

Rediscovering modern 'civil architecture': The case of Bela Vista neighbourhood in Setúbal

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ABSTRACT

Suburban mass-housing became commonplace in Portuguese cities during the twentieth century, particularly in the metropolitan areas. Research into the current conditions of such suburbs is increasingly important, as challenges facing metropolitan cities continue to evolve and demand for sustainable change.

Here, we observe the urban process of a particular case-study – the Bela Vista neighbourhood in Setúbal, planned by José Charters Monteiro as 'civil architecture'.

What aspects defined its urban design and what role can the territory play in improving Bela Vista in the future? Moreover, the urban and architectural forms of Bela Vista underwent a period of disbelief, deserving today a closer look. Can its intended 'civil architecture' and the later civic engagement promote urban regeneration and social-territorial cohesion?

Anchored on a morphological and ecological perception, we aim to disclose the key transformations of this planned suburb, assessing how it can continue to change towards a more just and sustainable future.

Keywords: suburban estate; public mass-housing; socio-spatial multidimensionality; Bela Vista neighbourhood; 'civil architecture'.

INTRODUCTION

Suburban mass-housing estates bloomed in metropolitan cities, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, which placed unprecedented pressures for transforming rural and peripheral landscapes. Urbanization and metropolisation of rural areas, during the 20th century were prompted by migratory flows, related to labour markets and later by decolonisation (Brandão & Remesar, 2000).

The urban spatial structure of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA) underwent a late and intense development, and in face of this growth and 'disorderly' urban expansion, housing for families arriving to modernizing cities was insufficient (Pinto & Guerra, 2019). Thus, suburbanization was not always compliant with planning policies, as there were often frail or inexistent, while the public sector itself played a key part in many cities in shaping suburban expansion. Some of the urban forms and architectural solutions of many mass-housing suburbs, particularly those led by the public sector, underwent a period of dismay and disbelief, which now deserves a closer look.

Here, we attempt this closer look towards the case of the Bela Vista neighbourhood in Setúbal, intended by its original architect, João Charters Monteiro, as an example of 'civil architecture' (Franco, 2009). Anchored on a morphological perspective, we aim to follow the planning process of this neighbourhood, assessing its relationship with the territory and how both can continue to change towards a more just and sustainable future. Can 'civil architecture' and civil interventions promote urban regeneration and social and territorial cohesion in the suburbs?

1. SETÚBAL AND ITS PLANNING HISTORY

Currently one of the main cities of the Setúbal Peninsula and part of the LMA, Setúbal has a long and important history, changing from town to city in 1860. Its dynamic urban life partly results from being what Spiro Kostof (1991) terms 'natural harbour cities'. Other examples are Halikarnassos, Naples and Valparaíso. Such cities have sweeping backdrops with offset street-sweeps. Likewise, Setúbal's urban structure was defined, until the 19th century, by east-west streets, parallel to the coastal line, with a few secondary perpendicular alleys (Faria, 1981). At the same time are built the port and Avenida Luísa Todi, also parallel to the coast (Pereira, 2007), replacing the defensive line and creating a modern "boulevard", a dynamic centre of urban life. Until the 1950s, the landscape of Setúbal was defined by dispersed residential neighbourhoods housing a precarious and dispossessed workforce, separated by farmsteads and other rural land belonging to the local middle-class (Faria, 1981).

Modernization in Setúbal goes hand in hand with industrial development, particularly the preserve industry (particularly canned fish), with several neighbourhoods or shanty towns emerging in the periphery to house its workers, generally of low income (Faria, 1981). From the 1930s onwards, urban growth rises significantly, partly due to the public works policy promoted by the New State (*Estado Novo*), a Bonapartist conservative dictatorship that governed Portugal from 1926 to 1974. Among its intervention are neighbourhoods directed towards the local middle and lower bourgeoisie (Faria, 1981), some of which were demolished later on, or occupied by the population during the democratic transition (Faria, 2009). However, low wages and deprivation were constant in the first half of the 20th century in Setúbal, causing a continuous "chronic housing crisis" (Faria, 1981, 110). Modernization and resolution of urban structuring problems led the Setúbal municipality to launch planning efforts from the 1940s onwards.

