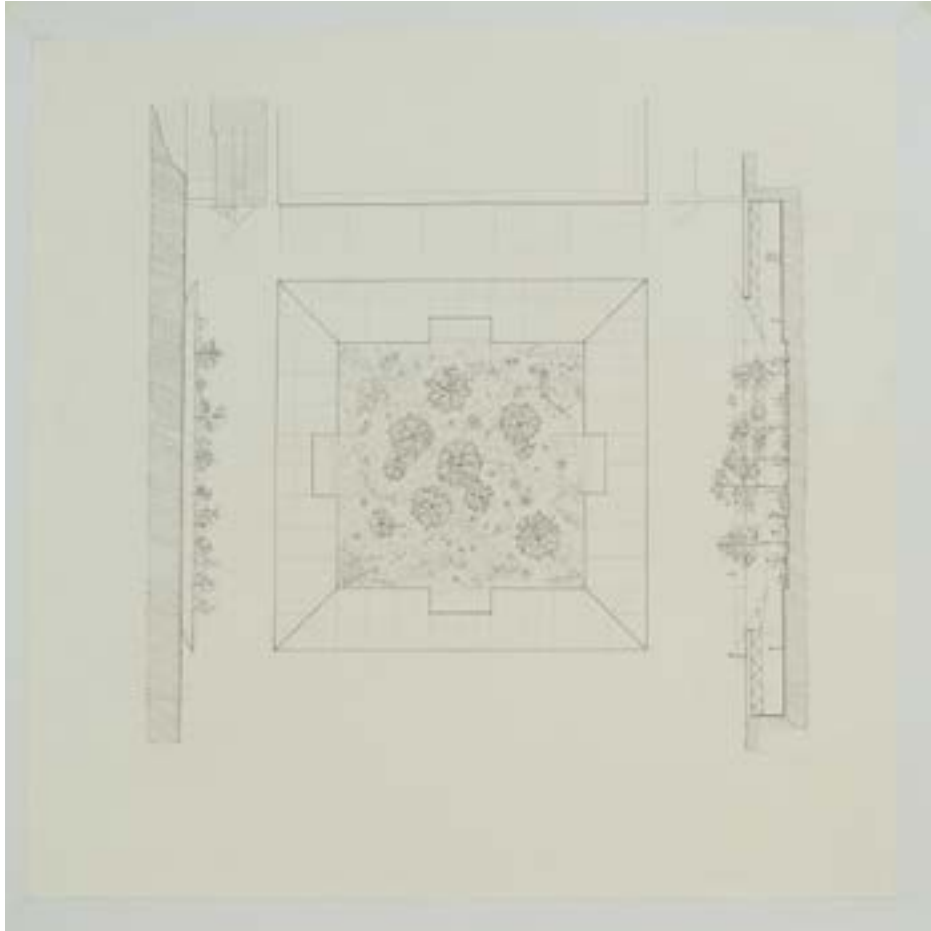


F03
TRANSFORMATION



Elena-Raluca Mihăilă, Elias Ginter, Ellen De Sutter

F03
TRANSFORMATION



Elena-Raluca Mihăilă, Elias Ginter, Ellen De Sutter

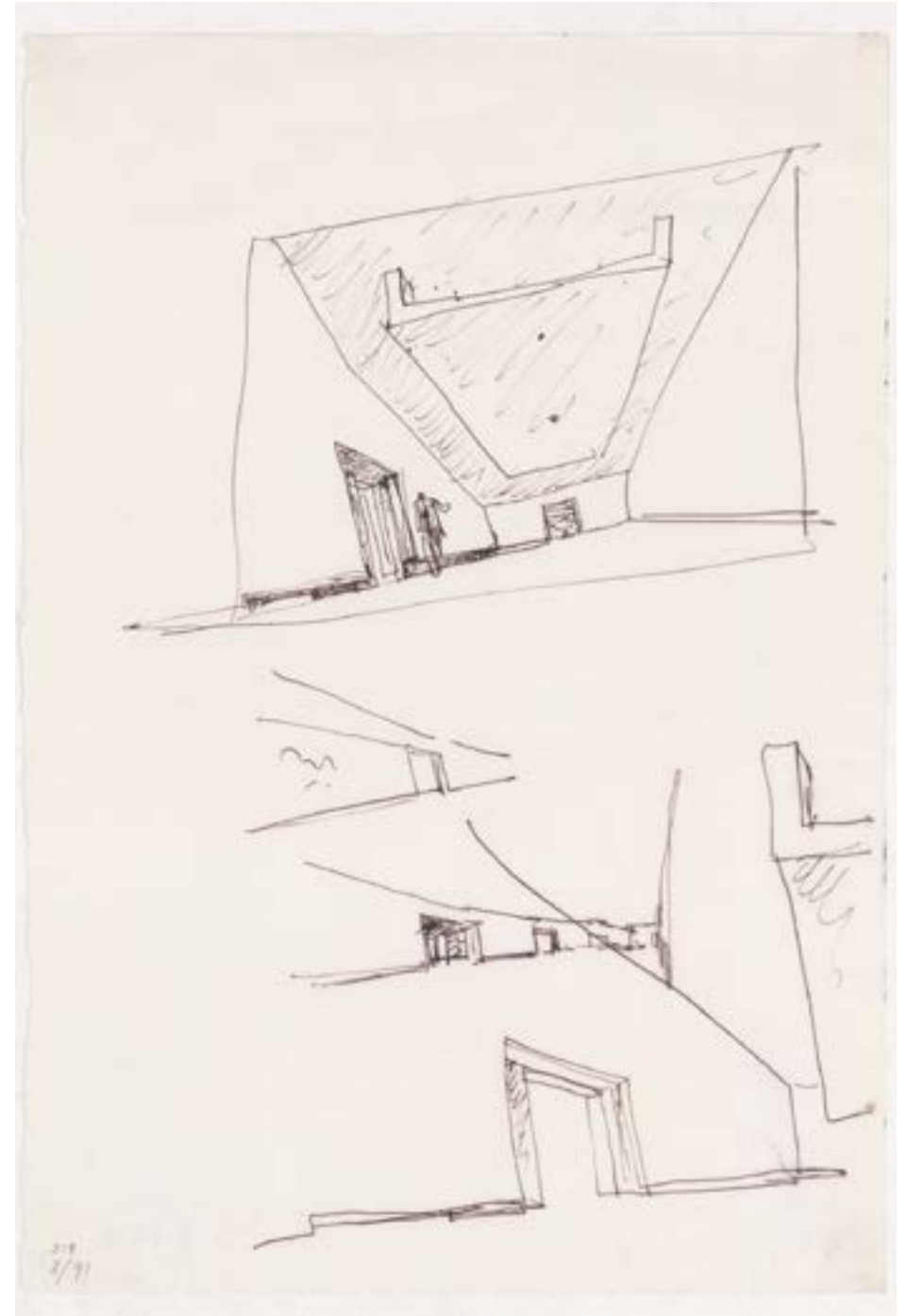
F04
Fragment 04

Centro Galego de Arte
Contemporânea (CGAC) /
Santiago 1993



Suggested bibliography

- * Kenneth Frampton, Álvaro Siza: Complete Works Phaidon Press, London, 2000.
- * Philip Jodidio, Álvaro Siza 1954–2024
- * Nuno Grande, Álvaro Siza. Obras e Projetos
- * El Croquis 68/69 + 95 (Álvaro Siza)
- * CGAC Archive
- * Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). Álvaro Siza Fonds



