

*Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and  
Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and  
Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces*



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## REVIEW

## **Iñaki Bergera's Poetics of Abandonment. Siza in Panticosa<sup>1</sup>**

Pedro Leão Neto

The first connection with Iñaki Bergera came from his engagement with architectural photography as both a scholarly and creative practice, a twofold commitment that has consistently defined his trajectory. An architect and photographer who has dedicated much of his research to understanding how photography is not only an instrument for documenting architecture but also a significant means of constructing its meaning, Bergera has collaborated for many years with the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP) through the research group Architecture, Art and Image (AAI) of Nuno Portas Centre for Studies (CENP), namely with its editorial project focused on the intersection of photography with architecture call scopio Editions. His academic work, publications, and curatorial projects reveal a sustained and rigorous inquiry into the relationship between built form, representation, and time. Over more than a decade, this inquiry has found one of its most compelling expressions in his photographic engagement with the abandoned High Performance Centre (CAR) designed by Álvaro Siza at Panticosa, in the Spanish Pyrenees.

*Poetics of Abandonment. Siza in Panticosa* is the culmination of this long-term project. It is not merely a photographic book, nor simply a record of architectural decay; rather, it is a reflective and layered investigation into the capacity of photography to reveal latent meanings within architecture—meanings that emerge most forcefully when function collapses and time takes over.

The book's main focus is the complex condition of Panticosa itself. As Bergera refers, this is not simply a geographical site but a landscape shaped by centuries of interaction between nature and human intervention, a hybrid terrain where architecture and territory coexist in tension. The CAR building by Álvaro Siza is the central figure in this narrative. This building was almost completed but was suddenly abandoned following the collapse of the Spanish real estate boom, becoming an architecture suspended between intention and entropy, between completion and decay.

Bergera's photographic approach entails a particular way of observing, namely in its restraint, since his photographic narrative avoids both overt denunciation and sentimental nostalgia. He achieves this by adopting a studied, almost forensic vantage point that allows the site's inherent contradictions to emerge. In this way, Bergera's work encourages the viewer to engage in a broader reflection about architecture's life cycle and the fragile conditions that underpin its realisation. His work stimulates the viewer to engage critically with what is seen and, equally importantly, with what is suggested.

<sup>1</sup> Bergera, Iñaki. *Poética del abandono: Siza en Panticosa*. Madrid: Ediciones Asimétricas, 2026.

What is of great value in this book is that Bergera's photographic invitation is closely tied to its structure: a sequence of images that constructs a perceptual journey. Here, we can speak about the notion of the *promenade architecturale*, as defined by Flora Samuel<sup>2</sup>. The *promenade* becomes particularly relevant in this work because of its capacity to make us simultaneously experience space through movement and interconnect a network of ideas that sustain architectural understanding. In fact, the photography series operates precisely within this dual condition. The viewer does not passively observe isolated images but is guided through a spatial and conceptual path that unfolds across the pages, suggesting movement, direction, and continuity.

As Juhani Pallasmaa has argued, our perception of architectural space is intrinsically linked to movement, to the act of traversing and inhabiting space over time<sup>3</sup>. We can see the reverberation of this understanding in Bergera's sequencing, as his photographic series constructs a path that the reader mentally inhabits. The book allows, in this way, to transcend the static nature of photography, proposing instead an experiential reading in which time and space are reconstituted through the act of viewing.

The condition of abandonment acquires a profound temporal dimension in Bergera's photographic series; in fact, the phenomenological path he builds with those images reveals the traces of an ongoing process: ceilings collapsing, materials decomposing, surfaces altered by humidity and exposure. None of these is understood just as signs of decay because they act as layers of superimposed records of time's passage that transform the building into a palimpsest. The architectural space becomes both subject and archive, simultaneously preserving and eroding its own identity.

However, as Bergera's images make clear, this process does not obliterate the architecture. On the contrary, it reveals its resilience. Siza's design—characterised by its careful insertion into the landscape, its controlled volumetry, and its subtle orchestration of light—retains a remarkable presence even in its unfinished and deteriorated state. The building does not appear as a ruin in the conventional sense but as something more ambiguous: an architecture in suspension, incomplete yet enduring.

