

Shrinking the plan. A middle-class wishful thinking in the outskirts of Lisbon

Leonor Matos Silva, Dinâmia'CET, ISCTE-IUL; leonormatosilva@outlook.com

Rogério Paulo Vieira de Almeida, Faculty of Architecture, University of Lisbon; Dinâmia'CET, ISCTE-IUL; rogeriopaulo4@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s and 1970s, large-scale Portuguese architectural production was largely promoted by the State. This took further aspects after the 1974 revolution when housing construction became one of the pillars of the new state policy. It is in this context that Manuel Vicente develops the project for Quinta do Bacalhau in different times: 1– Before 1974 by EPUL as part of UNOR 26 of which M. Vicente was the coordinator, 2– From 1974 as a SAAL operation after the site was taken over by a residents' committee, 3– After 1976, as it was built outside the revolutionary period by a housing cooperative and financed by the state. Unlike most SAAL projects – small, contained and with low-row houses –, and despite the ideologically marked circumstances of this period, it presents somehow ostentatious. Volumes of broad and generous features, incorporation of commerce on the ground floors like a boulevard, contrast with the dominant model, thus raising some questions: – to what extent did a particular class position correspond to a certain typology, style, etc.? – wouldn't this imply an aspiration to the same “rights” as the middle-class, as far as architecture is concerned? M. Vicente remains throughout his life in an ideologically multifaceted position. Close to the Communist Party, he has a cosmopolitan experience still in the 1960s being in touch with the Western capitalism – in the United States and in Macao – and in close contact with the speculation and profit markets. It has thus a double folded stance regarding the state-sponsored housing and low standards one, as if responding to the residents were the same as responding to himself. In this communication we intend to analyse through drawings of the project how the notion of housing for “a middle-class” crossed through the project. This argument is revealed in a plan of a dwelling with dimensions close to middle-class, which is later reduced to smaller areas, but “keeping” architectural qualities.

Keywords: SAAL; Manuel Vicente; Housing in Lisbon.

1.

In 1974, Portuguese architecture was in a kind of crossroads situation. The revolutionary process after April 1974 led to a suspension of most construction works, the public ones as well as the private ones. The exception were the public social housing programs absorbed, in the meantime, by the peoples' revolutionary claims for proper houses, a claim made famous by the slogan "Peace, bread, health, housing". Therefore, social housing became an opportunity for established architects, young architects and students to engage with the revolution, and with the overall desire for a social transformation. In this context, this research points at how, at a certain time, at a given place, – the outskirts of Lisbon, in the aftermath of the 1974 revolution – there was a crisscross with different events, different actors. The goal was to provide an answer to a simple yet many times overshadowed question: a population aspiring to houses reflecting more a middle-class status and not carrying the stigma of housing for the so-called disadvantaged population. It was precisely this challenge that in a sense that can be found in an architectural design which carried some middle-class ideal principles.



Fig. 1 – Timeline, Portuguese political context in the 1970s

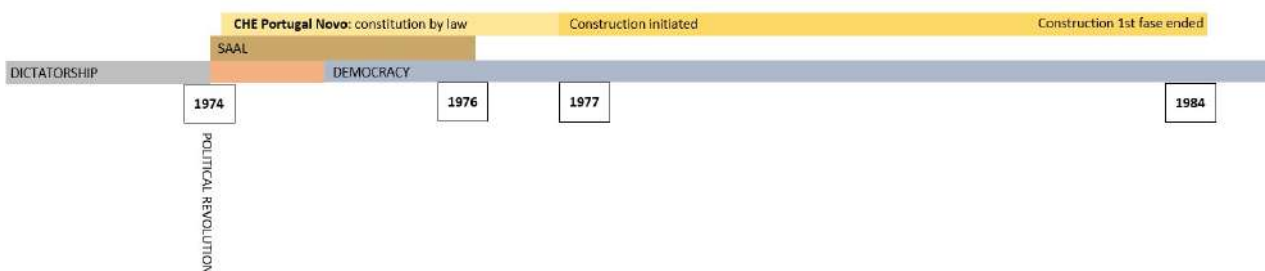


Fig. 2 – Timeline, Portugal Novo neighbourhood project and construction.