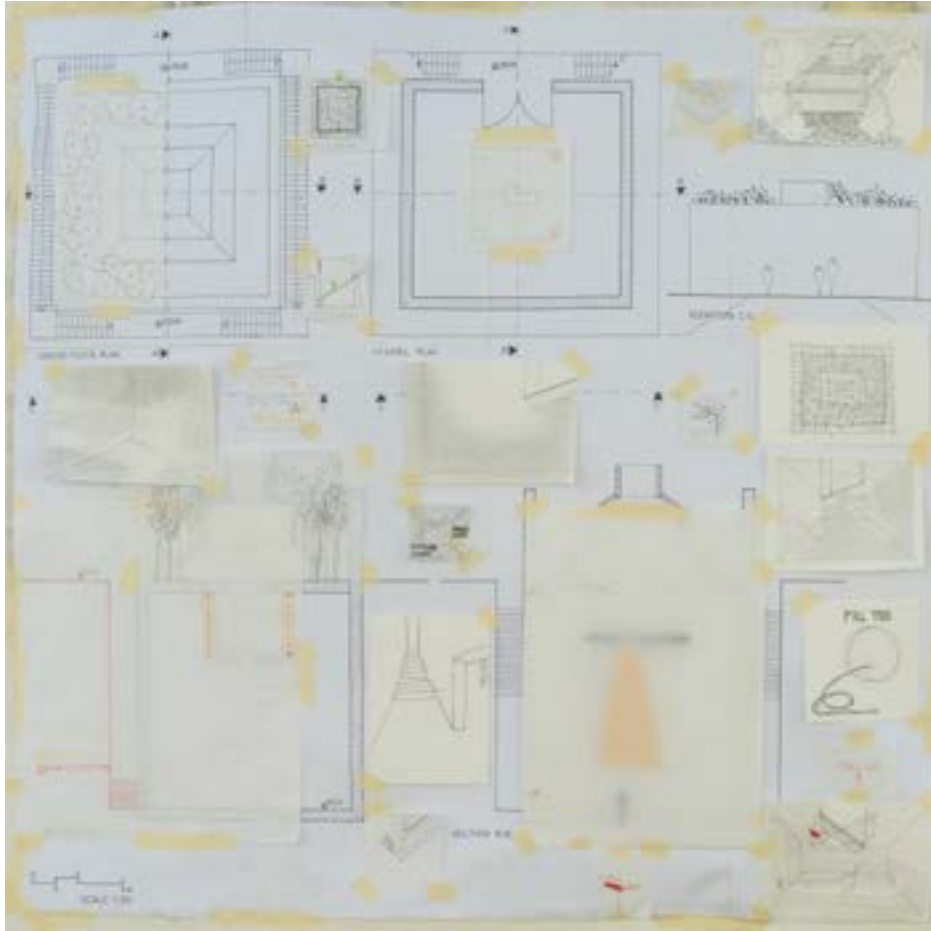


F04
TRANSFORMATION



Emilio Pappalettera, Eunsu Jang, Estée Debacker

F04
TRANSFORMATION



Emilio Pappalettera, Eunsu Jang, Estée Debacker

F05
Fragment 05

Casa Manuel Magalhães, /
Porto 1971



Suggested bibliography

- * Siza, Álvaro. Álvaro Siza: professione poetica. Electa, Milan, 1986.
