

Studio Sergison  
Spring Semester 2011

Modernism as a contemporary vernacular 2



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Aerial photograph of Palau and its surroundings

Introduction  
Jonathan Sergison

In the spring semester, we will continue our investigation of the notion of Modernism as a contemporary vernacular.

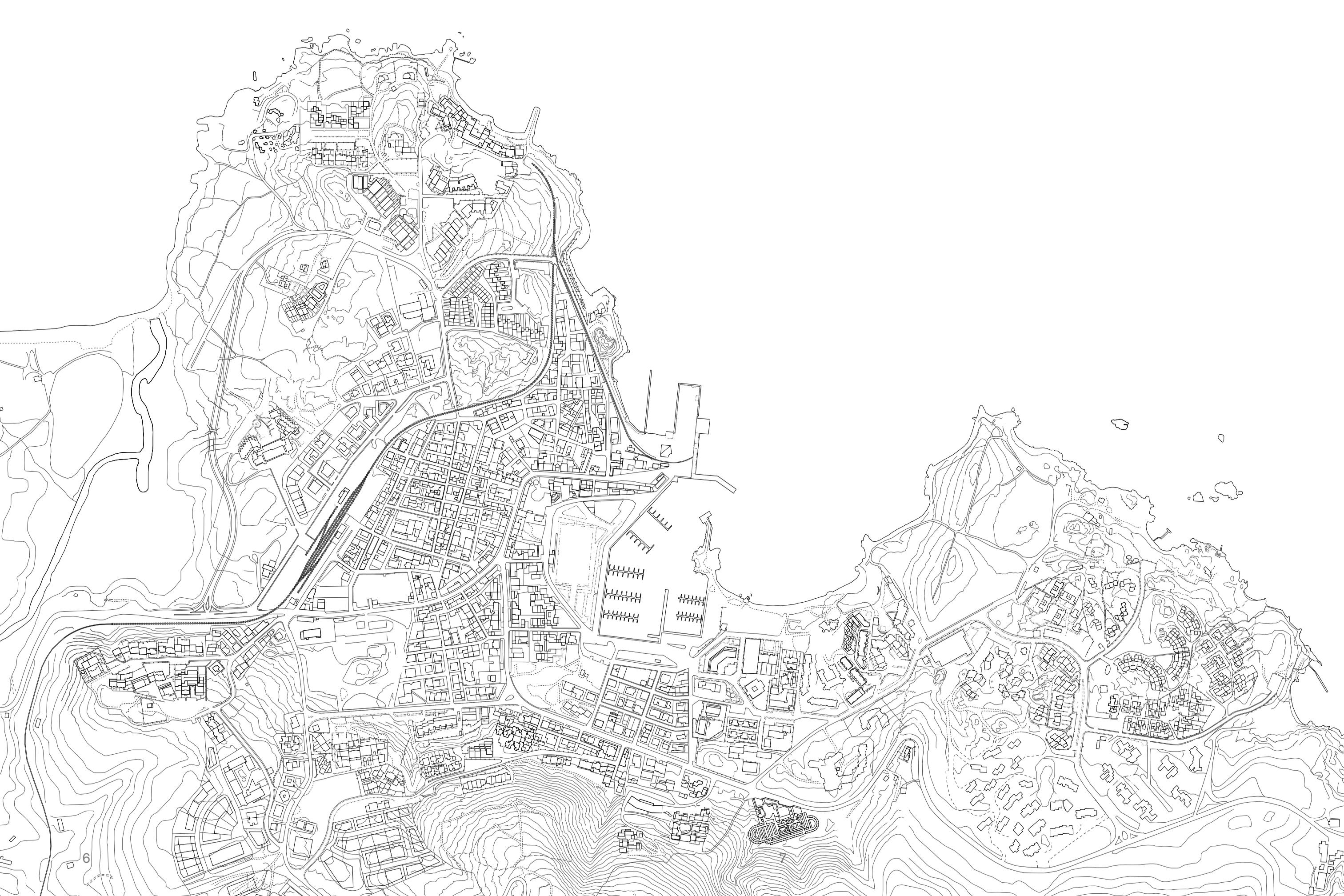
In the last semester we considered this theme in relation to the definition of Modernism, looking at its origins as a canon in architecture. The city of Tel Aviv offered a rich context for our studies. It forced us to question the manner in which UNESCO protected architecture from the 1920s and 30s can respond to the contemporary pressure to absorb growth and development. How can it meaningfully deal with issues of heritage while attending to the ever greater pressure to densify?