2 What is of interest here is the notion proposed by Flora Samuel when she defines *promenade architecturale* as being simultaneously an experimentation of the space in movement while we walk about the building and a network of ideas (that sustain the work of architecture). See Flora Samuel, *Le Corbusier and The Architectural Promenade*, Birkhäuser Architecture, 2010.

3 Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema", in Belks Uluoglu, Ayhan Ensici, Ali Vatansever (eds.), *Design and Cinema: Form Follows Film*, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006. Available at: <http://www.cambridgescholars.com/download/sample/58510>.

Reading Siza's thoughts about the project, in which he acknowledges both admiration and unease, we better understand this ambiguity. This is so because he recognises the value of the photographs while lamenting the state of the building, noting that it does not read as a ruin but rather as an unfinished work, one that remains recoverable and whose exterior retains a certain perfection. This idea is noteworthy since it reframes the condition of Panticosa not just as a terminal failure but still as a latent possibility, an interrupted narrative rather than a concluded one.

In this regard, Bergera's photographs can be understood as documenting what might be termed "false ruins": architectures that were never fully inhabited and therefore never completed in their social and symbolic dimensions. Unlike traditional ruins, shaped by gradual decay, these structures emerge from an abrupt interruption—materialising not the passage of time, but the collapse of expectation. Panticosa's photography series engages with this condition in a particularly subtle way, presenting these spaces as if they were monuments—silent, dignified, and suspended in time—while simultaneously exposing the economic, social, and political forces that led to their abandonment.

Bergera's photographic visual grammar increases the power of this engagement through precise control of composition, light, and framing, and a unique sensitivity towards the overlooked and the marginal. There is a recurring attention to "invisible" or neglected spaces—secondary rooms, transitional zones, residual areas—where the effects of abandonment are often most palpable. In this regard, his work resonates with the legacy of the New Topographics<sup>4</sup>, particularly in its capacity to register the banal and the overlooked with a quiet, almost forensic clarity.

At the same time, the photographs possess a strong poetic dimension. Truly, as Marc Goodwin<sup>5</sup> suggests, there is always more to a photograph than what is immediately visible, and Bergera's photography series conveys meaning through our imaginative engagement with it, just as architecture itself carries an atmosphere that extends beyond its material presence. Bergera's images operate precisely within this expanded field. They do not simply depict space; they evoke it, activating the viewer's imagination and inviting a deeper, more introspective form of perception.

4 See "Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz, 2009 November 15–17" in (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-lewis-baltz-15758#transcript>); International Centre of Photography (ICP) Archive (<https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/lewis-baltz?all/all/all/0>).

5 "There is always more to a photograph than the picture. It conveys because of our fantastic sense of imagination [sic]." Pallasmaa's argument for the sort of poetic image discussed by Gaston Bachelard strikes a chord: all spaces have an atmosphere, so presumably do all photographs." in Marc Goodwin, "A Hinge: Field-testing the relationship between photography and architecture". <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/30884/32382>.

This interplay between analytical rigour and poetic suggestion is one of the book's most compelling qualities. It allows the work to function simultaneously as documentation and interpretation, as record and reflection. The images are grounded in a clear architectural understanding, yet they remain open-ended, resisting definitive conclusions and encouraging multiple readings.

Moreover, the sequencing of the images reinforces this openness. Each photograph is the result of a deliberate act of selection—of framing, positioning, and exclusion—that defines what is visible and what remains hidden. As these images are brought together in a series, they construct not only a spatial path but also a conceptual framework, a network of relationships that shapes the viewer's understanding of the architecture and its condition.

The landscape of Panticosa plays a fundamental role in this construction. Far from being a passive backdrop, it acts as an active force, both contextualising and transforming the architecture. The interaction between the building and its environment—between concrete and vegetation, structure and erosion—becomes a central theme of the work. The architecture is not simply placed within the landscape; it is gradually reabsorbed by it, becoming part of a larger ecological and temporal process.

Ultimately, *Poetics of Abandonment. Siza in Panticosa* is a profound meditation on the relationship between architecture, time, and representation. It confronts mainstream understandings of architectural photography and proposes instead a photographic practice that is altogether critical, reflective, and deeply sensitive to the complexities of the built environment.

