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Architecture from an Alternative Power

*Participation and Design in the Catujal
Workers Estate SAAL Operation*

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In a revolution, governors can no longer govern, and the governed refuse to be so. In this sense, the experience of the Portuguese Local Support Service (Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local—SAAL) epitomizes the national revolution of 1974–5, allowing poor city workers to reclaim the right to housing and the city. This essay discusses the Catujal Workers Estate, built in this context, in Loures (Lisbon Region) with a plan by the brigade led by architect Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral. Most information is derived from the reports and drawings of the original SAAL intervention, with the aim of presenting an observation of this case and trying to highlight the process of cooperation that linked those designing the habitat with those who were to live in it.

- 1 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2005).
- 2 Tom Avermaete & Janina Gosseye, *Urban design in the 20th century: a history* (Zurich: GTA Verlag, 2022); João Cunha Borges & Teresa Marat-Mendes, “Viagem à capital de Lisboa,” in *Políticas de Habitação em Lisboa*, ed. Gonçalo Antunes (Lisbon: Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, 2023).
- 3 Gonçalo Antunes, *Políticas de Habitação — 200 anos* (Odivelas: Caleidoscópio, 2018).
- 4 Antunes, *Políticas...*
- 5 Ricardo Agarez (ed), *Habitação — Cem anos de políticas públicas em Portugal* (Lisbon: Instituto da Habitação e da Reabilitação Urbana, 2018).
- 6 Antunes, *Políticas...*

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, housing design still poses challenges which strongly imply concepts of justice, democracy and social organization. Unplanned and deregulated urban development has been hailed for being adaptive, individualized, and diverse, but it can also easily become unruly, deprived, and unsafe.¹ Planned development, at its best, provides adequate infrastructure, facilities and organization, but can also become easily diagrammatic, defiant to change, or restrictive.² Thus, the challenge is to avoid both top-down development based on a priori conceptions *and* the sprawl of informal settlements which deepen social inequalities. What can be done to ensure that urban transformation is properly structured, but also open to the changing needs of communities? It is likely that most solutions are yet to be found through the channels linking government and governance, technical expertise and popular decision-making. Luckily, the past has left us important experiences and clues regarding the types of organization which favour achieving such endeavours.

In Portugal, the scenario seems at first less than inviting. Public housing policies were almost negligible until the 1930s, and even then, they were created and enforced by a Bonapartist dictatorship, the New State (*Estado Novo*, 1933–1974), whose key housing policies were designed for the middle classes, guaranteeing access to the property through a twenty-five-year through a twenty-five-year instalment plan.³ Only in 1959 was there a large, apparently more inclusive programme for public housing, yet for ten years this applied only to the city of Lisbon.⁴

In 1969, the creation of the Housing Development Fund (*Fundo Fomento à Habitação — FFH*) within the Public Works Ministry (*Ministério das Obras Públicas — MOP*), allowed the planning of similar programmes in the metropolitan regions and some inland towns.⁵ But access to housing, even when promoted by the state, remained unaccountable to any specific community.⁶ Indeed, even municipalities played a merely consultant role in the processes of urbanization, whose key actors were solely the MOP departments.

Thus, until 1974, there was no legislation for communities to demand a housing estate, let alone to play a part in its design. During the democratic era, starting in November 1975, public housing continued to be under the responsibility of state institutions — central and municipal — but was increasingly oriented towards the most vulnerable sectors of society, including the many remaining slum and shack dwellers who, even in the capital, persisted until the late 1990s. Little more than assistance operations, the resulting housing estates did give a proper roof to many families, but regardless of their efficiency, they did not reflect the aspirations of their communities, nor were they understood as emancipatory tools for promoting social mobility. Only more recently have programmes for participated design been introduced, but their scope remains limited and site-specific, and it does not apply equally to all social classes: in the poorer,