Tel Aviv is not the only city that needs to address the contradictions of these contemporary urban issues. This semester the town of Palau, situated in the northeast corner of Sardinia has been chosen for the work of the studio. Like many Mediterranean towns, Palau is facing pressure to grow and extend largely as a result of tourism.

A number of sites have been chosen for projects. As a whole, the studio will create an urban vision for Palau. Students will work in pairs and propose projects within a collectively agreed framework. Typically, these will be at the scale of apartment buildings or clusters of housing blocks.

The Italian architect Alberto Ponis, and representatives from the Municipality of Palau will support the studio.

A typical street in Palau with a view of the surrounding hills



Theme: Modernism as a contemporary vernacular  
(the vernacular at the service of modernism)  
Jonathan Sergison



1

International Modernism derives its image of 'newness' in part from industry: grain silos, ships, motor cars. These were referred to by Le Corbusier in one of the most influential arguments made for the modern movement in his 'Vers une architecture'. Another facet of the search for an image of newness looked to the simple, pre-classical, primitive island architecture of the Mediterranean for inspiration. These forms are often painted white in a way that renders them pure and free from classical cultural association.

Le Corbusier's journey to the south east of Europe (his so called 'Journey to the Orient') was well documented and is frequently cited. He was not, however, unique in finding inspiration in a more primordial way of building. Louis Kahn is another architect that fundamentally changed the direction of his work as a result of exposure to the traditional domestic architecture of the Greek Islands. These buildings are a direct and practical response to their geographic setting, and the first generation of modernist architects found this very appealing.

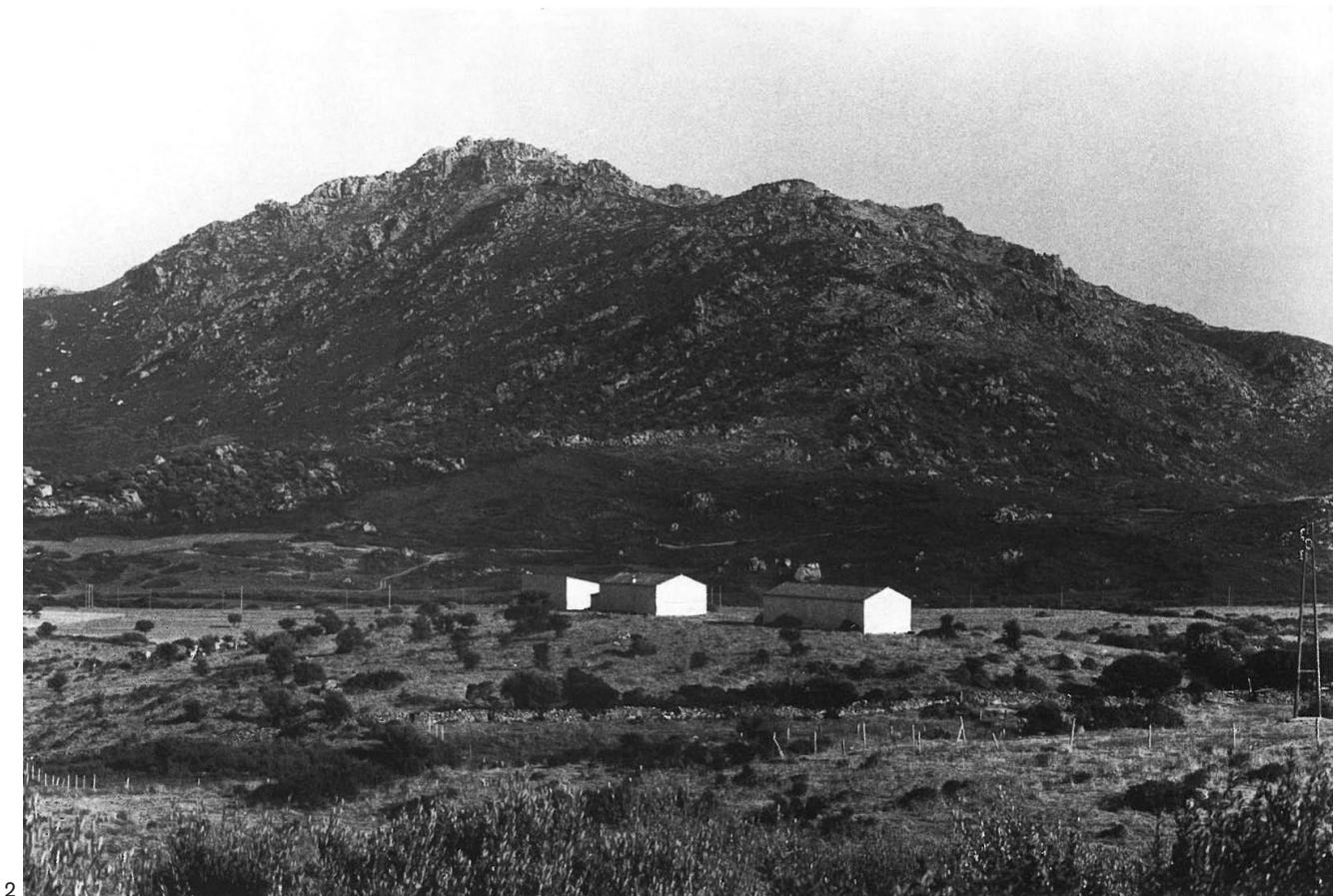
While the central protagonists of the modern movement - Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer, J.P. Oud, among others - were forceful personalities that did not shy away from a degree of self-promotion, another approach also emerged, exploring the notion of modernity by placing equal emphasis on projects being of their place rather than universal.