- * Siza Vieira, Álvaro. "Casa Manuel Magalhães, Oporto, 1967/1970: Obras y Proyectos." Summarios, no. 54, 1981,
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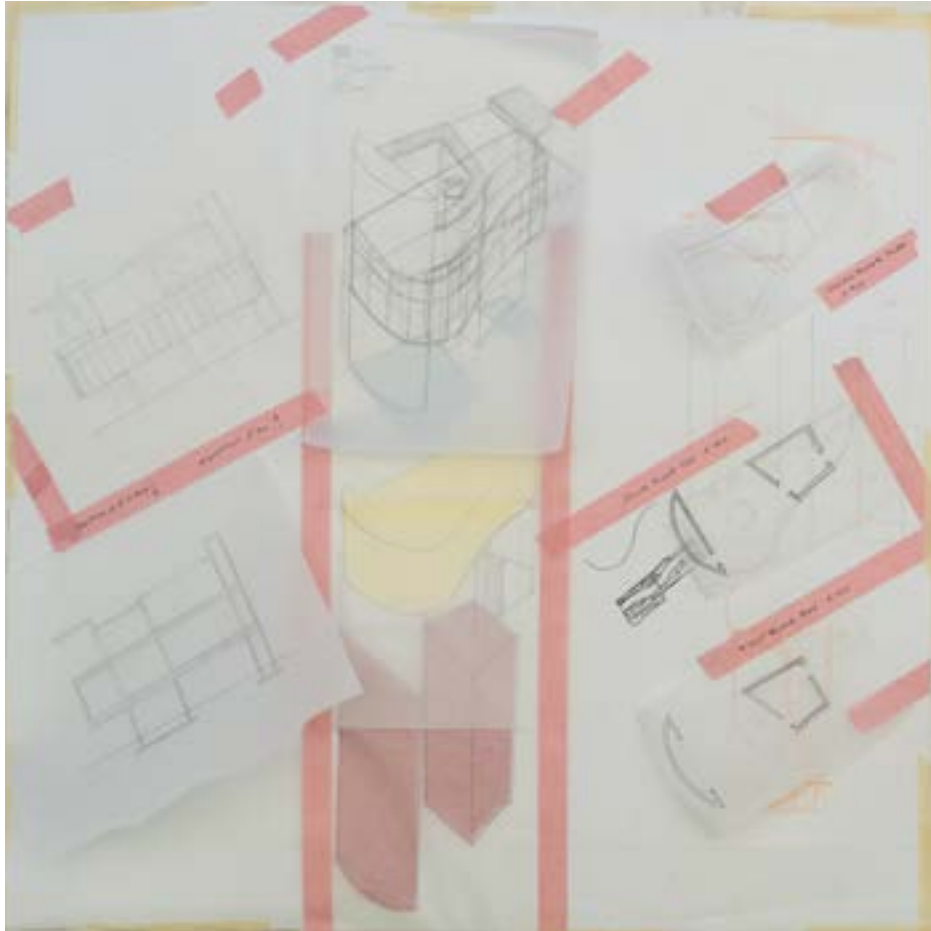


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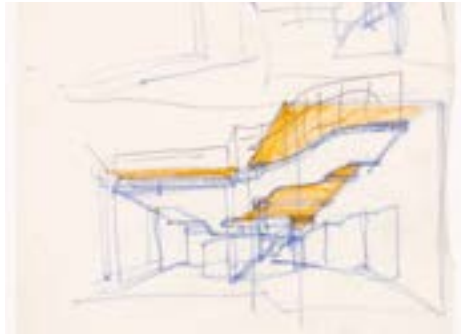
Gaetano De Piano, Ines Ollisaar, Karl Robin Timm





