ON BEING BLUE: LONG AFTER THE RING MASS HOUSING MAY NOT BE APOCALYPTICAL

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Jenks proclaimed the “Death of Modern Architecture”, metaphorically through the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate (1972), more than 40 years ago - precisely at a time when the private sector started to take over the welfare state almost everywhere. The paradox of claiming an “architecture for the people”, while a promulgating an economic-driven market which was obliterating the moral ambitions of architecture is outlined in the case study of the present paper, the urban plan of Portela de Sacavém (1960-79), designed by the architect Fernando Silva (1914-83).

The project is a mass-produced housing project – one of the principles of Modern Architecture – developed by the private sector in the outskirts of Lisbon for the upper middle class. Built over the 60’s and 70’s, the project is paradigmatic of a self-representing image that arrived in the capital from the ex-colonies and was promulgated for and by the emergent middle class at the time – it presented an image that was paradoxically linked with the provision of cheap houses for the working classes. The idea of a modern lifestyle was welcomed. It involved the car, the garage, the lift, the highway, and even the stereotyped anonymous character of the architecture - as opposed to the ‘ideal’ of detached suburban houses with private gardens. But, despite the modern character of the urban plan, the dwellings enclose a bourgeois Victorian vision of how private life should be lived. Given its wide acceptance, it became the model of the housing approach in the years to come. Thus, this paper will argue that ‘housing for the biggest number’ in the periphery of cities, is not necessarily synonymous of ‘miserabilism’, as it is the case with countless examples elsewhere.

The reasons for this attractiveness might be manifold and deserve a rigorous scrutiny that this paper aims to forge. It also opens up a wider question about how the socialist ideals behind modernism could be so easily absorbed by liberalism and the private sector. And “so it’s true: being without being is blue”?

LATE MODERNISM

In what concerns housing, modernism had its first expressions in Portugal later than in other European countries. On the one hand the country was under a dictatorship that was held power for over 40 years (staring in 1933). It used housing in pamphlet forms to promote the regime. In fact, in the capital, many neighbourhoods were built in peripheral areas of the city, most of them with semi-detached housing with private courtyards, cultivating the rural image with which most of the families were familiar with, at the same time developing the idea of a “Portuguese house”. Examples include Encarnação, Alto da Ajuda, Alto da Serafina, Alvito, Madredeus. On the other, the fact that the country did not suffer spatial consequences of the World War I, and did not participate in the World War II resulted in a totally different reality on what concerns the urge to rehouse entire populations.

But the idealized collective housing described by Yorke in “The Modern House”, “grouped in large blocks, and with a moral and ethical dimension that characterized the ideology of the International Style, could only be open up for discussion with the First National Congress of Architecture in 1948 – exactly between the first post-war meeting of the CIAM in Bridgewater and the CIAM 7 in Bergamo, that though representing the start of a shift from the focus on the functional city and the questioning of the designation International Style, was unable to live behind the prewar promise of a mass
architecture – where Portuguese architects claim the urban planning of cities, the application of the Athens Chart

The decolonization of British and French Empires between 1946 and 1960

In a year when we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the 25th of April or Carnation Revolution, as it was surnamed the political event that came to an end with the dictatorship government that, it becomes extremely pertinent to reflect upon its consequences in Portuguese territory. By Portuguese territory we mean mainland as well as the colonies, territories that since the abolition of the Colonial Act in 1951 - a result adaptation of the UN Charter – were then called overseas provinces, namely officially members of Portugal. Like all revolutions, this was a slow process and for which contributed in a decisive way, the instability that began to be felt these territories from the mid 50's with the founding of the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and early 60s with the creation of FRAIN (African Revolutionary front for the Independence of Angola), supported by the anticolonial positions of the ONU General Assembly. This political climate culminated in the beginning of the colonial war in 1961 and subsequent de-colonization between the "April 25th" and the November 11th, 1975, the date of the proclamation of independence.