By presenting these abandoned structures as both objects of study and subjects of contemplation, Bergera invites us to reconsider the meaning of architectural failure. Rather than viewing abandonment as an endpoint, the book reveals it as a condition rich with potential for reflection—a moment in which architecture, stripped of its functional and economic frameworks, can be re-examined in its most essential terms.

In this way, the work not only documents a specific site but also contributes to a broader discourse on architecture's role in contemporary society. It exposes the vulnerabilities inherent in its production, the forces that shape its realisation, and the unforeseen trajectories that may follow. At the same time, it affirms the enduring capacity of architecture—and of photography—to generate meaning, even in the face of uncertainty and decline.

Bergera's accomplishment rests precisely in a subtle balance between diverse features, such as distance and empathy, analysis and poetry, or the visible and the imagined. His lens acts as an inquiry tool that transforms the abandoned architecture of Panticosa into a space where the poetics of abandonment allows for the rethinking of the nature of architecture itself.





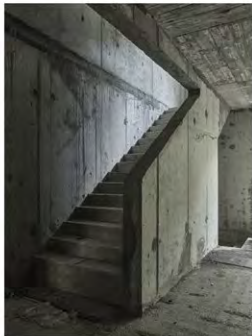
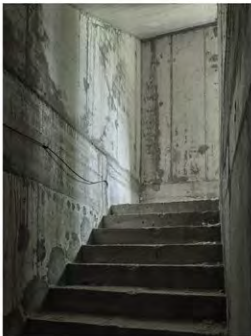














Balneario quedaron paralizadas. Algunas de las instalaciones como el Gran Hotel o el edificio termal ya estaban en uso y debieron cerrar temporalmente. Otras se quedaron interrumpidas en fase de estructura como el Apartotel o parte del aparcamiento ubicado a la entrada del recinto y las obras del edificio de Siza se paralizaron totalmente cuando apenas quedaban poco más que acabados, pintura, remates y equipamiento para entregar la obra. Este potente y elegante proyecto construido concienzudamente con una doble piel de hormigón quedaba así abandonando a su suerte y a merced de una naturaleza hambrienta de recuperar lo que era suyo.

Siza diseñó el CAR pensando en amortiguar su impacto visual en el territorio, gracias a la ubicación de una gran parte de su amplio programa a nivel de sótano y a sus cubiertas planas ajardinadas. Los 3.400 m<sup>2</sup> de parcela se ocuparon en tres niveles: el de acceso, con la recepción, el restaurante y un salón, el primer nivel donde se ubican más de 20 habitaciones, y un nivel subterráneo, con el spa, la pista polideportiva, el gimnasio y los vestuarios. La potente y quebrada volumetría resultante dialoga con la sobriedad y el dinamismo de los espacios interiores recorridos en rampa hasta la terraza exterior superior y tensionados siempre por la presencia de la luz que se vierte al interior por huecos y lucernarios.<sup>2</sup>

En diciembre de 2011 accedí por primera vez, con los permisos oportunos, al interior del CAR. Comenzaba así la serie “Standstill Architecture”, un proyecto fotográfico personal desarrollado durante más de 10 años centrado en documentar visualmente la realidad del Balneario de Panticosa, un particular paisaje del abandono y la ruina, un sistémico conflicto entre arquitectura y territorio, cartografiado visualmente por una mirada personal —artística en este sentido— que huye tanto de la denuncia o la crítica exacerbada como de la melancolía. Mi trabajo fotográfico encontraba en este contexto otro buen ejemplo de estas arquitecturas en suspenso, piezas inacabadas<sup>3</sup> que dejan paso al tiempo para que

transforme su latencia en herida y su espera en deterioro.<sup>4</sup>

Con la mirada propia de quien es a la par arquitecto y fotógrafo, el proyecto documenta mediante una narrativa aséptica y respetuosa las contradicciones y tensiones existentes entre las lícitas pretensiones formales, constructivas y materiales de la arquitectura de Siza y sus conflictos dialécticos con un territorio exacerbado, imbuido todo de esa cierta poética trascendente que cualquier proceso de ruina y abandono conlleva. Se trataba de volver y visitar el espacio exterior e interior para levantar una patética acta de las inexorables cicatrices y huellas que el paso del tiempo iba dejando, como capas superpuestas, sobre el alma del edificio: falsos techos desmoronados, vidrios y carpinterías rotas, revestimientos verticales derruidos, suelos levantados y una materialidad trasformada por la humedad y los procesos de pudrición.