- 7 Raquel Varela, *A people's history of the Portuguese Revolution* (London: Pluto, 2019).
- 8 Teresa Barata Salgueiro, *Lisboa: periferia e centralidades* (Oeiras: Celta, 2001).
- 9 Varela, *Portuguese Revolution*.
- 10 José António Bandeirinha, *O Processo SAAL e a Arquitectura no 25 de Abril de 1974* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2011); Maria Rodrigues, *Pelo Direito à Cidade* (Porto: Campo das Letras, 1999).

sometimes informal, housing areas, public participation usually implies the process of creating modest, if not negligible, urban improvements or basic equipment, but their status and more general problems usually remain unchanged. Because, all things considered, participation is not synonymous with justice, even though it is a fundamental aspect of it.

In this context, the years 1974–75, marked by the Portuguese Ongoing Revolutionary Process (*Processo Revolucionário em Curso* — PREC), kickstarted in April 25, 1974 with the Carnation Revolution, emerge as a time of exception. Participation and justice became paramount not just for technicians and politicians, but also for the common people, who gathered on workers commissions or residents' associations to take on the challenges of their daily lives, their labour conditions and their aspirations, actively establishing an alternative power to the state, characteristic of a revolutionary situation.⁷

In late 1975, through a constitutional process involving the agreement of the main political forces, state power recovered and the (social) revolution was defeated. But its short life was intensely marked by housing problems—and solutions—since Portuguese cities and their peripheries had endured a decades-long housing crisis.⁸ Hence there was a sprawl of speculative housing estates and of illegal neighbourhoods mostly inhabited by the poor, comprising all sorts of building types with variable degrees of construction quality, with public housing offering but a pale alternative.

Revolution happens when those who govern can no longer do so, and those who are governed can no longer be governed in the same way.⁹ In this sense, the experience of the Local Support Service (*Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local* — SAAL), a state programme launched during the PREC, was a deeply revolutionary experience. The poor workers of the main urban regions no longer accepted that political power would condemn them to live in jerry-built houses and deprived shacks while the affluent lived in neighbourhoods with proper construction, proper infrastructure, conditions for a public life, and access to transportation: they demanded not only the right to housing, but also the right to inhabit the city.¹⁰ The SAAL seems to embody the PREC in many ways, both being short-lived but both leaving a ballast of hopes and inspirations (or of dread and disgust, depending on ideological leanings) that largely outlived them, and that seems to always suggest pathways out of the harsh conditions of contemporary life in our gentrified cities.

Here, we discuss the process of a housing estate with roots in the SAAL, the Workers' Estate (*Bairro dos Trabalhadores*) in the municipality of Loures, in the immediate periphery of Lisbon. Located in the civil parish of Apelação, its residents were former slum dwellers from the contiguous area of Catujal, so the estate slipped into posterity as the Catujal Workers Estate. Although the FFH had intended to draw up a plan for the area since 1972, its construction only started when the SAAL took over the plan.

- 11 Bandeirinha, *Processo SAAL*.
- 12 Delfim Sardo, ed., *The SAAL Process: Architecture and Participation 1974–1976* (Porto: Museu de Serralves, 2014).
- 13 Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*.
- 14 Exhibition “Habitação: O SAAL em Loures,” Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade de Lisboa and Câmara Municipal de Loures, Palácio dos Marqueses da Praia e Monforte, Loures, 2015.
- 15 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório da Equipa do Catujal* [Report of the Catujal team], 15–11–1974, Processo 23343/OM, Arquivo Municipal de Loures.
- 16 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório do mês de Novembro de 1974* [Report of November 1974], 12–12–1974, Processo 23343/OM, Arquivo Municipal de Loures.
- 17 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Documento para o Seminário de Maio, no Porto*, [Document for the May Seminar in Porto], 31–12–1975, Processo 23343/OM, Arquivo Municipal de Loures; José Sarmento, interview by the authors, 06–02–2023.
- 18 Sarmento, interview by the authors.

More interestingly, when the SAAL collapsed in 1976, the residents’ association continued construction in accordance with the SAAL plan.