2.

The starting point for this paper is a plan from the late 1970s found between the sketches of a young architect for the "Portugal Novo" neighbourhood, in Lisbon, while a collaborator of architect Manuel Vicente. Manuel Vicente at the time was overseeing the overall project for rehousing the people from the Quinta do Bacalhau-Monte Coxo-R. Alberto Pimentel in one of the largest new housing schemes in Lisbon, – the New Portugal neighbourhood. While that young architect, Nuno Matos Silva, was monitoring a medium-scale architectural work in an outskirts area of Lisbon, he was also doing by himself some experiments with typologies for some uncertain future purpose.

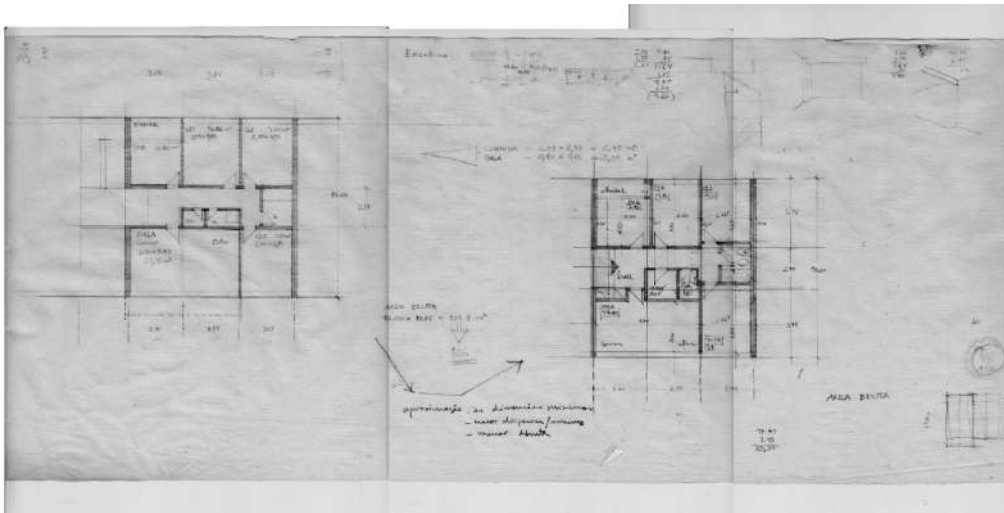


Fig. 3 – Drawing by Nuno Matos Silva, n.d. (ca.1974-1984)

At the time, experimentalism was on the agenda. Architects wanted to give needy populations the maximum comfort and dignity within an economic logic that intended to distribute the minimum to the maximum number of people. "Housing for the greatest number" became a commonplace. On the left of fig. 3, we see an ideal plan with larger areas. However, this "wishful thinking" immediately amended according to the minimum dimensions required on the legislation, as it can be seen in the plan on the right.

In a photo taken in 1997 by the already mentioned young architect, Manuel Vicente is at one of his works in Macao. Here, it is visible the architect's characteristic use of colour, the same colours – blue and yellow – already used in the neighbourhood New Portugal project – which we'll see ahead. In fact, the New Portugal neighbourhood was the announcement of the un-refrained intense colouring that will become a trend from the 1980s onwards.

