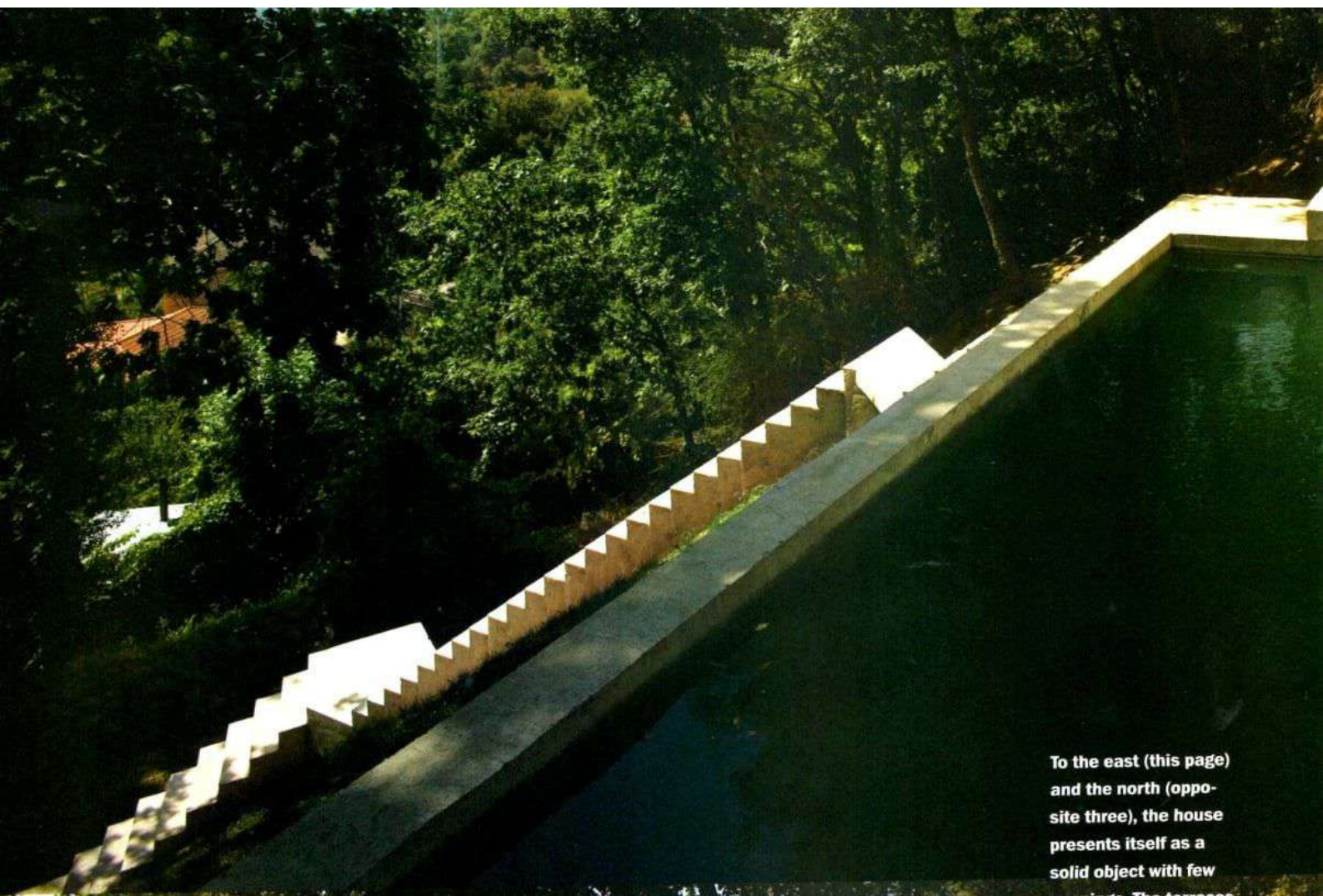


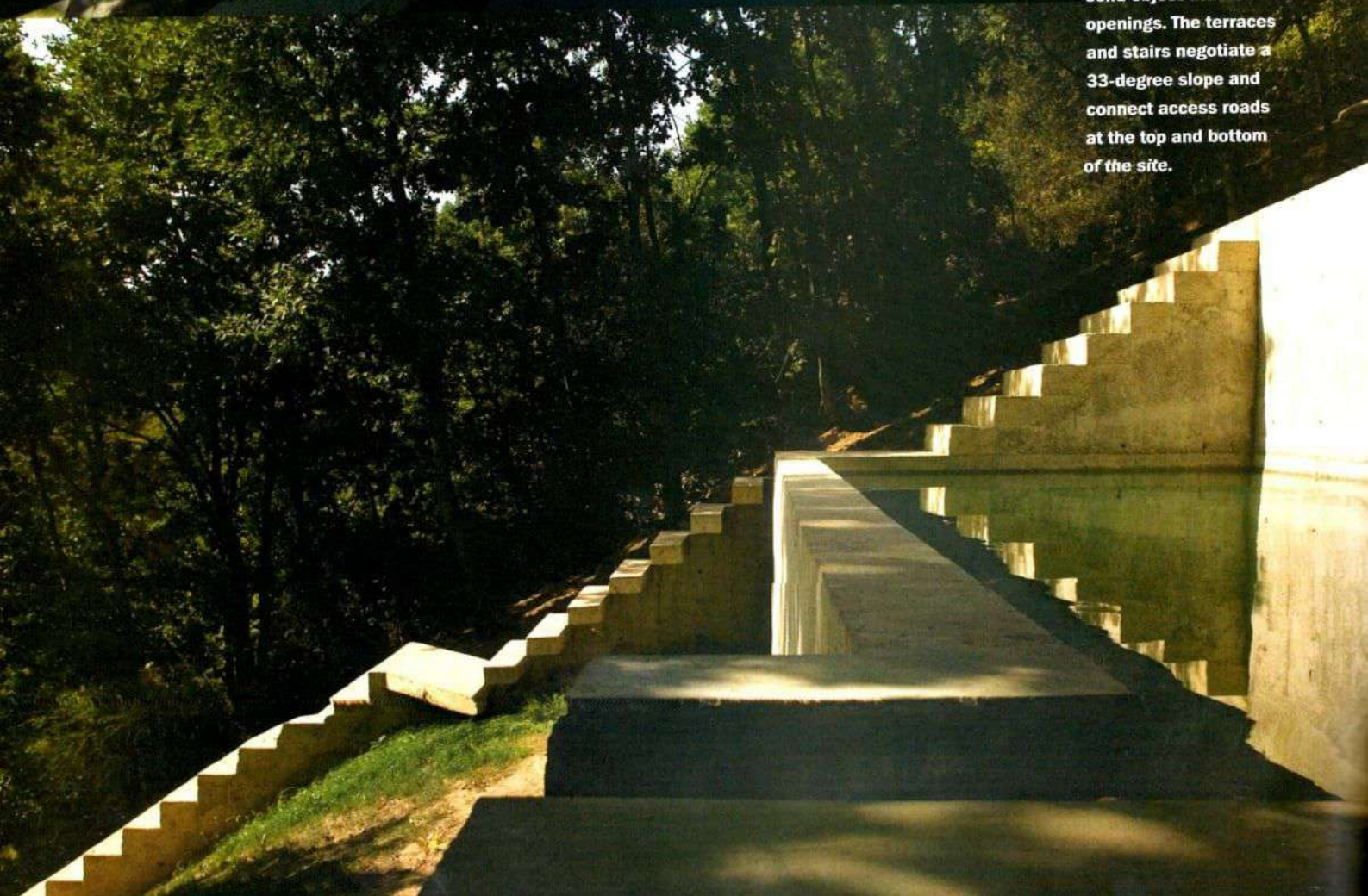
ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

RECORD HOUSES
2006





To the east (this page) and the north (opposite three), the house presents itself as a solid object with few openings. The terraces and stairs negotiate a 33-degree slope and connect access roads at the top and bottom of the site.



