

Portuguese Architecture and Identity. The SAAL Process: an (un)repeatable dream.

Case study of Portela-Outurela, Oeiras

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Introduction

The Portela-Outurela operation of the SAAL [Local Ambulatory Support Service] programme and the *18 de Maio* Residents' Association, which is shortly to commemorate its 40th anniversary, achieved many of the objectives set out at the beginning of the process and now stands today as an example of the committed undertaking made between the technical team and the residents, between architecture and participation.

The project coordinated by the architect António Carvalho was managed on site by the younger members of the team, who had to adapt their models and methodologies to both the context and the difficulties created by intervening in the periphery of Lisbon and in slum areas. Different proposals were discussed at great length and resulted in pragmatic solutions adapted to the needs of most of the families concerned.

The evolution and enlargement of the houses over time and in accordance with the possibilities offered by the project, the neighbourhood's state of conservation, the low costs of its maintenance and the levels of satisfaction of its residents, together with the creation of a coherent urban plan and a functional architecture adapted to the scale of the site and the urban centres of Portela and Outurela, are all fundamental data for any debate about rehousing processes and the role of architects and multidisciplinary technical

teams in contemporary society.

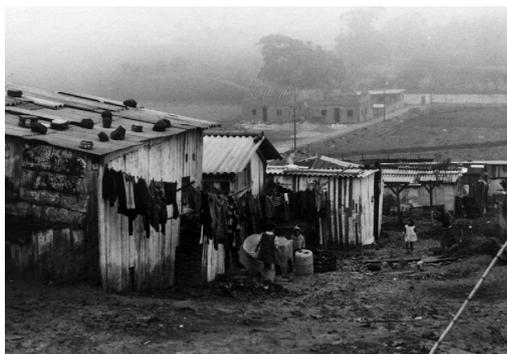
1. SAAL/Lisbon

Under the scope of the SAAL/Lisbon project, it is important to distinguish between those operations that were begun within and close to the city limits and those that were launched on the periphery, to the north and west of the city. When we look at the various architectural solutions and typologies, as well as the scale and density of the interventions, we can quickly see that, despite the differences, it is possible to identify, within Lisbon itself, the repetition of a solution based on collective housing blocks, with buildings four or five storeys high, and with common vertical accesses, towering over terraced buildings, or organised in galleries (Gomes, 1995, p. 561), whereas in the peripheral municipalities of Loures, Vila Franca de Xira or Oeiras, the reality is quite different. The operations here show lower occupation densities, with single-family houses, normally terraced, with two storeys at most, closer to the scale of the buildings in the nearby urban centres (Gomes, 1995, p. 560).

2. SAAL Operations, Oeiras

Given the size of the municipality of Oeiras, which until 1979 also included the present-day municipality of Amadora, and the number of interventions planned for the area, the

1. Street in a slum area, next to the land involved in the Portela-Outurela operation, Oeiras



2. Cover of the O Bairro newspaper, No. 3, June 1975



technical teams created a *Zone Council* to coordinate the various operations. This council favoured a more concerted action between the different teams and residents' associations, thus ensuring a greater capacity for negotiating with the local authority and the central government (Costa, 1997, p. 68).

Of the ten operations planned ("Livro Branco" 1976, p. XXXVI), only four were actually built, and in very different circumstances: Alfornelos;¹ Linda-a-Velha; Portela-Outurela and Carnaxide.² The study of these operations highlights the need for a case by case study, since, while it is possible to find a certain coherence at the level of the solutions and typologies proposed, each of the processes involved countless particularities.

3. Portela-Outurela. The place and the people

In 1974, the territory of the Portela-Outurela operation had all the typical characteristics and problems of peripheral areas and industrial expansion areas of the city of Lisbon in the 1950s and 1960s ("10 anos de habitação", 1997, p. 10). The two small and ageing urban centres, Outurela, near Carnaxide and Portela, next to Monsanto, were surrounded by roughly twenty-five factories and four slum areas, two located on hills – Barranhos³ and Alto do Montijo – and two next to a watercourse and therefore liable to flooding – Salregos and São Marçal.

Roughly 1,250 people lived in the slum areas, in appalling conditions, without any water, electricity, sewers or any kind of urban

equipment, in huts made of wood and metal sheeting, lit by oil lamps, which gave rise to countless fires ("1975-2000", 2000, p. 6). [Fig. 1] The people living there came from the Alentejo, Minho and Trás-os-Montes: 35% of them were illiterate and 58% were in active employment. 62% of these worked in the area and walked to work, while 51% had a monthly income of between 3,000 and 7,000 escudos and 41% earned from 1,000 to 2,000 escudos ("1975-2000", 2000, p. 6).