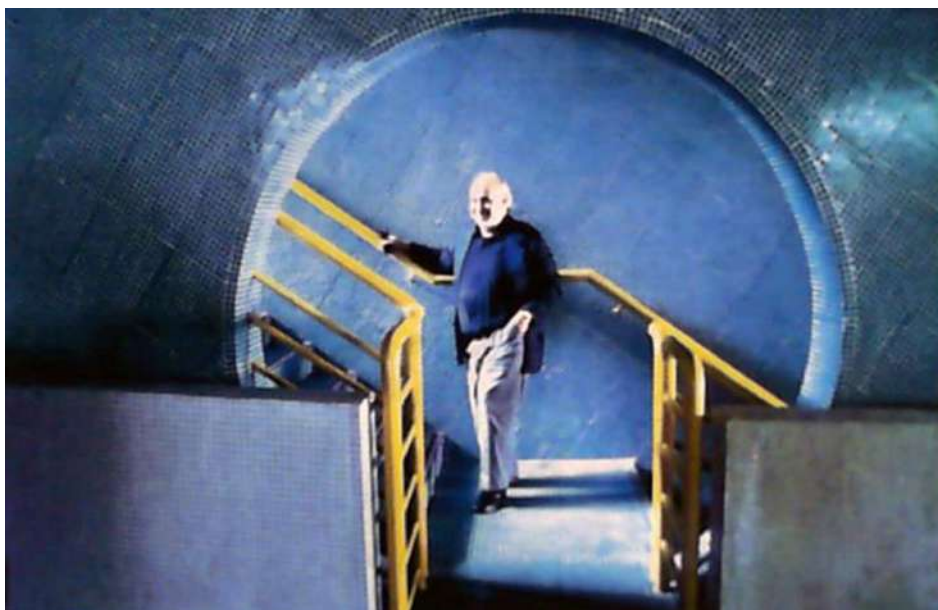


Fig. 4 – Architect Manuel Vicente (1934-2013). Photograph by Nuno Matos Silva

The colour was one of several features that made him a post-modern author. Well-travelled with a strong personality, a pupil of Louis Kahn, and living between Lisbon and Macao, he carried a unique cosmopolitanism that distinguishes him in the Portuguese architecture.

In the early 1970s he was designing urbanisation plans for the city of Lisbon, and in 1974 the revolution took place. After more than four decades of dictatorship, the eruption of the revolution in 1974 introduced a new watchword: freedom. And a year later, by the express will of the people, in free elections, democracy. Of course, the dominant values were the so-called left-wing ones, namely the distribution of wealth, equal rights and the public cause.

In the field of social housing, what distinguished this specific period (1974-1976) was the right to a place and self-construction. The needy populations, who lived in unhealthy shacks, claimed to remain where they lived and not to be re-located. The Local Ambulatory Support Service (SAAL) program was one of the main outcomes of the revolution concerning housing policies and was in force from mid-1974 to mid-1976. It consisted in the State providing support – financing, teams of architects, engineers, sociologists, etc. –, so that the populations could organize and manage and create themselves their own houses in the place where they lived. This programme had a strong impact in the architectural culture, as well a strong political engagement, evident in the fact that several of the most renowned Portuguese architects were appointed to make the projects (A. Siza, M. Vicente, S. Fernandez, F.S. Dias).



Fig. 5 – Intervention Area. SAAL Lisbon. Quinta do Bacalhau, Monte Coxo and Rua Alberto Pimentel, early 1970s

3.

The Cooperative New Portugal was created on the 2nd October 1974. Its purpose was to shelter the inhabitants of the slums of Quinta do Bacalhau, Monte Coxo and Rua Alberto Pimentel. As in most SAAL interventions, one first survey was made to determine how many families needed to be housed and other relevant issues concerning the socio-economical context. Then the architectural project was drawn up and only in 1977 did the construction work begin. By 1984 there were 221 dwellings fully built and inhabited, corresponding only to the first phase of the project.



Fig. 6 – Quinta do Bacalhau-Monte Coxo and Travessa do Noronha (Manuel Vicente’s working atelier).
Contact proof by Nuno Mato Silva

Before this process began, Quinta do Bacalhau-Monte Coxo was a place composed of a shantytown, a street and a countryside area, outside the consolidated city. The EPUL (Lisbon’s Public Agency for Housing) stamp – as seen in the bottom right corner of a plan (fig. 5) – confirms us that this land was already in sight to be urbanised, already before the revolution. One of the main innovative aspects in the SAAL programme was the contact with the populations. In the post-revolutionary period, the planners – namely the younger ones, many of whom were still students, and who belonged to the so-called local support brigades – went to the shantytowns and attended to urgent sanitary problems, like the lack of electricity or water.