In 1944, architect João António Aguiar is hired to design the Setúbal Masterplan (*Plano de Urbanização da Cidade de Setúbal*), a document whose process will continue for several decades (Faria, 1981; Lôbo, 1995; Pereira, 2007). This first version prioritizes road infrastructuring, a land-use scheme, and four zones for expansion. While the Setúbal Council approved Aguiar's Plan in 1946, several problems were pointed out to

it, namely its onerous solutions and its classification of the northern floodplain orange groves as land for urbanization (Pereira, 2007). However, Aguiar's plan would meet serious resistance from public opinion mostly because of the extensive demolitions it proposed on the old Setúbal centre (Lôbo, 1995). A first revision of this work is promoted in 1955, ignoring many objections raised to the primary design (Faria, 1981).

In 1962, a new version of the plan is prepared by Aguiar, introducing new areas for expansion. These include 'Bela Vista Residential Unit', in the immediate eastern limit of the city. However, the spatial planning framework had changed recently with the introduction of the Foreplan, a technical study which did not empower municipalities to expropriate the land necessary for implementation (Lôbo, 1995). This happened with the 1962 Setúbal plan, which, treated as a Foreplan, was powerless to control development dynamics (Pereira, 2007).

This era is also marked by the collapse of the preserve industry, and economic life is recovered through the great economic groups promoted by the New State's new development policies, which attracted rural newcomers mostly from Alentejo, rising the pressure over Setúbal's housing stock (Faria, 1981). New industries included metallurgy and ship construction, and the expected population growth is undeniable, leading to the first prospect of a housing intervention of larger scale (Faria, 1981).

In 1973, Aguiar finishes his last Setúbal Masterplan, in continuity with his prior proposals, privileging residential areas and equipment networks (Pereira, 2007). When the democratic Revolution sprang in 1974, the territorial situation of Setúbal was chaotic, mostly due to the weak planning policies followed so far (Lôbo, 1995) which protected the interests of dominant classes, particularly land owners and the industrial bourgeoisie, whose priority was infrastructuring (Faria, 1981). Often, as was the case in Setúbal, plan revisions were passive records of new urbanizations rather than instruments for programming urbanization (Faria, 1981).

In the early 1970s, the Housing Development Fund (*Fundo Fomento à Habitação* – FFH) promotes a new planning instrument, the Integral Plan. Inspired by municipal planning experiences in Lisbon (Monteiro & Ferreira, 1979), these plans created new residential areas with housing, infrastructure, equipment and services (Vilaça & Ferreira, 2018). Setúbal is assigned an Integral Plan (*Plano Integrado de Sertúbal* – PIS) parallel to Aguiar's final Masterplan (Faria, 1981). This is the first plan which seriously tries to tackle the massive population increase prompted by the late 1970s industrial boom.



Fig.1 – Bela Vista Neighbourhood under construction. Source: Silva, 1988

2. THE BELA VISTA NEIGHBOURHOOD

At the time of the Revolution, housing shortage in Setúbal was so severe that nearly 50 residents' commissions formed in shanty towns, slums and even middle-class neighbourhoods, all seeking housing improvements (Faria, 2009).

Social housing during the New State had been so ineffective that nearly 5000 Setúbal families were, in 1975, living in precarious housing (Faria, 1981). A city planning office was formed in 1975 to create a new form of housing policy, which extended from a municipal Masterplan in 1977 to the urbanization of neighbourhoods under several programmes, including the FFH, cooperative housing, and self-construction programmes (*Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local - SAAL*).

The Bela Vista neighbourhood was the most visible urbanization promoted by the PIS, and one of the most relevant of the post-revolutionary period in Setúbal. Originally its design was coordinated by architects José Charters Monteiro and João Campina Ferreira for the FFH. This was the largest suburbanization process in Setúbal's planning history, marking the transition from dictatorship to democracy and proposing the most radical change in the morphological patterns of the city.

The experimentation of new morphologies and the paradigm shift in social housing design in this neighbourhood sought a reconciliation between its civics, utility, and beauty, which the architect defines as a 'civil architecture' (Franco, 2009).



Fig.2 – Yellow Estate. Source: Authors, 2021.