With the revolution of 25 April, six residents' committees were created (Varela, 2014, p. 251), linked to the two urban centres and the four slum areas. These committees were the first people that the technical team dealt with, participating in discussions about the choice of land and organising meetings and demonstrations in defence of their interests.

4. Technical Team

On 28 November 1974, the technical team met with the local residents for the first time to present the SAAL programme. António Carvalho (1923-2013) had been invited by Nuno Portas to be the architect responsible for the Portela-Outurela operation and had put together a very young multidisciplinary team, who left their office in Avenida Columbano Bordalo Pinheiro in Lisbon to work in a prefabricated building assembled at the site itself.

The team was composed of architecture students José Cid, Regina Resende, Teresa Gafeira and José Pinto Barbosa, engineers

3. General Meeting for the creation of the *18 de Maio* Residents' Association on 18 May 1975



4. Demonstration of the *18 de Maio* Residents' Association on 16 July 1975, Lisbon



Albano Pereira and Pedro Esteves, economist José Carlos Pereira and draughtsman José Carvalho. Other members of the team included engineer Rui Andrade Martins, social worker Margarida Martins and lawyer Fernando Menezes.

Between the months of January and May 1975, the support that the technical team lent to the residents' committees was truly impressive. This marked the beginning of an intense process of participation and the involvement of the populations in the decisions to be taken about the neighbourhood, namely regarding the choice of land (Costa, 1997, p. 68), the identification of the necessary equipment and the dimensions of the plots and the types of homes that would be built. [Fig. 2]

5. *18 de Maio* Residents' Association

On 18 May 1975, the six residents' committees held a general meeting to approve the association's statutes. Attended by roughly 200 people, the meeting led to the formation of the *18 de Maio* Residents' Association and its founding committee was elected. [Fig. 3]

Throughout that year, with the support of the SAAL team, the association showed an ever greater organisational capacity and the ability to mobilise people to take part in a wide range of different initiatives, participating in demonstrations, contacting other residents' associations, not only in the municipalities of Oeiras and Lisbon, but also in Setúbal and Porto, and building new equipment, namely the association's headquarters and

two classrooms through their own voluntary efforts. [Figs. 4 and 5]

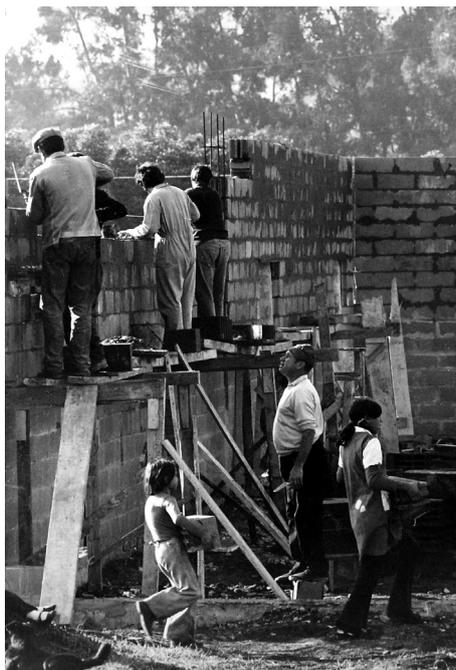
6. Process

In 1975, after the creation of the residents' association, three fundamental steps were taken to move the process forward (Bandeirinha, 2007, p. 251): on 26 July, a declaration of public utility was published in the *Diário da República* (the Government's Official Gazette) relating to the land that was to be used for the new neighbourhood; on 7 September the land was marked out; and, on 13 November, the Municipal Council was authorised to take administrative possession of this land.

From November 1975 onwards, Oeiras Council was in possession of an important area of land that was to be used not only for the SAAL projects, but also for many other council-run projects built over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, with the aim of eliminating the municipality's slum areas.

In the specific case of the Portela-Outurela operation, roughly thirty-two hectares were expropriated, which, with the extinction of SAAL, would be used to build five municipal estates, to rehouse some of the members of the *18 de Maio* Association who had not received any of the houses distributed by lot and to rehouse residents who came from other neighbourhoods. The land was also used to build a very significant amount of public equipment and to create green spaces that are now used by the whole of the parish of

5. Participation of the local population in the building of the headquarters of the *18 de Maio* Residents' Association, 1975



6. Architect's model of the urban project, SAAL technical team, 1975



Carnaxide.