In northern Portugal, **Alvaro Leite Siza Vieira** cascades **CASA TOLÓ** down a steep slope through terraced gardens

By Clifford A. Pearson

PROJECTS



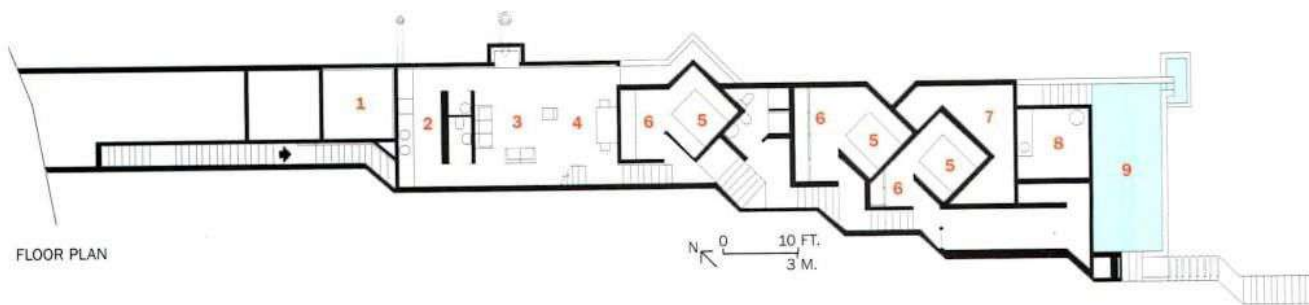
From certain vantage points, it looks like a relic from an ancient civilization, maybe an exposed portion of a stepped pyramid or some kind of Mayan monument. Partially buried in a steep hillside in the rural Vila Real district of northern Portugal, the Casa Tólo presents itself as a Jimmy Stewart kind of character: self-effacing at first, but then increasingly bold. Instead of a front facade, it offers merely a concrete deck, jutting out over the edge of a 33-degree slope with a view of mountains in the distance. To learn more, you must descend a set of stairs recessed in the deck, an act of faith since so little of the architecture has been revealed so far. As you move forward, you realize the house is a path, both literally and figuratively, taking you on a walk through the woods and unfolding in section as much as in plan.

Neither a Modern box nor a series of pavilions, Casa Tólo tumbles down the hill, a concrete cascade that seems more like pavement than domicile. Designed by Álvaro Leite Siza Vieira, son of the Pritzker Prize-winning architect from Porto, the house serves as the weekend retreat for the architect's cousin, his wife, and two children. With a difficult plot of land and a very tight budget (just \$150,000 for construction and another \$3,000 for landscaping), the client offered the architect little but constraints. Siza turned these limitations into assets by highlighting instead of hiding them. For example, the long, steep, $\frac{1}{4}$ -acre site, he says, made a narrow, stepped plan "practically inevitable." But how many architects would take the concept of stairs so literally?

Siza, who set up his own small firm in 1992, shortly after graduating from architecture school, traveled in the United States that same year and again in 1997. "I saw a lot of Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings and some of Louis Kahn's," he recalls. "I loved the way both of them manipulated scale and light." Like some of the early Wright houses in Oak Park, Illinois, Casa Tólo lives bigger than its size—just 1,950 square feet. By establishing integral connections between indoors and out, and orchestrating daylight to animate interiors (instead of flooding them), Siza boosted the impact of this small house. He designed the roofs as a series of gardens, which turns these spaces into outdoor rooms. A swimming pool occupies the lowest terrace, while other levels offer areas for

Project: Casa Tólo, Lugar das Carvalhinhas, Alvite, Portugal
Architect: Álvaro Leite Siza Vieira Architect

Engineer: GOP/Gabinete de Organização e Projectos
General contractor: Oscar



FLOOR PLAN



SECTION

A rooftop parking deck (top photo, below) offers views and a stair to the entry, one level below. The house tumbles down the hill, one room and level at a time (below middle and bottom).

1. Office
2. Kitchen
3. Living
4. Dining
5. Bedroom
6. Dressing
7. Laundry
8. Mechanical
9. Swimming pool
10. Parking
11. Entry hall

sitting, sunning, and even outdoor showering.