Alvar Aalto was an early protagonist of this tendency; others include Sigmund Lewerentz and Gunnar Asplund. All of them were educated in the classical tradition, but in the course of their careers, their work moved from investigating the late classics to being unquestionably modern and proposing a way of making architecture that was without precedent. This can be seen as a particularly Nordic attitude, imbued with a spirit of humanism and a belief that buildings should be of their place, as well as being contemporary. Utzon, Peter Celsing, Sverre Fehn and, to some extent, Jacobson further developed this sensibility.

1  
Traditional *stazzo*

2  
*Stazzi* near Olbia

Page 6 7  
map of Palau



2

This proved inspiring for a particular strand of British architecture, sometimes referred to as the Cambridge school, which includes Denys Lasdun, Colin St. John Wilson, Lesley Martin and Patrick Hodgkinson, among others. Alison and Peter Smithson, James Stirling and James Gowan did have at certain times in their careers a connection to this sensibility, but they were always too conceptually restless to remain in one camp for long.

Where this 'other tradition' has been adopted with remarkable enthusiasm is where the journey can be said to have started — in the south of Europe. While several Greek and Italian architects developed a modernist architecture that is sensitive to a building's place in the world, a number of architects from the Iberian Peninsula were directly influenced by northern European architecture and have drawn upon it in their own work, such as Antonio Coderch in Barcelona and the Porto masters, Fernando Tavora and Alvaro Siza.

In 1983, architectural theorist Kenneth Frampton addressed this other approach to modernism in his seminal essay 'Critical Regionalism', where he defines precisely the inherent characteristics of what he argued had been a tendency in the architecture of the last 40 or so years. It does not do justice to the seriousness of his argument to summarise Frampton's analysis as an investigation of the tension that exists in contemporary architecture between the need to be modern (universal) and the sense of responsibility to the local (the particular), but this is broadly the thrust of his argument.

This semester we will take Frampton's proposition 28 years after it was first articulated and, by drawing upon the work of Italian architect Alberto Ponis, we will investigate how it might be possible to make a modern architecture that strives to be deeply rooted in its place — a modern architecture that is a form of contemporary vernacular.