The general process of decolonization left the historical movement of the 25th April; the cessation of Portuguese sovereignty in Macau differs substantially from the African case. Despite the colonization process to reassemble 16th century. It is only in 1887 that China has officially recognized the sovereignty and perpetual occupation of Portuguese Macau, through the "Treaty of Amity and Commerce Sino-Portuguese". 1967 went down in history as the year of the revolt of pro-Chinese Communist Macau residents, and the following year (December 3, 1966) Portugal renounced its perpetual occupation of Macau and recognized the power and control of the Chinese, which marked the beginning of the end of the colonial period this city. However, contrary to what happened with the liberation of the Portuguese colonies in Africa, China rejected the immediate handover of Macau (since, given the isolation of Beijing, this was convenient channel of communication with the outside), and called to establish negotiations to allow a smooth transfer (in 1987, after intense negotiations between Portugal and China, the two countries agreed to return Macau to Chinese sovereignty on December 20, 1999).

During the 70’s the number of slums in the city fringe of Lisbon had increased significantly given the continuous flow of people from the interior of the country to its capital that started in the previous decades, in search for a better quality of life. In 1900’s, Lisbon’s population amounted 365,000 and by 1960’s it doubled to 802,000 with a step fall to 750,000 in 1970 (França, 1997:116-18). The majority came from places without sewers, piped water or even electricity.

The political climate proper of a dictatorial government, the civil war in the so-called overseas provinces that begun in 1961; the subsequent decolonization from mid-70’s onwards; the poor conditions in which people lived in (in the 1960’s only 18% had sewer system and almost 8% of the capital lived in slums); the return of many families from the ex-colonies to a country that for most of the 2nd generation was unknown, had a strong impact in the territory from the point of view of housing and urbanism.

**FREEDOM NEIGHBOURHOODS**

Consummated the decolonization in Angola and the consequent influx that occurred from the former colonies to the capital ethnically (the so-called "returnees" amounted about 305 000 having been set approximately half in the region of Lisbon), coupled with the gradual process of rural depopulation and to a lesser extent, the return of emigrants from Europe had an extreme impact in the overall urban shape of Lisbon during the last five decades in Lisbon. Indeed, more than a decade after the start of the Master Plan of the Lisbon Region (1961) the housing situation in 1974 is described as extremely serious: requirements calculated at 600 000 dwellings, aged and poor housing, poor public sector involvement in housing promotion. If in the years that followed the revolution witnessed a greater state intervention, particularly with regard to underserved populations.

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In the 80s there is a significant change of interventionist housing policies tended to promoting the use of credit systems for purchase of homes that have resulted over time in increased land speculation. Where these populations have settled in younger average, with a higher proportion of assets and more schooling? Indeed, these factors significantly contributed to the sprawl of the suburbs and the development of peripheral territories that represented opportunities to experiment with new urban typologies.

**LOOKING BLUE DOES NOT MEAN BEING BLUE**

Portela de Sacavém

Fernando Silva’s urban plan for Portela (1960-1979) in the outskirts of Lisbon prompted important questions about urbanism, the contemporary city and the city dweller, that are still part of the contemporary architectural and urban agenda as they imply a rethinking of ongoing problems through drawing and the cross over between multiple scales.

Housing can be understood to be a major element articulating the individual and society, the neighbourhood and the block. The spatial arrangement as a whole has a social content and therefore stands as an object of reflection.

The neighbourwood: for the “happiest families in Europe”

Drawn after the advent of modernism, Portela’s urban plan is probably one of the most eclectic, within the Portuguese culture, and can be analysed as an exercise that reflects over more than one century of urban theories, combining and reinventing new relations between those.

Portela, can be regarded as a symbol of anonymity, would look exactly as an answer, a refuge from an uncontrollable society, a materialization of an ideal of community, because it denies the ontological difference, the basic asymmetry within and between subjects, through its undifferentiated design, in the most socialist tradition. Nevertheless, and ironically, community has been preconized as an alternative to liberal individualism and to welfare capitalist society, where individuals are able to occupy private and separate spaces as propelled only by their own private desires.