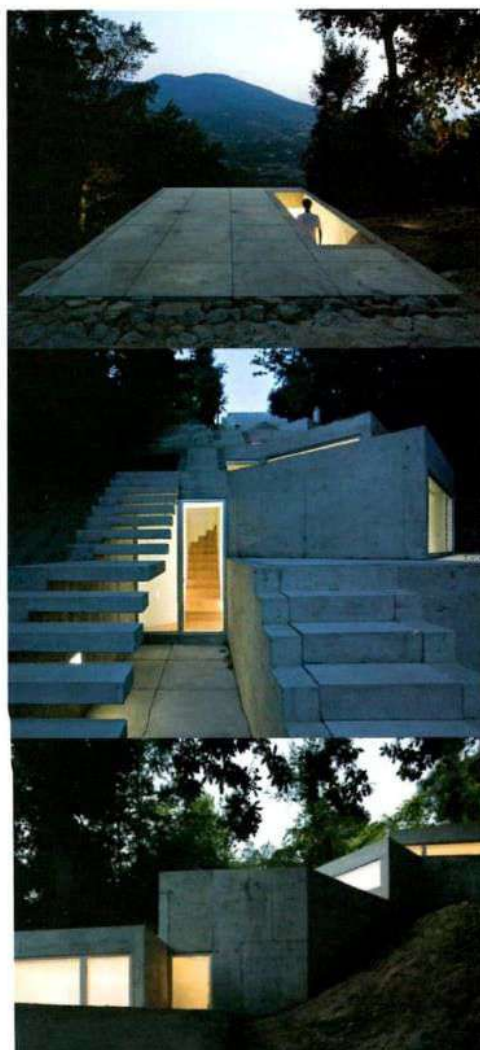
The architect pushed the house into the hillside to save money during construction and reduce expenses for heating and cooling later on. A simple, poured-concrete structure, it was easy to build. Precast-concrete pavers, each 3.3 feet square, clad the roofs, adding an extra layer of protection from the elements.

While it's immediately clear the house is all about stairs, you can't always see where they're headed. Most people arrive from the north, parking their cars on the house's uppermost roof. (A rustic footpath runs along the south edge of the site.) To get inside, you must descend the recessed stairs in the parking deck, going a full flight before arriving at the front door. Once inside, you encounter a long run of stairs, but later only fragments. "When I was young, I loved looking at drawings by Escher and Piranesi," recalls Siza. With Casa Tólo, he says, he wanted to make games

WHILE IT'S IMMEDIATELY CLEAR THE HOUSE IS ALL ABOUT STAIRS, YOU CAN'T ALWAYS SEE WHERE THEY'RE HEADED.

of the stairs, creating ambiguity about what's going up and what's going down. Taking advantage of the sloped site, the architect placed each major function on its own level, starting with an office at the top, then dropping down to the living/dining/kitchen area, a bedroom, a second bedroom, a third bedroom, and finally a laundry and mechanical room. Each level enjoys its own outdoor space on the roof of the room below.

Siza's use of light reinforces his games with stairs. In the living room, he brings in daylight from a high transom whose source is obscure, giving the space a touch of mystery. In the bedrooms—three individual cubes turned 45 degrees from the main stair axis—his strategy is more