7. Project

The implantation of the new neighbourhood was carefully studied, with advantage being taken of the two hills to the north and the downward slope to the south to connect the two existing areas of population, promoting their consolidation and creating an integrated urban expansion on the scale of that area.

The urban project contemplated the building of two housing estates: a central one for the placement of urban equipment; and the rehabilitation of the Quinta do Sales, which the SAAL team wished to see transformed into a green park. These plans demonstrated the team's sensitivity to taking full advantage of the site's different characteristics, a very concrete idea about how to build a city, and an enormous respect for the right to use the place where one lives, which had been claimed by the residents (David, 1976, p. 60). [Fig. 6]

The programme for the neighbourhood involved the construction of 450 homes over several phases. According to the data obtained from a survey conducted with the local population, and following an intense discussion process with the future residents, in which architects' models played a very important role,⁴ a model of single-family terraced houses was chosen, each just one storey high and with space for a backyard. The area of the plots was fixed at 150m², while the areas of the different types of houses to be built and their respective numbers were also

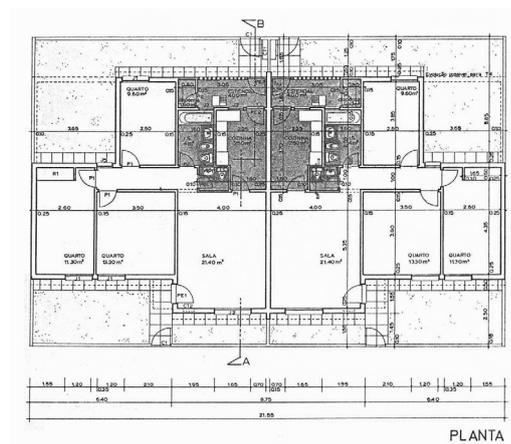
established.

The houses were designed in such a way that they could be enlarged from the T2 to the T4 type, as the family grew, and as their capacity for further investment also increased over time. The different spaces were well dimensioned and proportioned, with special privilege being given to the living-room, which was different from the plan for the façade of the bedrooms. The social area was separated from the private area by a corridor that led to the sleeping area and the bathroom. The technical areas were concentrated around a "plumbing wall" and included a small covered outdoor space for the washing and drying of clothes.⁵ [Fig. 7]

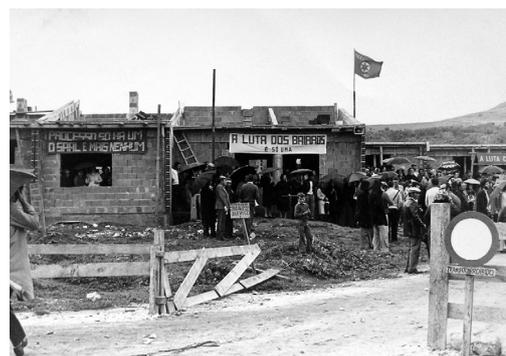
8. Building work

With the rapid development of the process throughout 1975, building work began on 4 December, with the first phase for the construction of infrastructures, and the following month the residents' association participated in the meeting organised by the Coordinators of SAAL/North, pooling their knowledge and discovering other experiences. On 27 October 1976, with the work already in progress, the official order was published that dictated the extinction of SAAL. In response to this order, the residents' association held a plenary meeting on 7 November, next to a house under construction, in order to defend the process. On 27 November, an official request was made for a loan from the Housing Development Fund (FFH).⁶ [Fig. 8]

7. Plan of the semi-detached houses, of the T3 evolutionary type



8. Demonstration of the local population next to the houses being built and in defence of the SAAL process, 7 November 1976



With the extinction of SAAL, part of the technical team from the municipality of Oeiras were integrated into the council's services (early 1977), seeking, in this way, to guarantee the continuity of the projects and to ensure that changes in the governing party did not affect the construction of the new neighbourhoods and the fight against the growing number of slum areas.

Despite the support given by the council, the work for the building of the new neighbourhood was interrupted. On 1 September, the works began again, but came to a definitive halt on 30 November, remaining suspended until 1979. It was only in May 1980, four years after the works had first begun that the first 44 houses were distributed by lot to the residents. [Fig. 9]

In December 1980, the solution that was again found in order to be able to continue with the second phase of construction (50 homes) was to resort to direct labour.⁷ The new houses would only be delivered three years later, in October 1983. Despite the low construction costs,⁸ the simplicity of the design and the building solutions, no further phases were developed and no more houses were built in the *18 de Maio* neighbourhood.

With the passage of time and due to the fact the houses had been conceived and built in such a way that they could be altered and enlarged, such enlargements have taken place naturally, but always with great respect being shown for the initial project, so that it is practically impossible to distinguish the houses that have been enlarged from those that haven't.