The first section of the essay contextualizes the Catujal area and its situation at the time the SAAL commenced. Section 2 introduces the SAAL and presents the plan developed for the Workers Estate by the brigade led by architect Francisco Pires (aka Pitum) Keil do Amaral (b. 1935). Section 3 focuses on the dissolution of the SAAL programme and introduces the second phase of construction. Section 4 discusses the design and programming aspects of the plan through a comparison with the current state of the neighbourhood.

Bandeirinha published an outstanding work presenting a vast overview of the SAAL programme, while providing a minute survey of all the projects, regardless of their construction status.¹¹ This is further illustrated in the exhibition *The SAAL Process: Architecture and Participation 1974–1976*.¹² While focusing on the case of Porto, the study by Rodrigues critiques the SAAL as a planning and housing policy and evaluates the fundamental role of residents’ associations.¹³ For Catujal, the available literature is relatively scant, but we have reconstituted its urban process through the comparison of different military ordnance surveys and aerial photographs, as well as the panels from the exhibition on the SAAL operations of Loures.¹⁴ The main source of information regarding the plans was the documentation, both written and drawn, made available by the Loures Municipal Archive, namely the full SAAL process, including the monthly reports issued by the brigade. An informal interview was conducted with the former president of the Neighbourhood Workers Association. Finally, in loco visitations and photographic surveys provided the direct observation which also informs the discussion.

More than presenting an in-depth observation of a SAAL operation, we aim to understand how the design activities of SAAL were coordinated with a local (and vulnerable) community in the creation of a habitat.

1 Upwards to Catujal

Catujal was part of a harsh valley system with ridges and steep hills where, by the 1970s, houses were being built indiscriminately in more or less regular gridirons (figure 1). Its unpaved streets, under the winter rains, became a quagmire where it was nearly impossible to walk.¹⁵ After sundown, houses became engulfed in thick darkness.¹⁶ The residents, nearly all industrial workers and construction employees, went down the hill to catch a bus on the military road to reach the nearby towns, and from there took other transport to their workplaces, sometimes very far away.¹⁷ Children went to schools in nearby villages, usually at Apelação and had to endure long walks through dirt pathways.¹⁸

It had been over a decade since the spree of illegal construction had started to claw at the olive groves and farmland of the areas surrounding Lisbon, as it did in other areas of Loures and the Amadora area of Oeiras.