We will consider place in terms of physical things, topography and local conditions as found, but also in relation to the wider cultural and socio-political aspects of the local settlement.

1  
Nordic Pavilion at Venice Biennale,  
Sverre Fehn 1962

2  
Restaurant Boa Nova, Leça da  
Palmeira, Alvaro Siza 1958-1963

3  
Ugalde house, Barcelona, Antonio  
Coderch 1951

4  
Malagueira neighbourhood, Alvaro  
Siza 1977-1997

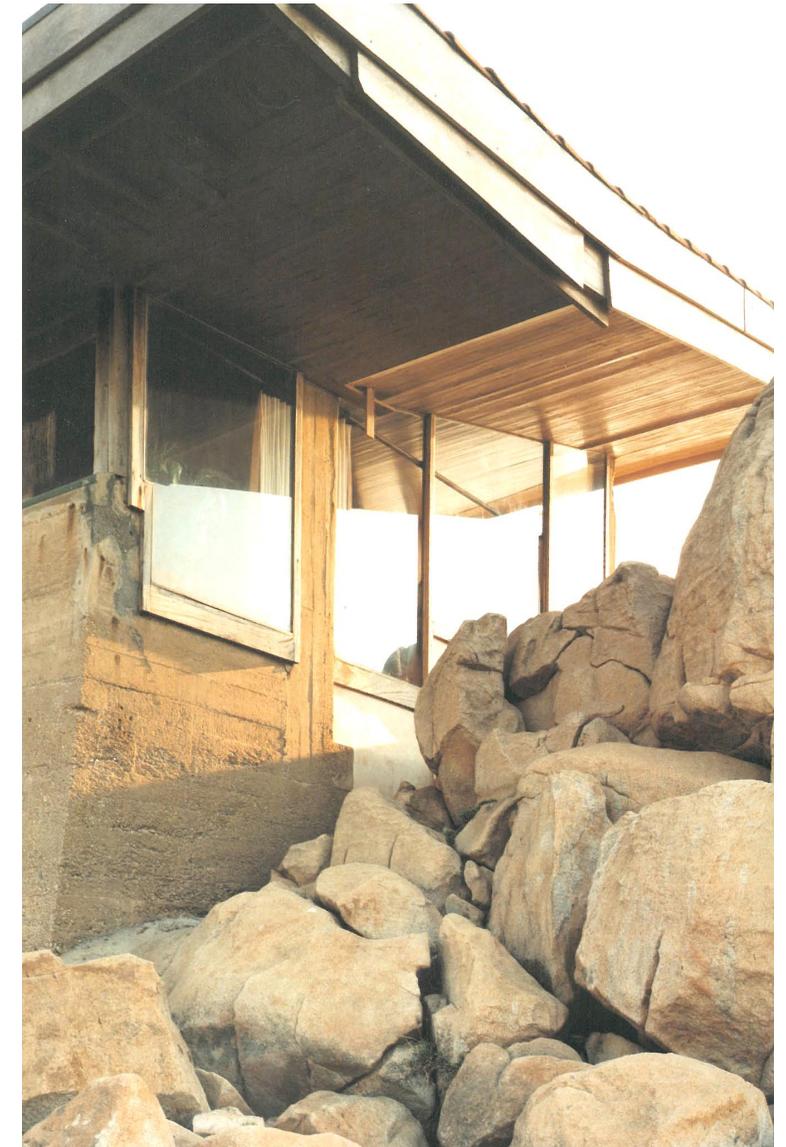
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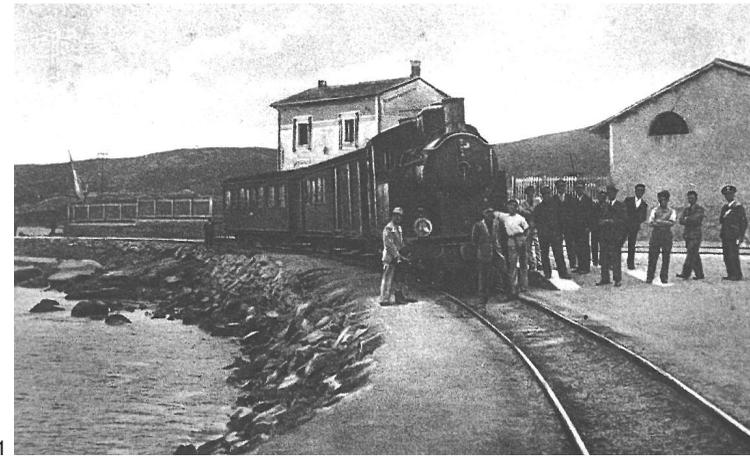
Palau is situated on the north-eastern coast of Sardinia, close to the famous Costa Smeralda, the boarding port for the archipelago of La Maddalena.