Much have been said, studied and published about it, and yet, the middle class has been almost ignored, when in fact it was responsible for the expansion of the city towards outside its 2nd ring, i.e., to the suburbs. In fact, a significant territory was built by the strength of liberal pressure for economic privatisation, private interests and promises of a new life style to those that benefited from the general rise in salaries, widespread use of the automobile, transformation of the family structure, from an extended group to its reduction into a nuclear family, new cultural experiences and practices of consumption as well as the transformation of the housing market, increasingly aggressive, and the spread of an easier access to bank loans for the acquisition of private dwellings.

At the same time, those projects, in the suburbs, in the outskirts of Lisbon, were fertile territories (and laboratories) to experimenting new urban concepts, detached from the traditional city model.

Portela’s urban plan was conceived by Fernando Silva (1914-83), around half a century after the advent of modernism, providing him the opportunity to design an entire site and rethink major urban strategies. What is Fernando Silva’s position within this most basic kind of problem solving (physical, social and moral) that has characterised modernity and that drew visionary architects to propose not only alternative built forms but also alternative societies? In which ways does he challenge previous models? Its urban plan has probably one of the most eclectic designs possible, combining the experience of more than one century of debates. Furthermore, it also reveals Fernando Silva’s awareness and deep knowledge of the history of urbanism which led him to take the opportunity to design an entire site as an exercise to rethink major urban strategies, being simultaneously heir and a
challenge to previous models by the way it combined features that when looked carefully are not only anachronistic but also coming from disparate discourses. Modernity saw cities, quintessentially, as disordered places, infinitely harder to manage than small towns or villages. It aimed to produce an optimum social environment and to re-humanise the city through a new order of space and population, which has led to the reduction of the social and the collective to smaller entities that are easier to manoeuvre, and to the constant re-evaluation of strategies of grouping.

The first attempt to project the city as a whole was done by Ebenezer Howard and his vision became widespread not only in Britain but also in the rest of Europe and America, producing a series of variants that more often than not ended up being completely different proposals. He inspired further investigations that drew upon some of his principles, criticising some and repositioning others. Howard aimed to solve, or at least ameliorate, the problem of the Victorian city by exporting a large proportion of its people and its jobs to self-contained constellations of new towns built in open countryside, far from the slums and smoke, and, most importantly, from the overblown land values of the giant city. He proclaimed radical hopes for a co-operative socialist civilisation, which he advocated could only be fulfilled in small communities embedded in a decentralised society, away from the ulcers of the existing cities. In his series of garden cities, linked by railways (forming a polycentric social city), all had two kinds of centres: the neighbourhood centres and the (one) civic centre. Neighbourhoods were “slices in the circular pie”, each comprising one-sixth of the town. The basic unit in the neighbourhood was the family living in its own home surrounded by a garden, and the most important neighbourhood institution was the school. There are two cohesive forces that bring the residents out of their neighbourhoods and unite the city. The first is leisure (Central Park), the other is civic life (located at the centre of the Park). Co-operation was expected to take place within the new building type that he developed, together with his associates Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker: the Cooperative Quadrangle. In essence it was designed to support co-operative housekeeping, its series of garden apartments dependent of a central dining room and kitchen. Housing and domestic work were shared by co-operative tenants as the basic social unit of an ideal garden city.

The concept of the Garden City, though very different in theory, anticipated the Neighbourhood Unit principle of Clarence Perry in the 1920s. Before being translated into urban terms, the Neighbourhood Unit was a sociological concept, conceived to enhance familiar relationships as well as community relationships. The aim was for residents to become aware of each other by sharing common facilities and daily life experiences. This was also to provide for family and community supervision.

If we were to compare the Garden City and Neighbourhood Unit diagrams, we could conclude that they did not necessarily contradict each other, and the ward-and-centre diagram for a garden city has a lot in common with the diagram for a neighbourhood unit. Both diagrams imply a variety of scales within the city and define complete units, one at the level of the city, the other at the level of the neighbourhood. The first because of its concentric form, closed off by a green belt; the second because the development was defined according to the number of families needed to support an elementary school. But while the diagram for a garden city has a pre-established limit for growth and extension defined by the very nature of its drawing, the diagram for the Neighbourhood Unit alone does not restrict change and growth, establishing a more dynamic set of possible relationships with other neighbourhoods or even with the civic centre. That is to say that this diagram creates a complexity that allows its translation to drawing in multiple ways that does not necessarily mean the reproduction of one fixed model but creates the possibility for overlaps and different formal approaches. Even if it would constrain the drawing to a rigid structure, the city itself was still allowed to expand and grow and therefore to coexist with proposals derived from distinct diagrams. Even though both drew upon social approaches, Howard’s model appears to be a “closed” entity, while Perry’s diagram establishes solely a set of relationships that could be spatially organised in different ways.