Final considerations

The difficulties encountered by each of the SAAL operations were tremendous. The complexity of financing the project and the expropriations, the urgent need to resolve the problems of the local populations, the resistance that was shown to the development of the process and its short duration, all made the actions of the technical teams more difficult and did not respond to the needs of all the families and the objectives launched by the residents' associations. However, given the circumstances, can it not be said that, even so, the experience was, generally speaking, highly positive? In the case of the Portela-Outurela operation, it would seem that the answer is most definitely yes, not only due to the neighbourhood's state of conservation and that of the houses themselves, as well as the enormous integration and social advancement enjoyed by its residents, but also due to the opportunity that the land acquired by SAAL gave Oeiras Council to solve the problem of its slum areas.⁹

The *18 de Maio* neighbourhood exhibits a highly simple architecture, designed in a current style and well integrated into its surrounding environment, sensitive to the topography and identity of its location. It is a pragmatic architecture displaying a balanced articulation between terraced houses and streets, and introducing here and there some small variations and exceptions to its geometry, resulting in footpaths, visual harmonies and small recreational spaces and green areas. [Fig. 10]

9. View of the first phase in the building of the neighbourhood, 44 homes, 1980



10. View of the neighbourhood during the completion of the 94 homes, 1983



It is an architecture in which there was a genuinely high level of participation, and that still remains capable of evolving. The houses were built in a practical fashion, resulting from a dialogue with residents, adapted to their needs and habits, and with a great economy of resources and simple construction methods.

Despite the clear achievements of this operation, with the building of the 94 homes, the few resources required for the management and maintenance of the neighbourhood, the rehabilitation of the Quinta do Sales as an urban park and the large quantity of equipment that is now accessible to the whole population of the parish of Carnaxide, the 18 de Maio neighbourhood is surrounded by a group of much denser council estates, with a much less silent architecture, more rundown despite being more recent, and with populations that are less integrated and constantly dissatisfied. What lessons can we draw from this experience? What is the role of the State and the local authorities in relation to solving the housing problem? (Gomes, 1995, p. 564). Just as, at that time, architects were able to adapt the tools of their discipline to the reality which they found, it now seems to us to be increasingly urgent to reconsider the social role of architects, and their capacity to adapt to the current circumstances and to participate in political decisions, as well as the need to return, we venture to say, to a dream that is once again possible (apud Costa, 1997, p. 65).

¹The Alfovelos operation, 11 de Março de Alfovelos Residents' Association, developed by the architects José Manuel da Cruz Henriques and Eduardo Osório Gonçalves, was launched in April 1975 (76 homes).

²The Linda-a-Velha operation, 25 de Abril Residents' Association, developed by the architect José Silva Carvalho, was launched in December 1974 and completed by Oeiras Municipal Council in 1981 (192 homes). This was the only operation to be fully completed. The Portela-Outurela operation, 18 de Maio Residents' Association, developed by the architect António Carvalho, was launched in November 1974 and partly completed in October 1983 (94 of the 450 homes that were originally planned). The Carnaxide operation, Luta Pela Casa Residents' Association, developed by the architect Manuel Madruga, was launched in July 1975 and completed by

Oeiras Municipal Council as part of a Municipal Promotion, in 1985 (100 homes).

³ See the film *Barronhos. Quem teve medo do poder popular?*, directed by Luís Filipe Rocha, in 1976.

⁴ Statement by José Cid, an architect of the SAAL Team working on the Portela-Outurela Operation, 5 November 2014.

⁵ In order to maximise the reduction in construction costs, it was decided to make the entrance lead directly into the living room itself, thereby sacrificing its privacy to some extent. At the same time, in order to reduce circulation areas, it was decided that this room would communicate directly with the kitchen.

⁶The loan was completely paid off by the Association in May 2013.

⁷The system of direct labour, together with the

direct grant paid by the FFH, the hiring of small contractors, and the technical support paid for by Oeiras Council meant that there was a huge reduction in the costs of the houses – 11 contos/m².

⁸ 94 homes were built (99,263 contos): 34 T2 apartments with 86m² (963 contos); 56 T3 apartments with 99m² (1,097 contos); 4 T4 apartments with 114m² (1272 contos).

⁹ However, the challenges faced by this operation and its residents have not yet ended. Currently, with the ageing of the population and the change in generations, the direct sale of the building lease from Oeiras Council to the Association is being studied, as well as the possibility of the residents purchasing the plots of land, with all of the problems and implications that these alterations might involve.

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Personal archives of Albano Pereira.