Its name dates back to the fourteenth century, when fishermen used the term *parago* or *parao* to refer to a safe haven, a landing place protected from the wind. The first settlement consisted in agricultural buildings known locally as *stazzi* which were built in the interior, along the Liscia river and inhabited by farmers and fishermen.

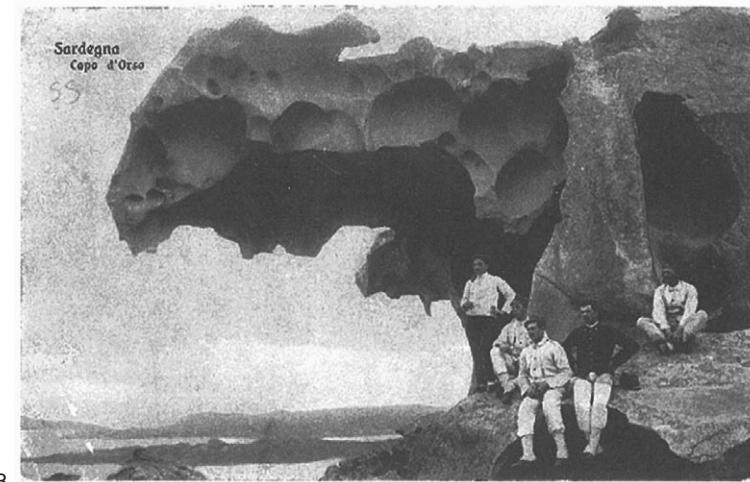
In 1793 French troops under the command of the young Napoleon Bonaparte tried and failed to occupy the small island of La Maddalena, which was then one of the most important strategic points in the Mediterranean and part of the Regno di Sardegna. In 1861, with the unification of Italy, La Maddalena became the strategic base of the Italian Navy and in the decades that followed, military fortifications were erected on La Maddalena, Caprera, Spargi and along the coast between Punta Sardegna and Capo d'Orso, forming an impenetrable barrier for any enemy arriving from the sea.

The first house in Palau was built in 1875 by Giovan Domenico Fresi. A farsighted and wealthy pioneer, he managed to attract other settlers, mostly fishermen and farmers from the surrounding countryside. The subsequent development of Palau is closely connected with the growth and increasing prosperity of La Maddalena and the consolidation of its defensive fortresses. Work on the large fortifications around Palau continued until 1916, providing work for local inhabitants. A garrison was also posted at Palau from the early 1900s, and the soldiers stationed there were responsible for draining and reclaiming the surrounding marshes.

The construction of the first bridge over the Liscia in 1880 ended Palau's isolation, making it possible to cover in a few hours distances that would previously have taken days. Sardinia's first highway, connecting Sassari, Tempio Pausania and Palau was opened in 1908, and a train line followed along the same route in 1932.



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2 3



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1  
One of the first locomotives departing from Palau Marina station

2  
Capo d'Orso at the beginning of the twentieth century

3 4  
Palau in the 1930s

Palau retained its strategic importance and was used as a transit camp for troops and vehicles bound for the front during WW1. In 1943 its strategic significance exposed it to destruction on a scale unseen elsewhere on the island. An event which is deeply etched in the collective memory is the US air force attack that sank Italian battleships Trieste and Gorizia in the bays of Mezzo Schifo and Caprera. It was an abrupt and brutal bombing, which inflicted heavy casualties among Italian marines, and the oil slick it caused blackened the cliff face for many years.