Le Corbusier’s first urban project, La Ville Contemporaine (1922), was essentially a reinterpretation of the Garden City of Howard, projecting a centre for 600,000 inhabitants that was circled by a green belt, around which would be situated a series of “garden cities”. La Ville Radieuse (1930) already contains the organisational principles of his ideal city: housing units with the facilities in high-rise constructions to free the ground for green amenities, and creates the basis for subsequent projects. Both projects add to the Garden City of Howard the “language” of modern architecture. They were
definitely influenced by the concept of the neighbourhood unit, but contrary to the English strand that developed research of the sociological model focused on the community of dwellers. Le Corbusier started with the architectonic typology and looked for the built model, simultaneously housing and integrating at the same time all the elementary facilities. The ideal of community, or social grouping, was in fact transformed, from the horizontal diagram of the Neighbourhood Unit into a vertical one (his Unité d’Habitation in Marseille being its best example) representing the morphological element of organisation and composition of the “collectivist city”. Surprisingly, it was Corbusier himself who called his project a vertical garden city, but the scale and unit of planning was definitely closer to the Neighbourhood Unit, the architectural counterpoint to it. As it has been frequently acknowledged, Perry was the mentor of modern planning, while Corbusier was the mentor of modern architecture.

Both Le Corbusier and Perry reflected on the work of Ebenezer Howard in terms of his ideas and their practical application, and both proposed antidotes to his influential views. Nevertheless, they all considered housing to be the basic urban unit, which when grouped together with social facilities and services would constitute the urban system, the latter being the means of social life polarisation. They all proposed to solve not only the urban problem but also the social problem, in the belief that architecture and urbanism could organise and structure society and, ideally, a community of mutual interests and aspirations. All of them, including Howard, foresaw the same vision: a social mix that would overcome class distinctions.

A project for a residential district with the scale of the one to be analysed raises the question of how to govern communities of people through architecture. Its urbanism might be located in relation to the question of the neighbourhood, as a spatial way of grouping. The neighbourhood has been regarded as an answer to social sustainability and, whatever its urban form, it should encourage social interaction, provide self-sufficient communities, and develop a strong local identity and control over local resources. In that sense it seems to mean more the degree of autonomy a district has than its physical form. Fernando Silva intentionally situates his work within a different theoretical reasoning, one in which community is not regarded as a place but rather as a self of social ties, an extra-spatial social phenomenon not to be confused with neighbourhood.

Neighbourhoods have been, historically, a natural consequence of the growth of cities. Munford mentions Paris and Venice to illustrate cities where neighbourhoods appeared spontaneously organized, according to medieval principles, in relation to a dominant church or square with a market place adjoined to it, “facts that did not prevent the city to function as a whole”, and that not necessarily have consolidated the activities of the inhabitants in a limited local area. Sennet also refers the medieval city as a place where people could feel a “passionate attachment to the places in which they lived” and one which promoted an “experience of compassion for one’s neighbours, based on imagining the sufferings of others as one’s own” (Sennet, 1994: 157-158). Echoing some of the claims of Jane Jacobs in the USA in the early 1960s, he applauded the dense and traditionally unplanned city for allowing men to “become more in control of themselves and more aware of each other” (Sennet, 1971: 198). While the church or the plaza would relate to the district, other spaces within the city were thought of on a larger scale, bringing the different neighbourhoods together. Many of the functions of a city tend to be distributed naturally, and a church, a small park or a local library do not have the same role in the city as a cathedral, a ‘Hyde Park’ or a central library. The different scale of these elements structures the city in different ways and constructs a certain hierarchical order that was not always planned as such. This suggests a certain inevitability of group formation that, despite not necessarily being social, can be physical, visual or simply temporal. Accordingly, neighbourhood could be defined in a broader sense as simply being people who live near one another. In this line of reasoning, Munford continues:

“To share the same place is perhaps the most primitive of social bonds, and to be within view of one’s neighbours is the simplest form of association. Neighbourhoods are composed of people who enter by the very fact of birth or chosen residence into a common life. Neighbours are people united primarily not by common origins or common purposes but by the proximity of their dwellings in space. This closeness makes them conscious of each other by sight, and known to each other by direct communication, by intermediate links of association, or by rumour. In times of crisis, a fire, a funeral, a festival, neighbours may even become vividly conscious of each other and capable of greater
cooperation; but in origin, neighbourliness rests solely on the fact of local cohabitation. There is nothing forced in this relationship and to be real it need not be deep” (Munford, 1968: 59).

Portela, designed away from the city, has clearly defined borders, both visual and physical. The physical are mostly speed ways, connecting it with Lisbon and other sites and in that sense can be seen as an interpretation of Howard’s garden-city – though substituting the railway and the train by roads and cars, and the houses by apartment block. It has a centre as well from where everything else is organized. That centre though, has an ambiguous character. It is not the park that Howard envisioned and, like in medieval cities, it has a church, but it became slightly peripheral, stressing the importance (both in terms of position and scale) of the shopping mall. Together with other facilities such as tennis and football courts, the centre does not stress the importance of intensifying a sense of collectivity but promotes the occasional encounter of those sharing the same interests. What seems to join Munford and Francisco Silva’s understandings about the meaning of sharing the same territory is what both saw in the principles of the Neighbourhood Unit, of which he was an advocate, an instrument to enable occasional association as well as to promote “freedom, pleasure, and effectiveness in meeting the needs of family life”, “the only practical answer to the gigantism and inefficiency of the over centralized metropolis” (Munford, 1968: 70-72) that, if nothing else, would be justified in economic terms. Munford counters this: “The fact that many of the significant activities of the city are occasional ones, and lie outside the neighbourhood, or that a large part of an adult’s life may be spent far beyond his own domestic precincts, does not lessen the importance of neighbourhood functions. Nor does the coming and going of population of a big city lessen the formative result of good neighbourhood design” (Munford, 1968: 73).

Portela could be a satellite city in its very beginning; a district, since the sprawl of Lisbon led to a gradual homogenization of the territory changing the logical relationship between centre and periphery; but also a Neighbourhood Unit. However, the project does not reassemble the modern principles of zoning or follow any kind of functionalist logic of this sort. In fact it does not try to achieve an ideal combination of work, habitation and leisure in a perfect, if not autonomous, environment, nor a non-segregated social equilibrium. Louis Wirth suggested that the city dweller is only a neighbour if forced, reinforcing the idea that the metropolis does not develop on the basis of proximity relations. However, the theme of the “urban village” remains an important issue in current analysis, theoretical debates and actual proposals. The urban is at the heart of an enlarged and ever-renewed sociability and needs to address and adapt to multiple lifestyles.

The block: “the reality of the future”

It was around the years from 1920 to 1930, that the design of collective housing became part of a clear international agenda for architects, urbanists and other professionals. Architectural typology was, to a large extent, bound up with the whole idea of the city. From Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse to Hilberserimer’s vertical city and from Gropious’ studies for the sitting of the city dwelling to May’s urban design in Frankfurt, the residential schemes of those years were indissolubly linked to radical perspectives for the renovation of the city. The new modern movement represented both a stylistic and social break; it assumed a symbolic role indicating a real and emphatic shift in how life was to be lived.

With a few exceptions, European architects have remained faithful to the modern movement in one form or another ever since its emergence as a dominant force, so much so that “modernism has effectively become the vernacular in Europe” (Doubilet et all., 1999: 8). Although in a variety of ways architects draw upon the whole history of modern architecture and therefore in order to understand their work is necessary to understand the legacy of modernism that shapes the intellectual and physical context within which they build.