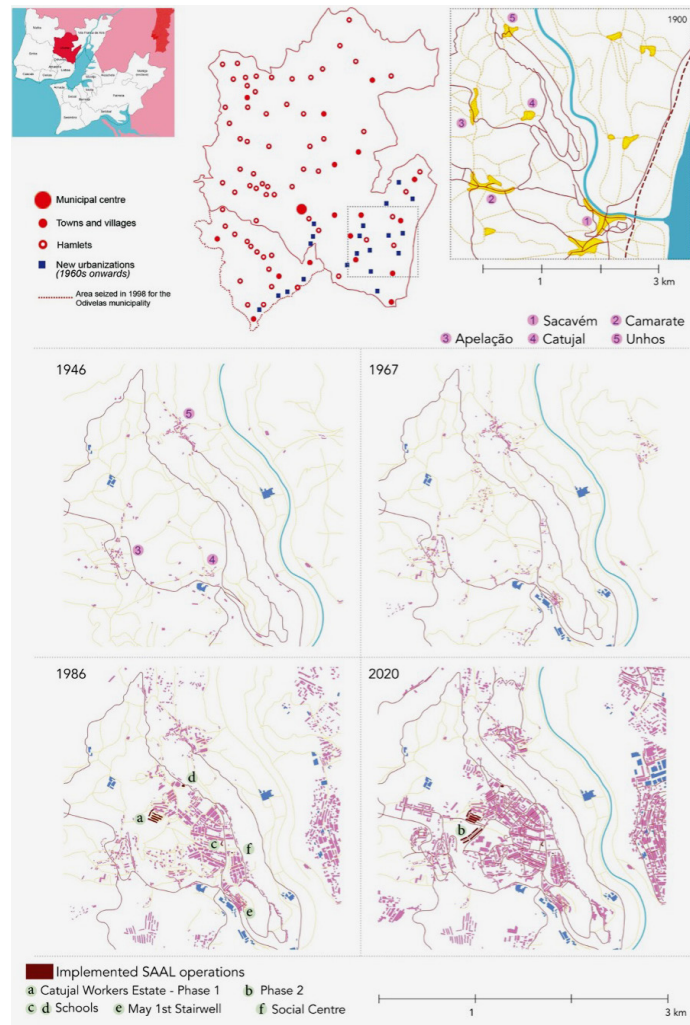


fig. 1 Urban evolution of Catujal, Unhos and Apelação

19 António Freitas, “Bairros clandestinos,” *Arquitetura*, no. 73 (December 1961): 27–35.

20 *Ibid.*

Most were improvised by speculative landowners within the limits of farmsteads, sold plot by plot, often to a second level of speculators who would build houses (and to a lesser extent workshops and industrial units) to sell or rent for profit.¹⁹ Thus, in many (though not all) cases, the tenants of these houses had but little say in the actual making of the neighbourhood, which resulted from the accumulation of ventures that, albeit relatively petty, proved lucrative.²⁰ Some were denser, others sparser; some were more structured, others chaotic; some stood on gentle hills, others on ridges — the only rules were those of financial interest and construction possibilities, sometimes taken to the limit. The New State, having created



21 Ibid.

22 Teresa Valsassina Heitor & Jorge Gonçalves, “Êxodos e migrações na Região de Lisboa,” *Prumo* nº 6 (December 2019); Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório sobre os estragos causados pelos temporais de 25/26 de Novembro de 1967* [Report on the damages of the storms of 25–26 November 1967], 18–12–1967, Processo 13779, Arquivo Municipal de Loures.

an urban planning policy, ostensibly ignored this vast phenomenon which, obviously, clashed with the urban plans resulting from the state’s own departments. In 1960, a Lisbon newspaper (*Diário de Lisboa*) had hypocritically hailed the clandestine development of “José Bernardino Delgado and associates” in the fifty-four hectares of the Brandoa farmstead (in today’s Amadora) as a new civil parish built “for all pockets.”²¹

This prompted some interest in the subject, and architect António Pinto de Freitas (1925–2014), one of the authors of the massive public housing plan of Olivais Sul in Lisbon, wrote a colourful but wise article on clandestine development in 1961. Although Freitas mostly focused on the areas of Brandoa and Prior Velho, the illustrations include other examples, including those of the eerily dense Manteigas neighbourhood (figure 2), the most emblematic clandestine area — nearly a slum — of Catujal. This, however, was only one of eight clandestine developments that had sprawled around and between Unhos, Apelação and Catujal: Vinha da Coroa, Martin do Vale, Miradouro, Queimadas, Nossa Senhora da Saúde and Wenceslau.

Urbanization plans had been created for Bobadela (1969), São João da Talha (1971) and Prior Velho (1971), privileged locations for clandestine development, planning efforts possibly prompted by the tragic floods around Lisbon of November 1967 and the collapse of a six-floor building in Brandoa in 1969.²² For Catujal, Unhos and Apelação, the first efforts seem to have advanced in 1972, but until the PREC, the majority of development remained clandestine, aside from a few apartment buildings which obtained approval from the municipality, especially in Apelação.

fig. 2 The neighbourhoods of Manteigas and Nossa Senhora da Saúde, Catujal, 2023.