In the aftermath of WW2 Palau, like the rest of the island and Italy as a whole, faced a profound economic crisis, which caused emigration on an unprecedented scale. It was not until the end of the 1950s that economic recovery was followed by the influx of the first tourists.

At the beginning of the 1960s following the development of the Costa Smeralda by the Aga Khan, the golden era of tourism brought prosperity, wealth and growth to the coastal villages and reversed the flow of migration, attracting workers, craftsmen and professionals from central Sardinia and mainland Italy. Palau started to open up towards the sea; tourist villages and holiday resorts sprung up along the coast and the commercial port was built.

In 1962 an eccentric Spanish aristocrat, Rafael Neville, founded a small settlement, which would become the world famous Porto Rafael. The development was an immediate success, attracting a wealthy Anglo-Italian elite and acting as a catalyst for further developments at Punta Sardegna.

Development has since transformed Palau; the once introverted town has now turned towards the sea and the twenty-house hamlet of the 1940s now counts 4200 inhabitants, which increase to 35.000 during the summer months.



1



2



3

- 1 Palau in the 1940s
- 2 Palau in the 1950s
- 3 Historical panorama



## First exercise: An urban strategy

The first piece of work will involve developing a strategy plan for the town of Palau. The purpose of this is to formulate a collectively agreed understanding of the way the town can be organised in the future as a settlement.

This work should be understood as a real question, one that we have been invited to address by the Municipality of Palau. It should be based upon and question the existing urban plan, as there are a number of parts of the town that are not functioning well from an urban perspective.

A model made at a scale of 1:500 will be built in the first weeks of the semester. This will be a tool for testing urban adjustments and later to locate the projects produced on a number of sites.

The site visit at the beginning of the semester will provide the opportunity to record accurately the existing urban situation. Groups will be allocated different neighbourhoods and parts of the town and will be responsible for compiling survey information of the assigned area. A detailed programme for the site visit will be issued separately.



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1  
Seafront

2  
The abandoned train station

3  
Typical street

Page 14 15  
Panorama of Palau and the archipelago with La Maddalena island in the background

## Second exercise: A house portrait

During our trip at the beginning of the semester, we will visit a number of houses by Alberto Ponis. These are exceptional examples of the capacity of a house to be situated with great sensitivity in relation to a site and a set of topographical conditions. In terms of the idea of how a building might be organised to support a domestic programme, the house we will visit will provide further information.

As a way of acquiring a deeper appreciation of the qualities these houses have in relation to the issues we will be exploring, we ask you to make two portraits of a house: one from the outside, describing the house's relation to place, the other of the interior of the same house as a way of recording the manner in which it supports the act of inhabitation.

While we do not expect you to make projects in the manner of Alberto Ponis there are many lessons that can be learnt from his work.