Fig. 7 - Quinta do Bacalhau-Monte Coxo and Travessa do Noronha (Manuel Vicente’s working office).
Contact proof by Nuno Matos Silva

The history of these on-site actions can be traced through several sets of photographs taken by the young collaborator of Manuel Vicente, Nuno Matos Silva. They are essentially of the shacks, of his family and of Manuel Vicente's office where he worked. In a contact proof (fig.7), one might acknowledge the poverty and the waste containers in the shacks, in contrast with what we supposed to be the office decoration (on the top right of the image): a woman dressed as a nun, with Che Guevara tattooed in her chest, an image revealing Manuel Vicente's strong personality.



Fig. 8 - CHE* Portugal Novo/New Portugal *(Economic Housing Cooperative) created 2 October 1974: political rally and football match. Contact proof by Nuno Matos Silva



Fig. 9 - CHE* Portugal Novo/New Portugal *(Economic Housing Cooperative) created 2 October 1974: political rally and football match. Contact proof by Nuno Matos Silva

One question here is: how did Manuel Vicente respond to the SAAL proposition of mediating an auto-construction by the residents in the shantytowns?

Another aspect we need to underline from these contact prints is the sessions' topic: the private/public joint ventures. The SAAL program was a government initiative. But soon, the residents' committees, like in many other SAAL locations, gave way into private cooperatives and the Economic Housing

Cooperative “Portugal Novo” (New Portugal) was created.

In one of the contact proofs (fig. 8), we see, on the bottom, a private football match and, on the top, a rally with posters where the following watchwords are written “Struggling for housing”, “No shacks”, “Residents’ committees”. One might say that sports and politics, as well as leisure, are two of many of the facets that a cooperative ranges.



Fig. 10 - Rua Alberto Pimentel (1 June 1975?; Children’s day). Photograph by Nuno Matos Silva

4.

Fig. 10 shows the site before the construction. As we can see, this was a very rural place, almost bucolic. A privileged site for a dream house. The mentors of the Cooperative New Portugal wanted their homes with more than just simple features. According to Manuel Vicente, the people of the shacks wanted him to plan the house as it was for his own. He asks a question, in a João Dias film (2007) on his words: “On top of that misery, they still had to organize themselves?”.



Fig. 11 - Areeiro square, Lisbon. 1960s

Just a few hundred meters distant from the site, this was the formal and consolidated city, one of the most iconic urban squares in Lisbon (fig. 11).



Fig. 12 - Cooperative New Portugal: Architecture Project by Manuel Vicente. Implantation

Looking at the initial plan for the New Portugal neighbourhood, we see on the left the established city and on the extreme right the remaining rural areas within the city. The project, on the mid right, foresaw the construction of five housing blocks and an area for a building with school facilities. The site was a privileged one, and the plan was to absorb all the 350 families living in the shacks.