- 23 *Programa de Acções Prioritárias a considerar pelos serviços do FFH, 02–07–1974* [Programme of priority actions to consider in the FFH services], quoted in Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*.
- 24 *Bandeirinha, Processo SAAL*.
- 25 *Bandeirinha, Processo SAAL*.; Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*.
- 26 Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*.; Carlos Nunes Silva, *Política urbana em Lisboa, 1926–1974* (Lisbon: Horizonte, 1994).
- 27 Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*.
- 28 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório do mês de Abril de 1975* [Report of April 1975], 06–05–1975, Processo 23343/OM, Arquivo Municipal de Loures, 3–4.
- 29 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório do mês de Novembro de 1974* [Report of November 1974], 5.

But by this time, it would already be strange to recall that Catujal was a very small hamlet—a seventeenth-century chapel, and a handful of small and very small houses—on an isolated plateau midway between the hamlets, themselves small, of Unhos and Apelação. Houses were being built in the unbuilt spaces in these hamlets, and whole rural estates were being urbanized, in some cases with an intricate and vertiginous system of narrow passages and stairwells. In many cases, houses were improperly built and lacked basic conditions.

2 The Revolution and the Catujal Workers Estate

The SAAL can be seen as an adherence of architects to the revolution. The intervention of the FFH was recalibrated according to four priority stages defined by housing deficit, demand and supply.²³ But for the first time, the services prioritized the housing needs of the poorer sectors of the population and degraded urban areas, making the SAAL perhaps the most radical shift on housing policies in modern Portuguese history.²⁴ It implied a conceptual change—the right to housing was associated with the right to the city, since people often struggled to build a new habitat in the same place, instead of being displaced—but also a political change, envisioning new links between state services and the population, and a change in urban management, with new instruments for planning and financing made available.²⁵ However, upon the official publication of the SAAL as a legal decree, some ambiguities started to arise. First, the municipal councils were brought into the process, but without considering the bureaucratic proceedings of these institutions and their lack of a tradition in direct urban intervention.²⁶ Furthermore, the mechanisms made available for both land expropriation and for housing financing proved to be contradictory or highly exposed to bureaucratic blockade.²⁷

Even in the context of the SAAL, Catujal introduced a particular ambition: it sought to encompass “simultaneously the creation of a new housing estate but also to refurbish or restructure the existing vast clandestine zone.”²⁸ Consequently, this implied making design and technical assistance available to the impoverished community of seven thousand people who were already settled on the hills between Catujal, Apelação and Unhos and their intermediate blanket of illegal neighbourhoods.²⁹

The SAAL brigade was assembled in early November 1974, led by architect Pítum Keil do Amaral, and included two architecture majors, Margarida Valla (b. 1951) and Tomás Fonseca (b. ?), later replaced by José Manuel Fernandes (b. 1953), law student João Mascarenhas (1945–2016) and sociologist Isabel Fonseca (b. ?). Their gathering place was a small dairy located in the nearby neighbourhood of Queimadas, while the Unhos Civil Parish functioned as an information centre. In less than a month, a first meeting with residents was set. Many demands were made: roads, garbage collection, toponomy, electricity transformation substation, a school, street

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 3.

32 Ibid.

33 Sarmento, interview by the authors.

34 Diário do Governo, 03-05-1975 — Despacho da Secretaria de Estado da Habitação e Urbanismo, 2707.

35 Sarmento, interview by the authors.

36 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório do mês de Janeiro de 1976* [Report of January 1976], 21-01-1976, Processo 23343/OM, Arquivo Municipal de Loures.

lighting and three fountains.³⁰ Houses and families abounded in number, but essential infrastructures and building quality were lacking.

Directly considered as a test to understand the proper relations between the community, the brigade and the state institutions (municipality and FFH), a public stairwell was designed for the Manteigas and Nossa Senhora da Saúde neighbourhoods, to be built by some of the residents. It is painful to imagine going up that vertiginous hill, in the tight space between the buildings, without at least a stable stairwell. But such was the situation, and the nearly improvised project resulting from this first meeting sealed the intention of the brigade to study solutions to the pre-existing settlements, retroactively bringing amenities where these barely existed and little space remained to accommodate them.³¹