The dwelling: “the nobility of the past”

The same applies do Fernando Silva who designed apparently modernist blocks, perpendicular to the streets. Paradoxically, behind their strong socialist aesthetics, the apartments have generous areas, were considered at the time to have high standard materials, and clearly propose a bourgeois lifestyle, implying what we would like to call a new “code of civility”, one century after The Gentleman’s House: there are proper parking places, collective rooms specially thought for the owners’ meetings,
clothes were not to be hanged outside, there were guest toilets and a separation of bedrooms and the eventually study-room, rescuing some Victorian principles of privacy at home. But are those same external aesthetics that give a certain recognizable identity to Portela, a certain feeling of belonging to, of being part of that same community of people behind those carefully drawn stripes. The notion that a sense of belonging to a space could be achieved through a certain coherence of architectural expression, both through the general plan and through the individual design of buildings. What people can share is unbuilt, it is rather a lifestyle. Conviviality is de-territorialized, as is the spatial distribution of economic and social activities. Hence, the forms of our cities and the “neighbourhood” become a simple contract of spatial cohabitation. The contemporary city-dweller is still a social animal, but his social contacts are by no means with his neighbours.

The project emphasises the individuality of each dwelling, and public spaces in the rest of the plan suggest a de-problematization of the urban organisation of certain sociability. Individualisation does not necessarily refer to individualism, but rather to the possibility of producing an identity-related space for all. This desire may even extend to a reconsideration of the boundaries between public space and private space. The question of de-territorialisation does not address simply the social question, by assuming a monofunctional territory it also expresses a will to extend the city to all its inhabitants and stresses the importance of an idea of diversity on a broader scale. In a sense it accounts for the unavoidable importance of the city centre and the impossibility of creating an autonomous district given the contemporary way of living. What happens to local facilities when increasingly both partners in a couple work full time? Who uses those local facilities on a daily basis?

The blocks define the streets very precisely, while the rows give continuity and structure to the overall plan, creating visual relations with the surroundings and introducing a variety into the urban fabric, thereby establishing a different system of hierarchies and relations. While the overall plan resembles early modernist schemes of parallel rows, unlike it (which progressively tended to abandon the traditional relation block-street to favour alternatively blocks placed on site according to sun exposure, rather than following an existent pattern) the blocks follow the system of streets through a kind of platô.

"Absorbing modernity": when upper classes rescue modernism

The strength of Portela project lies in its reflection on urban design as a discipline, rejecting any strategies derived from fixed assumptions, establishing a dialogue with modernity at the same time as reinterpreting some of its formal proposals, and challenging some of its propositions and ambitions. Addressing the unfinished task of imagining post-modern democracy, democracy in an age of mass media, technical instrumentality, commodification, and social heterogeneity, Fernando Silva, far ahead of his own time looked for ways of conceiving the public responding to the irreducible diversity of identity, adequate to the connectedness of power, the politically uncompromising consumer culture of global capitalism.

After more than 40 years of its completion, and although this debate was brought to stage some decades ago, the ghost of community is still obscuring urban debates and suggesting the return to old models. Likewise Portela keeps its pertinence as it still addresses most of the discussions on housing and urbanism, on centre and periphery, privacy and community, etc. Implicit in his project is the conviction that sociology itself is unable to draw the city.

Was it a disbelief in utopia? We believe it was an optimistic way of looking at suburbia through the careful construction of we could also call a cadavre exquis, a montage or collage that reinvented their original purpose:

First, the base is an address, to be connected with the infrastructural networks, both mass media and physical transport systems. It welcomes the car, the bypass and the free-way culture. The base should be designed as a drive-in, a drive-on, a drive-over. The convenience of the car and the beauty of the car are an elementary inspiration for its design.

Second, the need for individuality, intimacy and privacy. In the hectic contemporary life with hundreds of decisions and fragmented landscapes, it should be a safe and defined spot that prioritises enclosure before the view. The base is probably introverted and incorporates nature within instead of exposure to it(…) the entrance [is] the gate to the hectic life. The architecture is not a complicated
composition but expresses simplicity and clarity and tries to catch the daylight without losing privacy.
(Adriaan Geuze)

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