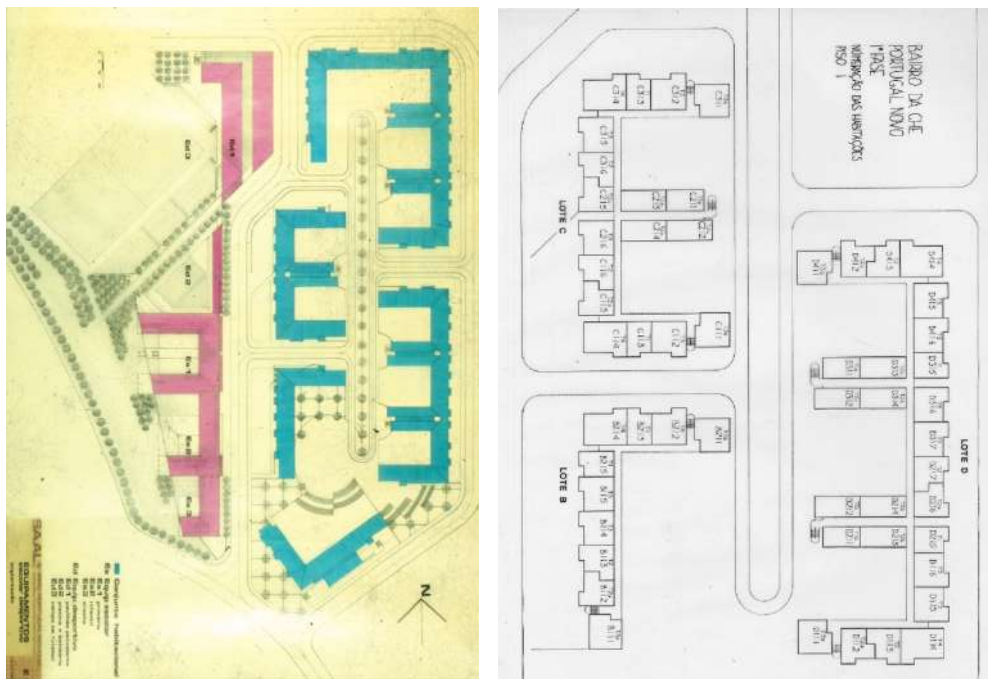


Fig. 12 - SAAL – CHE New Portugal: Architecture Project. Implantation. Housing and school and sports equipment and dwelling numbering- On the right: drawing by Nuno Matos Silva

The implantation of the planned blocks (fig. 13) shows great compositional richness by articulating the exterior roads with an inner street, and sequences of courtyards reflecting the “U” shape of the blocks. In blue, housing; in pink, school and sports facilities. What may have started as an imposing rule, at a close look reveals a much complex and rich design. The blocks are uneven, misaligned to each other. In the end they defy order and simplicity.

5.

From the initial project, 210 dwellings were built – with different types and for families of different dimensions. The plan on the right (fig. 13) shows in greater detail, the design of the blocks with their interconnections through exterior galleries and staircases. Both plans (fig. 13) show that the whole and its parts are carefully worked, minding the different dimensions and relations, and not just the pursuit of simplistic architectural codes.

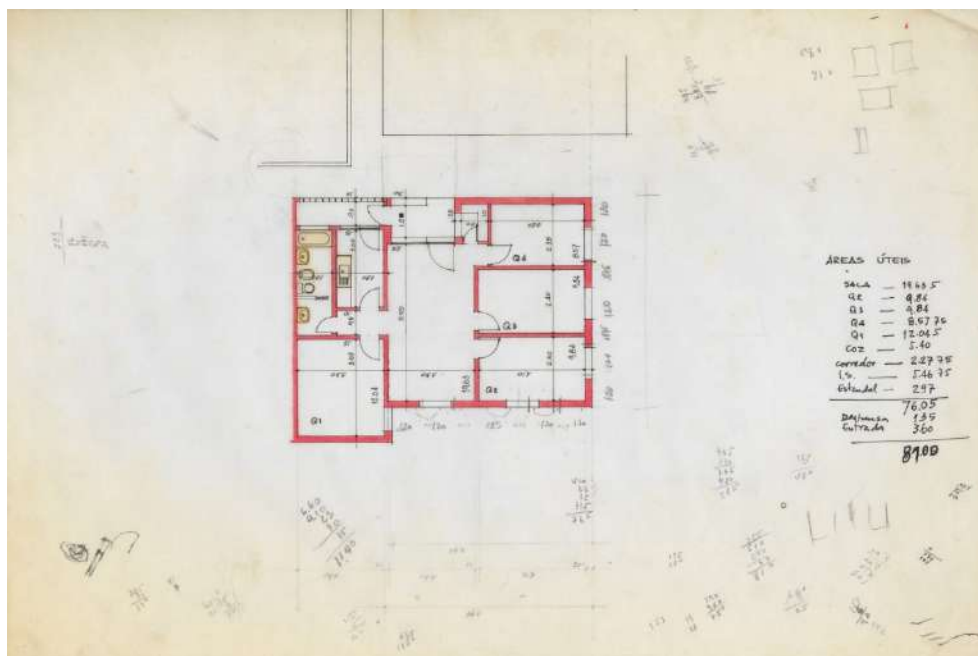


Fig. 13 - SAAL - Cooperative New Portugal: Architecture Project. Dwelling's numbering. Drawing by Nuno Matos Silva, n.d. (ca.1974-1984)