The Old House,  
Palau  
Alberto Ponis, 1964

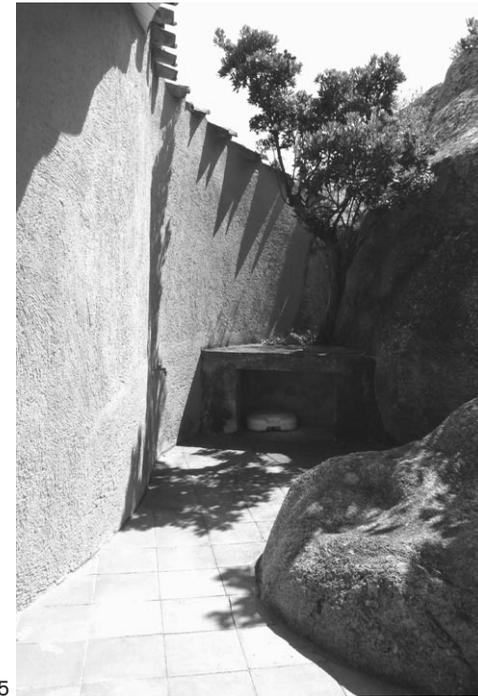
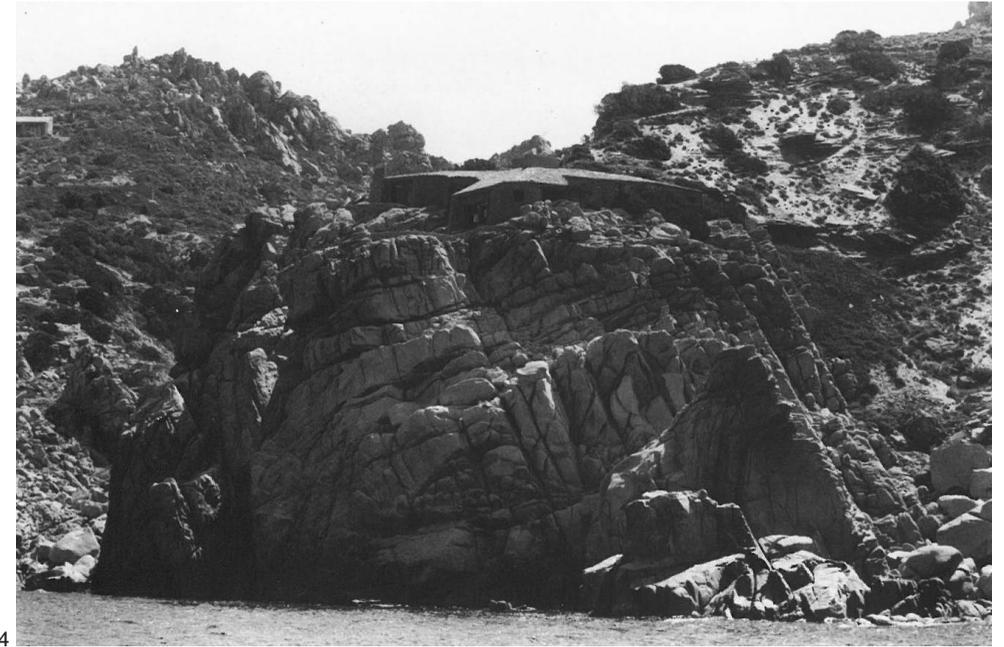




1  
The Patio House  
Stazzo Pulcheddu  
Palau  
Alberto e Aldo Ponis, 1975

2  
Stazzo Pulcheddu  
Palau  
Alberto e Aldo Ponis, 1975-1982

3  
The Definitive House  
Palau  
Alberto Ponis, 1975



4  
Scalesciani House  
Costa Paradiso  
Alberto Ponis, 1977

5  
Casa Trevisan  
Costa Paradiso  
Alberto Ponis, 1971

### Third exercise: Neighbourhood study

This exercise is intended to address the question of how a neighbourhood can be developed, adjusted and repaired. The physical and social characteristics of a place should be considered carefully.

The key piece of work at this stage of the project will be to make a model of a scale to adequately locate the built context around the site chosen for your project. The material for these models should be grey card.

At this stage you are required to propose an appropriate programme for the site – although this should be predominantly residential. The organisation of this programme should be explored through model making and tested in relation to the site.



## Fourth exercise: House(s)

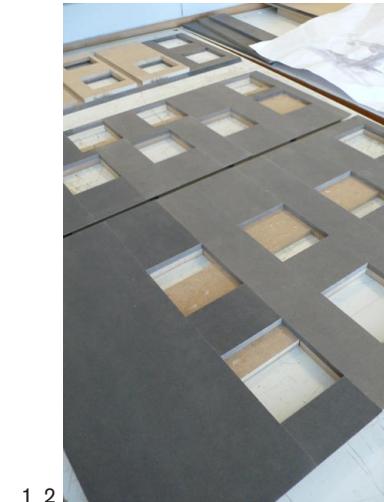
The final piece of work we are asking you to produce this semester is to design a house or building that contains multiple dwellings at a scale of 1:20. This should be understood as a development of the previous exercises.

During this stage of work, priority should be given to model making. For the final review, the project should be modelled precisely in a timber-based material at a scale of 1:20 (or a smaller scale if the size of the site demands it).

Drawing should be produced at a scale of 1:50 in plan, section and elevation and the neighbouring buildings represented.