The residential ensemble includes three estates, Yellow, Blue, and Pink. Its urban morphology is regular and orthogonal with a 'rigid design' generated by explicit architectural norms (Crespo, 2012). The neighbourhood presents a discontinuity with the surrounding urban fabrics.

The Yellow Estate, built between 1976 and 1989, consist of rectangular blocks with three to five floors, circumscribing semi-public courtyards inside. Access to dwellings is made through vertical access cores located in the corners of building and then through horizontal decks. The Blue Estate was built between 1980 and 1989, consisting of a set of deck-access parallel slabs separated by public courtyards. Finally, the Pink Estate was built in two phases –in 1992 and in 2001 – with several low-rise slabs, some linear and others in U

shape, along a backbone defined by Alameda das Palmeiras. For the first time, access to homes does not use a deck structure.

Despite the geometric formalism and innovation, the urbanistic quality of the public and semi-public (third spaces), and the shift in the ways of living of the community was not always successful (Nogueira, 2007). For a long time, there was no correspondence between the functional and social dimensions meaning that habitat morphologies were not suitable to collective life.

Lack of public transportation to the city restricted neighborhood life to its immediate space. The lack of public facilities, as well as qualified common spaces, were only rectified later, with collaboration from residents' committees.

Public space had three key elements: green areas, squares and access-decks. The green spaces, which included allotment gardens (Silva, 1988) were not implemented, and the escarpment was not recovered. In recent neighbourhood redevelopments, these spaces were redesigned for integration on the neighbourhood. Squares were conceived to intermediate between domestic and urban space, promoting collective life. Access-decks are considered a third space, for collective distribution and leisure as well as thermal comfort (Franco, 2009).

Services and facilities were built separately. Community relations and everyday activities were later recognized as fundamental for an adequate habitat. The 'Observatório Social da Bela Vista' (*Bela Vista Social Observatory*) identified problems associated with social exclusion, degradation of the housing stock and weak community bonds. The 'Nosso bairro, Nossa cidade' (*Our neighbourhood, our city*) programme was an innovative local experience, with a socio-economic and spatial dimension, promoting citizenship and community participation in local decisions. It sought to transform and improve the life of a run-down area through participation in the identification and resolution of problems (AICE, 2018).



Fig.3 – Bela Vista Neighbourhood. Source: Authors, 2021.

3. DISCUSSION AND FINAL NOTES

Although at first the community did not accept the morphology of Bela Vista – particularly in the Yellow Estate – the recent interventions have demonstrated that shifts in socio-economic conditions do strengthen the link

of residents with space, promoting a better usage. The model of public mass-housing focused on specific urban areas, often producing peripheralization and social homogeneity. This has led to habitats that neither improve the living conditions of the residents nor the socio-territorial cohesion and integration of these neighbourhoods.

Community involvement, encouraged by local authorities, created tools for improving conditions. Projects like "Nosso Bairro, Nossa Cidade" promote the organization and participation of residents in actions such as cleaning, dynamizing and rebuilding the neighbourhood. The social stigma attached to the neighbourhood is being circumvented through educational activities for young people, as well as exterior and public space arrangements. The community is also partaking in neighbourhood management (Silva & Raposo, 2007a), while more integration with the Setúbal centre was sought.

In 2017, the aforementioned project promoted eight flowerbeds were rebuilt in the inner courtyard of one of the blocks. Similar actions, involving the community in improving public spaces run alongside the municipal support for community gardens, and could potentially generate jobs (one of the project's objectives) to mitigate unemployment.

Indeed, this civil architecture failed for a long time. But this tells us less about architecture, and rather emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary teams in mass-housing suburbanization. Architecture sought to promote beauty, utility and civility, but implementation counted only with a limited team of architects and sociologists. Furthermore, civil architecture implies municipal decision-makers, social workers, as well as socio-economic stability and employment, which was not the case in Bela Vista (Silva & Raposo, 2007). The Lisbon planning experiences which inspired Integral Plans were successful where multidisciplinary teams joined to create a cohesive habitat, and where social mobility was effectively promoted. In Bela Vista, there was indeed a civil architecture, but this cannot do without other civilities for which all of society, not just architects or the local community, is responsible.

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