La inexorable acción de la naturaleza y el clima sobre esos abandonados espacios de la pulcritud aportan el argumentario para una narrativa visual diferente del espacio arquitectónico. Como si de un maravilloso pecio hundido en el mar se tratase, contemplar estas intensas imágenes nos incita —una vez sacudida la lástima que nos produce el hecho en sí— a reconsiderar críticamente los procesos que desencadenan y gestionan la ejecución de los proyectos y la ética que ha de ponderar la transformación del territorio por parte de la arquitectura, al tiempo que nos reconcilia con el valor de la buena arquitectura, que mantiene sus elegantes esencias incluso enmascaradas en su ruina.

Iñaki Bergera

## Poetics of abandonment. Siza in Panticosa

Few places reveal with such intensity the relationship, particularly edgy in this case, between architecture and territory. Panticosa is more than a territory or a location; it is a landscape in its own right, shaped by the hybridisation of sublime nature and human intervention. Lying in a granite basin at 1.630 metres above sea level, in the heart of the Aragonese Pyrenees (Spain), the Panticosa Spa bears the imprint of centuries of glacial sculpting. Today, it stands as a setting for mineral-medicinal thermal waters, natural springs, *ibones* (mountain lakes), and powerful alpine torrents.

Evidence of the baths dates back to the mid-17th century. Over more than four centuries, the evolution of the spa complex has built up a layered memory of an exciting adventure narrated by chroniclers, tourists, tuberculosis patients, photographers, and artists drawn by its promise of health, leisure, and glamour. Yet the Spa's history is a sublime drama, imbued with richness and vitality at its peak in the early twentieth century, but also burdened by failure and disaster, sometimes brought about by the forces of nature—snow avalanches that on several occasions swept away parts of its facilities—as well as by fires, the decline of tourism due to mismanagement, and, more recently, a disproportionate attempt at transformation that has partially turned it into a landscape of ruin and abandonment.

Fortunately, the memory of Panticosa has been preserved through photographic collections held by institutions such as the National Library, the Ramón y Cajal Institute, the Diputación de Huesca, as well as in various private archives<sup>1</sup>. Since the first photographic survey and architectural plan in 1865, generations of photographers—both national and international—have journeyed to this remarkable site, capturing not only the essence of its architecture, cascading waterfalls, and rugged mountains, but also the lives and activities of its visitors.

Images from the 1950s vividly reveal the spa's final moments of vibrancy as a summer retreat for

families, offering leisure, sport, and easy access. The economic downturn of the 1960s, coupled with the challenges of maintaining an ageing infrastructure, led to its closure in 1979. From that moment on, the complex became a melancholic site, frequented primarily by day-trippers, hikers, and mountaineers. In 2000, the Nozar company, a real estate firm owned by the Nozaleda family, acquired the decaying establishment with the ambition of transforming it into a luxurious international resort. Their plan involved demolishing most of the old hotels, restoring the original spa buildings, and constructing new facilities, with investments exceeding sixty million euros and the promise of more than four hundred jobs.

Spain's post-1997 'Guggenheim effect' fuelled widespread confidence in iconic architecture and star architects among investors, developers, and politicians. Two distinguished Pritzker Prize winners—Spanish architect Rafael Moneo and Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza—were commissioned for key projects: Moneo oversaw the expansion and restoration of the Casino and the Grand Hotel, while Siza was entrusted with the design of the striking High-Performance Sports Center (CAR) and an apartment hotel. Meanwhile, Belén Moneo, Jeff Brock, and Jesús Manzanares took responsibility for the new thermal buildings and the parking facilities.

Yet the story—a contemporary fairy tale—never reached its happy ending. The 2008 international economic crisis, coupled with the bursting of Spain's real estate bubble, and the ensuing lack of credit, forced Nozar into bankruptcy, abruptly halting all construction across the complex, with each facility left to a different fate. Some, such as the Grand Hotel or the thermal building, briefly opened but soon closed; others, like the apartment hotel and sections of the car park at the entrance, remain unfinished. Siza's works at the CAR came to a complete standstill, with only finishing touches, painting, fixtures, and equipment delivery pending. This formidable and elegant project,