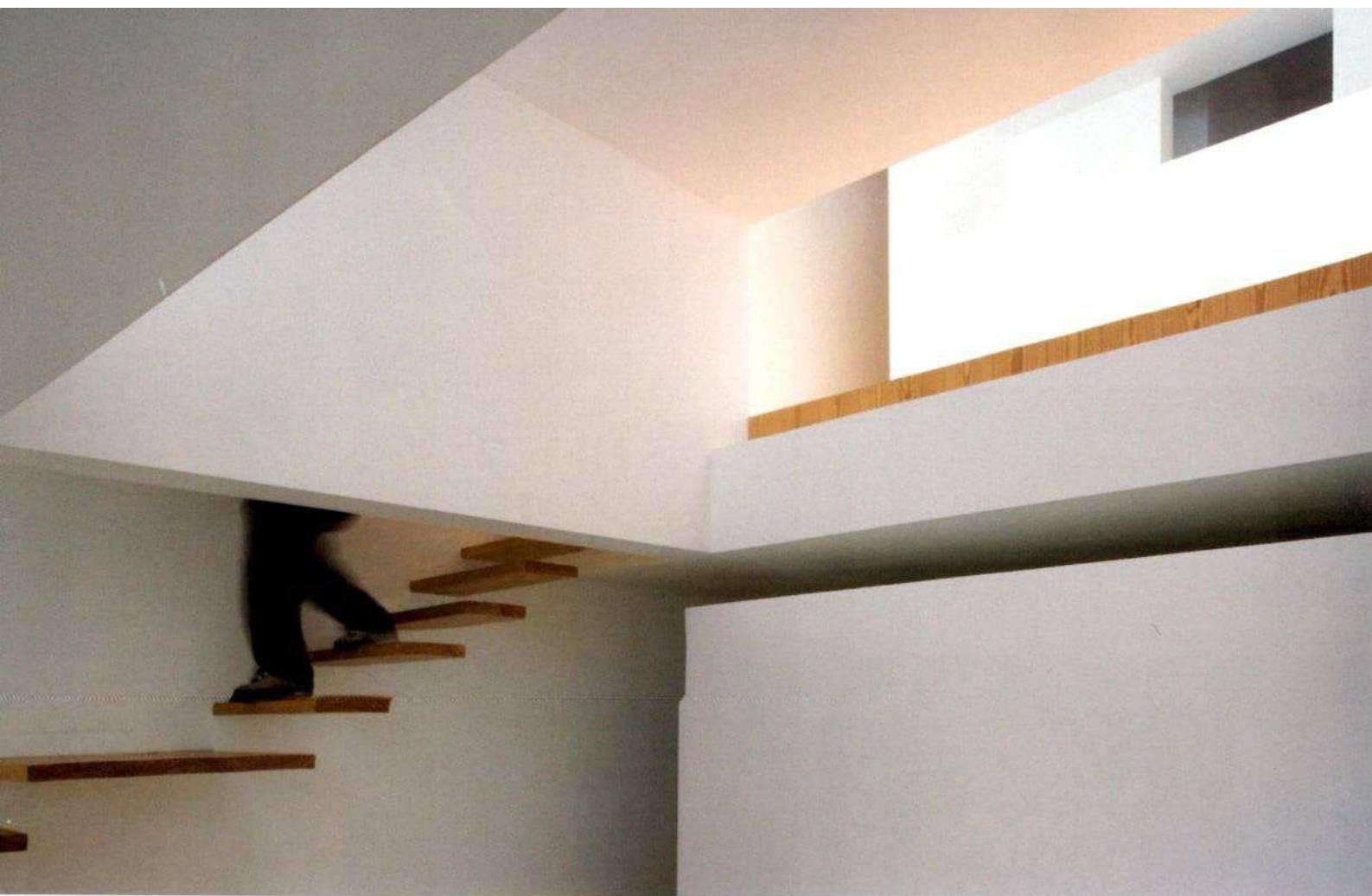
Bedrooms occupy cubes rotated off the main axis to capture views of the valley and mountains (below). A swimming pool rests on the lowest terrace (above).



In the living room, a large, north-facing transom window, bringing in suffused light, and a set of railless, wood stairs, cantilevered from one wall, give the space a floating quality. Siza designed the sofas himself to complement the house's simple materials and the other spare furnishings.







Inspired by the drawings of M.C. Escher and Giambattista Piranesi, Siza plays a visual game with the stairs, sometimes revealing long views of them (opposite), and other times obscuring where they lead (above and below), creating an aura of mystery.



direct: Provide large panes of glass oriented to views of the valley below and mountains beyond. The interior surfaces are of either white cement or lightly stained wood, a simple palette that was easy on the pocketbook and makes the house look bigger and brighter. During construction, his cousin was concerned that the house would be dark because it pushes into the slope without windows on the west and only one facing north. But, as the architect sees it, less was enough.

When asked if his father's architecture had an impact on his own, Siza says, "Everyone in Portugal is influenced by him. But I worked for him only one summer when I was a student and later only collaborated with him on a few projects. My work is autonomous from his."

With no front facade and a form that almost disappears into the hillside, Casa Tólo defies expectations. Though hardly ideal for the elderly or disabled, the house offers a lively sequence of spatial experiences created by the play of solids and voids, indoors and out. When described, it sounds preposterous, an intellectual conceit. But Álvaro Leite Siza Vieira has made a building of stairs work as a house—one that engages its site and actually lets people live on top of each other without getting in one another's way. ■

Sources

Elastomeric roofing: Sotecnisol

Aluminum windows: Velfac

Locksets and hinges: Carvalho e Baptista

Pulls: Designed by Álvaro Leite Siza Vieira for Carvalho e Baptista

Sofas: Custom by Álvaro Leite Siza

Vieira

Sinks and toilets: Valadares

Refrigerator and kitchen appliances: Siemens

For more information on this project, go to Projects at www.archrecord.com.