Please note that what is described is a process that starts at the scale of the town and finishes with a project for a house in that town. It should be stressed, however, that at every stage an iterative process is encouraged, where ideas are tested at a large and small scale in strategy and in detail.

Encouragement is given for drawing by hand and employing reference as a way of communicating atmosphere and ideas. We also strongly urge you to think about and develop your verbal presentation technique.



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1 2 3  
Making a large scale house,  
Autumn semester 2009



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## Programme 2011

Date	Event	Details	Assignments
24-25 February	Introduction to semester	Jonathan Sergison (JS) presents studio and spring semester. Introduction to studio assistants Sarah Maunder (SM) and Corinne Weber (CW)	Start work on group model Allocation of site
3-4 March	Review	Review of group model and initial site strategy. Lecture by JS: "Modernism as a contemporary vernacular (2)" Lecture by SM: "An introduction to Palau as an urban condition"	1:500 group model
10-13 March	Site visit	Please see separate programme for detailed information	
17-18 March	Review	Presentation of a house portrait Review of strategy plan	Start work on neighbourhood study and selection of sites
24-25 March	Review	Review of neighbourhood study and sites Lecture by SB: "A Mediterranean house"	Elaboration of programme and typologies scale 1:100
31 March 1 April	Tutorials	Review of project typologies	1:50 model 1:100 plans, sections and elevations
7-8 April	Tutorials	Tutorials	1:50 model 1:100 plans, sections and elevations
14-15 April	Intermediate Review	Review of housing typologies with invited critics	1:50 model 1:100 plans, sections and elevations
21 April	Tutorials	Tutorials	1:50 model 1:100 plans, sections and elevations

Date	Activity	Event	Assignment
22 April-1May	Easter holiday		
5-6 May	Tutorials	Tutorials	1:20 model 1:20 plans, sections and elevations
12-13 May	Tutorials	Tutorials	1:20 model 1:20 plans, sections and elevations
19-20 May	Tutorials	Tutorials	Submission of 1:20 plans, sections and elevations
26-27 May		Tutorials	1:20 model
1-3 June	Final Review	Invited critics	1:500 site model 1:20 model 1:20 plans, sections and elevations pdf/ppt presentation

## Reading list

Towards a critical regionalism: six points for an architecture of resistance  
Kenneth Frampton  
in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster ed., Bay Press, Port Townsend 1983

Critical Regionalism: modern architecture and cultural identity  
Kenneth Frampton  
in *Modern architecture. A critical history*, Thames & Hudson (1980) 2007

The grid and the pathway. An introduction to the work of Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis  
Liane Lefaivre and Alex Tzonis,  
in *Atelier 66. The Architecture of Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis*, Kenneth Frampton ed., Rizzoli International 1985

Critique of Regionalism  
Alan Colquhoun  
in *Architectural Regionalism. Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition*, Vincent B. Canizaro ed., Princeton Architectural Press 2007

The Concept of Regionalism  
Alan Colquhoun  
in *Architectural Regionalism. Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition*, Vincent B. Canizaro ed., Princeton Architectural Press 2007

Architecture writings  
Alvaro Siza  
Antonio Angelillo ed., Skira 1997

9H No. 9 On Continuity  
Rosamund Diamond and Wilfried Wang eds., 9H Publications 1995

## References

Sert, *Arquitectura Mediterranea*  
Maria Lluïsa Borràs ed.  
Ediciones Polígrafa 1974

Projects + buildings  
Aris Konstantinidis  
Agra Publications 1992

Fernando Távora  
Luiz Trigueiros ed.  
Editorial Blau 1991

Alvar Aalto  
Richard Weston  
Phaidon Press 1995

Álvaro Siza. *Private Houses 1954-2004*  
Alessandra Cianchetta and Enrico Molteni  
Skira 2004

Coderch 1913-1984  
Editorial Gustavo Gili 1990

Álvaro Siza. *Complete Works*  
Kenneth Frampton  
Phaidon Press 2000

Storie di case e ambiente  
Alberto Ponis  
Skira 2003

Architettura in Sardegna  
Alberto Ponis  
Skira 2006

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