The plans of the apartments had to comply with the strict code regulations for social housing, and with strict budgets. These lead to organisations with open staircases and galleries to access the apartments. Nevertheless, the apartments in New Portugal reveal an attempt to go behind the strictness of the codes. In the plan of a 4-bedroom corner apartment (fig. 14), in addition to the gallery, a semi-public area guarantees a gradual passage between the inside and the outside, one first degree of privacy to the home.



Fig. 14 - SAAL - Cooperative New Portugal: Architecture Project being constructed. Photograph by Nuno Matos Silva, n.d. (ca. 1983)

What struck the most was the dimension of the blocks. One sees that the supposedly three-storey high buildings became, in fact, and in some places five-storey high plus the ground floor (fig. 15). Regulations dictated that construction with no elevator could not be more than three floors high. But Manuel Vicente was not at ease with the idea of building the so-called houses for the poor, so he made a duplex on the last floor therefore making the buildings have a more visible size. In our view, Vicente proposed to ensure, as far as he could, what we may discuss as some middle-class principles in the 1970s: dimension and colour (it would be painted in blue and yellow). Other features, like a generous urban space and the inclusion of service facilities – like polyvalent rooms, a laundry, stores, etc. – made this place comparable to Olaias – which was this middle-class great endeavour on the background of the picture (fig. 15).



Fig. 15 - SAAL - Cooperative New Portugal: Architecture Project under construction. Photograph by Nuno Matos Silva, n.d. (ca. 1983)

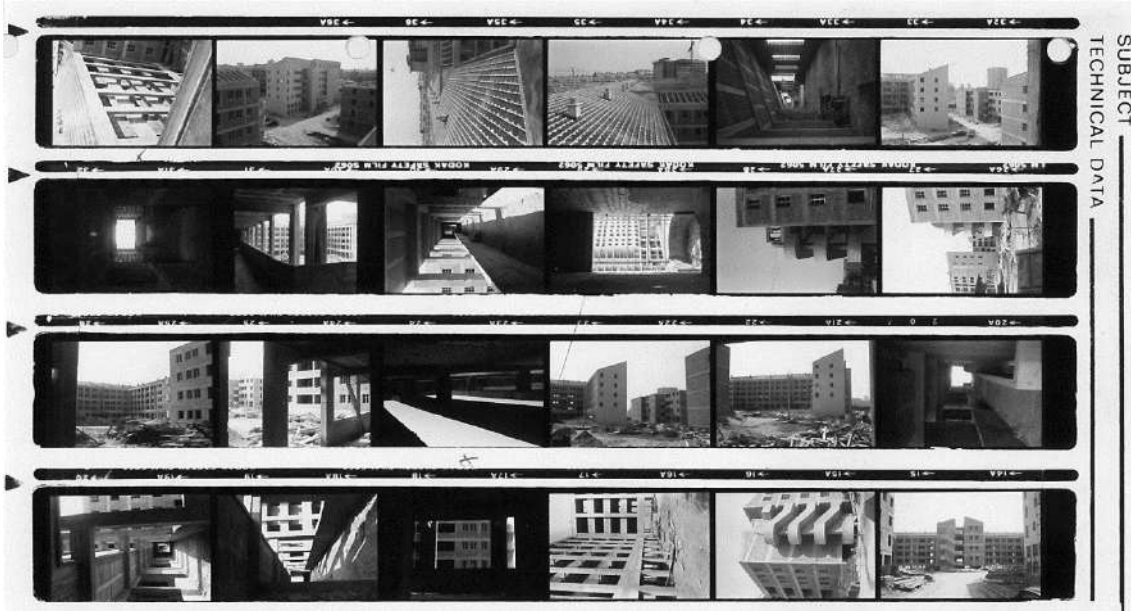


Fig. 16 - SAAL - Cooperative New Portugal: Architecture Project being constructed. Contact proof by Nuno Matos Silva, n.d. (ca. 1983)