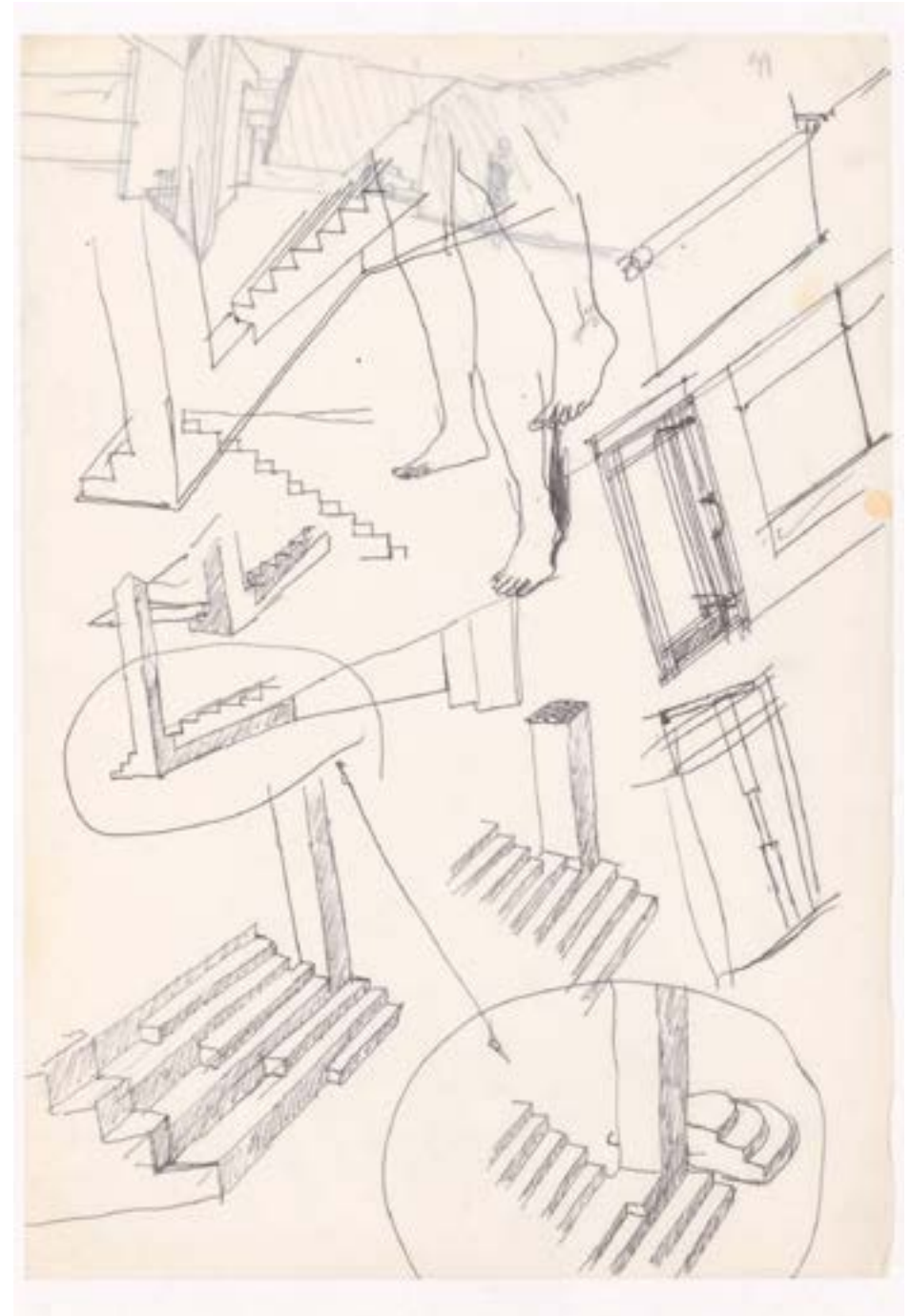
F06
Fragment 06

Galeria do Antiquário/
Campo Alegre, Porto 1973



Suggested bibliography

- * Álvaro Siza. Imaginar a Evidência. Edições ASA, Porto, 1998.
- * Frampton, Kenneth. Álvaro Siza: Complete Works. Phaidon Press, London, 2000.
- * Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA).
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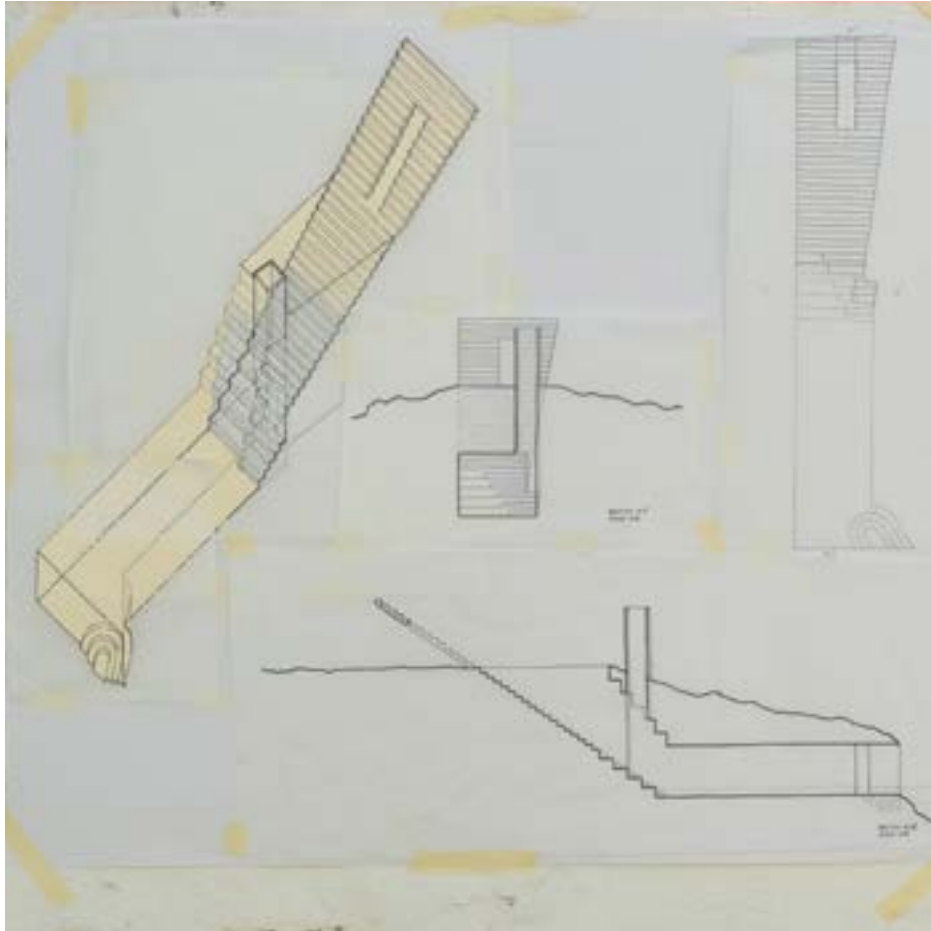




F06
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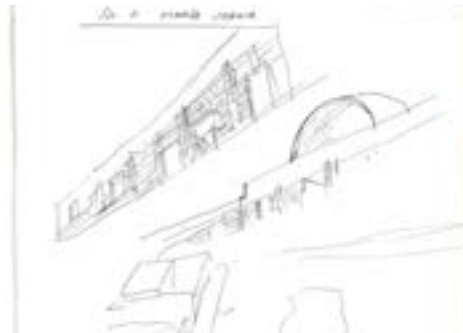


Loukas Shimitras, Manon Van Laarhoven, Marco Hurst



F07
Fragment 07

Quinta da Malagueira/
Évora, Portugal 1997



Suggested bibliography

- * Siza, Álvaro. Malagueira, Évora. Editorial Blau, Lisbon, 1997.
- * Frampton, Kenneth. Álvaro Siza: Complete Works. Phaidon Press, London, 2000.
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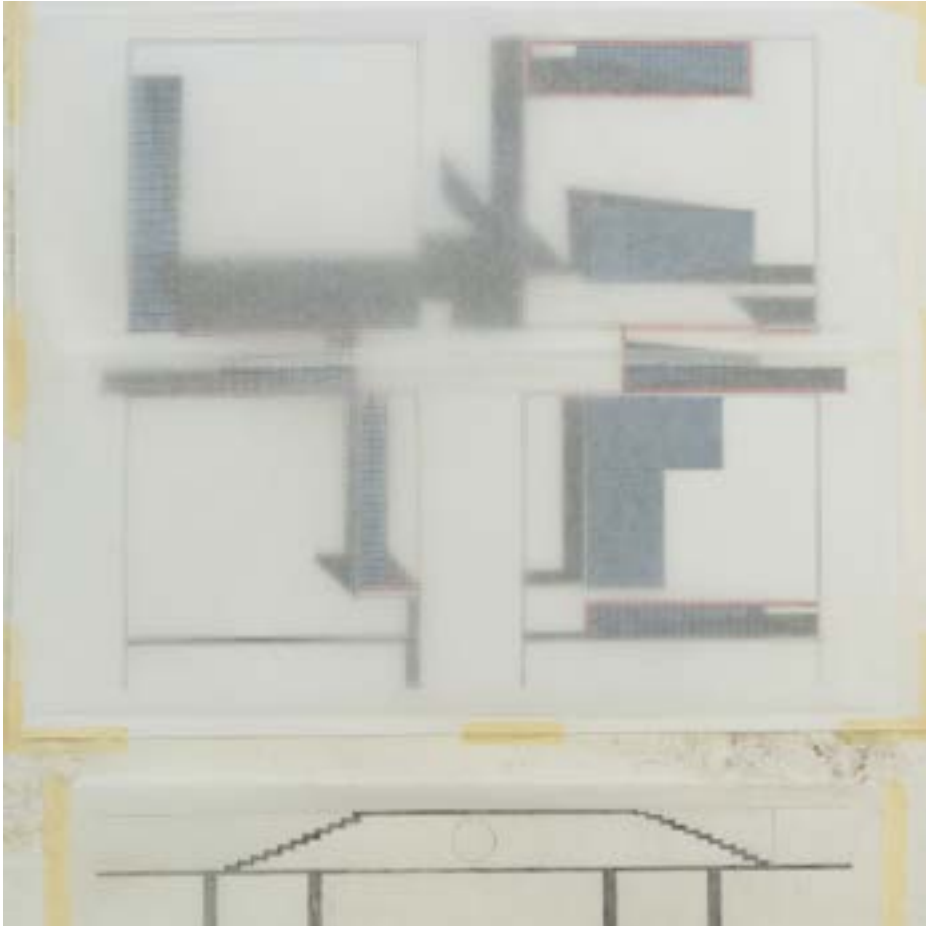


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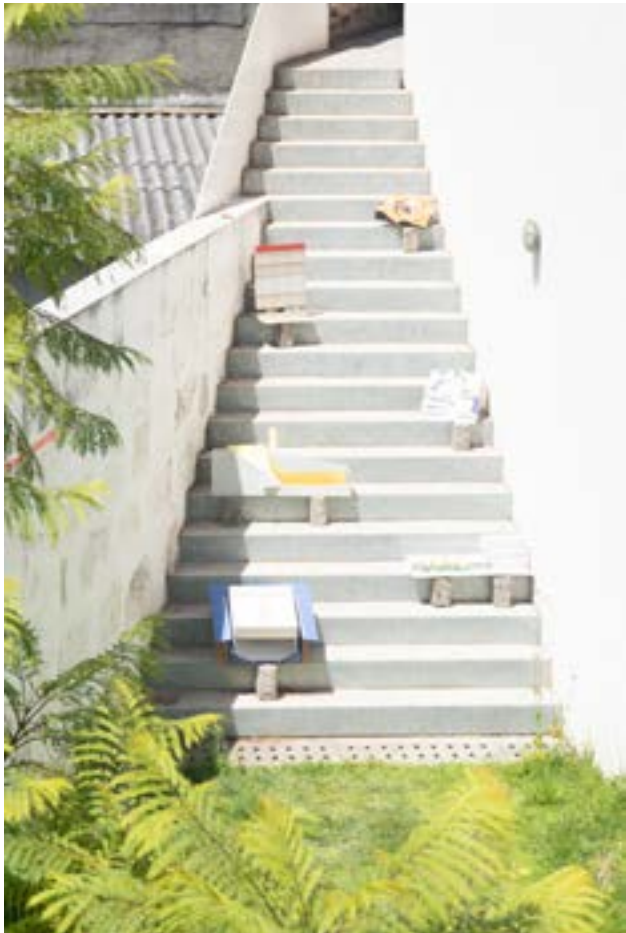


Maria Pukk, Marie Büttner, Mario Bejenaru, Minna Pärli

F07
TRANSFORMATION



Maria Pukk, Marie Büttner, Mario Bejenaru, Minna Pärdi











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