Fig. 17 – SAAL interventions: New Portugal, Zambujal, Lagos, Porto (Top left to bottom right)

The remark about the striking dimension of the blocks may, today, seem enigmatic or anachronistic. However, let's not forget that many of the SAAL interventions all over the country were rows of houses with one or two floors only. This was not the case in New Portugal neighbourhood, as we can see by comparing a few cases (fig. 18).

6.

The years have passed and, in 1987, the cooperative New Portugal went bankrupt. The neighbourhood became no man's land. What was supposed to be a perfect place to live became just one more dangerous neighbourhood in the country. Today, we may observe three stages in its development:

- First, the shacks' population where optimistically offered a kind of a dream house;
- second, the new houses were occupied, however the people's dream never fully fulfilled;
- third, this neighbourhood became a new sort of shantytown, or a 21st century ghetto.



Fig. 18 – Portugal Novo neighbourhood, current state

It is built in between bigger and uncharacterized buildings that minimize it, instead of applying the original project. There are people that have lived there since it was built; some others occupied it illegally, either buying a key, either just by simply awaiting someone to die to get in and occupy it. The ground floor stores have been occupied and electric cables been pushed down. The buildings need urgent maintenance, physically and socially: the iron bars of the concrete are visible at certain points, and some empty spaces are places of drug consumption.

Strangely enough, residents like to live there. On 25 March 2021, TVI broadcasted a TV news report: "New Portugal: the neighbourhood in the heart of Lisbon where the houses belong to no one". In it, the wife of member n° 1 of the cooperative testifies that she was 100% better when she moved from the shack to the New Portugal and that, even today, she would only move away if it was for a new, and legal, house at the same place.



Fig. 19 - Print screen from a TV report called “New Portugal: The neighbourhood in the heart of Lisbon where the houses belong to no one.”. 25 March 2021.

Still, on the 13 of May 2021, a Council of Ministries of Portugal Resolution promised to solve the situation. Unfortunately, for decades, the State didn’t care about New Portugal as well as other similar neighbourhoods created in the mid-1970s. Nor the private sector. It is true that here are people still paying their rent to Caixa Geral de Depósitos, a public bank; however, these are remains of a wishful thinking similar to the one Manuel Vicente had when conceiving what we believed to be a middle-class intention proposal. In conclusion, we have three stages. The first is the creation of the private Cooperative New Portugal, which is going to provide ‘dream houses’ for the people in need. Then, in 1987, the Cooperative goes bankrupt, and the neighbourhood is no man’s land. Lastly, the future. Again, in the TVI report, we hear the city’s councillor for urbanism saying she will support whatever needed, either the rehabilitation of the building or its demolition.

7.

Having for background the Optimistic Suburbia moto, we might say that we wish the New Portugal neighbourhood and its residents to have a better outcome. Situated in a noble part of the city of Lisbon, may the neighbourhood not be demolished but rehabilitated. Some of the most important architectural principles still prevail. Also, it is important to finally acknowledge the right to the place for the people that live in it that the SAAL process claimed for.



Fig. 20 – Aerial view of the site, June 2021. Source: Google Earth.

This last image shows the consolidated city just a few hundred meters from the neighbourhood. After the 1974 Revolution, it was this dream that people were after, aspiring to a kind of middle-class status, both socially and in their homes.

8.

In this paper, we argued how some quite distant realities sometimes are quite related. Either physically, either conceptually, sometimes even in a more metaphysical sense. In the same sense that's what these last two sentences try to point at.

What is immensely far, can be close
Heidegger, *The Thing*, 1950

So far away, though standing near
ABBA, *S.O.S.*, 1975

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