To accompany projects, meet the residents and take part in activities, much of the brigade's work was done during weekends and weekday evenings, as during the day people were at work. The urban plan was not, however, the only promoted in Catujal. A didactic play by the Applied Magnetics Workers Theatre, conferences on housing, health and sports as well as an anti-colonial exhibition with films and debates, and literacy courses for adults, all took place or started during the early days of the formation of residents' groups.³²

From the very beginning, surveys were promoted with the living community, regarding their current housing situation but also their aspirations and needs. These surveys became a cornerstone of the project's future success, allowing the design brigade to understand in very specific terms what kind of house the residents would like, considering their family conditions, which dictated house divisions and the backyards for cultivation, a practice most residents brought from their countryside backgrounds.³³ Although the population took some time to trust the SAAL brigade and the FFH was relatively lax in providing support, efforts quickly seemed to achieve good results, and the Urbanization Plan for the Apelação Extension (figure 3), containing the SAAL operation, was approved.³⁴

In May, residents' commissions were already constituted and had statutes, and by the next month, the association named "Catujal Workers Estate" was formalized, with headquarters in the dairy the SAAL brigade worked from. The organization of the local communities in residents' commissions was helped by the brigade, notably by Pitum, who lived in Apelação, but also by young political activists from left-wing parties who wanted to bring their neighbours to revolutionary activities, thus providing them with a political and civic education.³⁵

It took some months for the approved plan to find implementation, but in early 1976, the Loures Council was already expropriating some of the land necessary for the construction, and agronomist Nuno Lecoq (b. ?) was contacted to provide guidelines for the outside areas.³⁶ In March, a large assembly was summoned to discuss the ongoing works, and a list of cooperative construction companies was compiled, showing a tacit



fig. 3 Pitum Keil do Amaral (coord) — Urbanization Plan for the Apelação Expansion, Loures, 1975 (Processo 20490/OM, Arquivo Municipal de Loures).

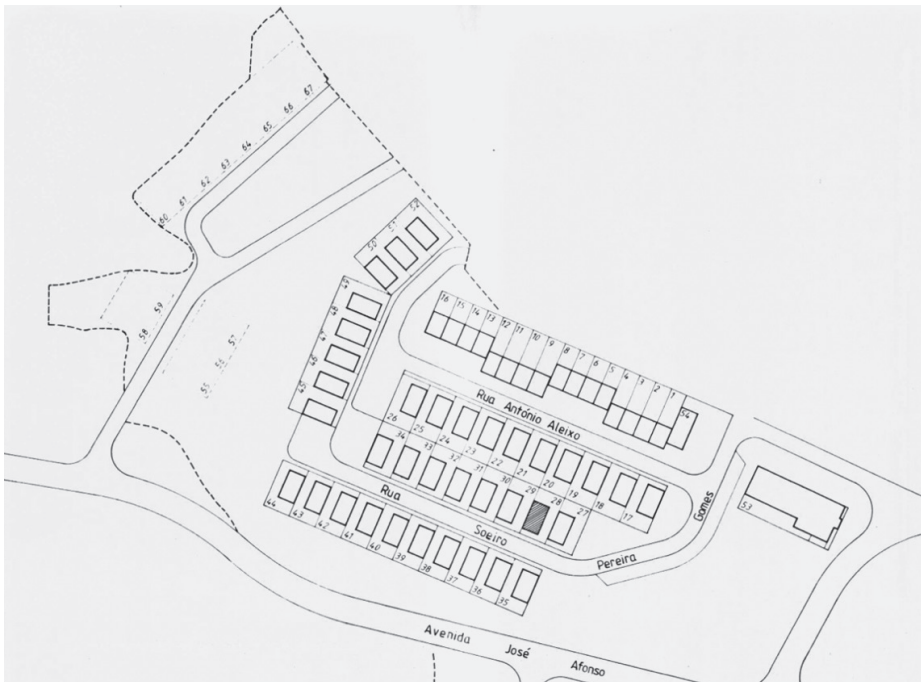
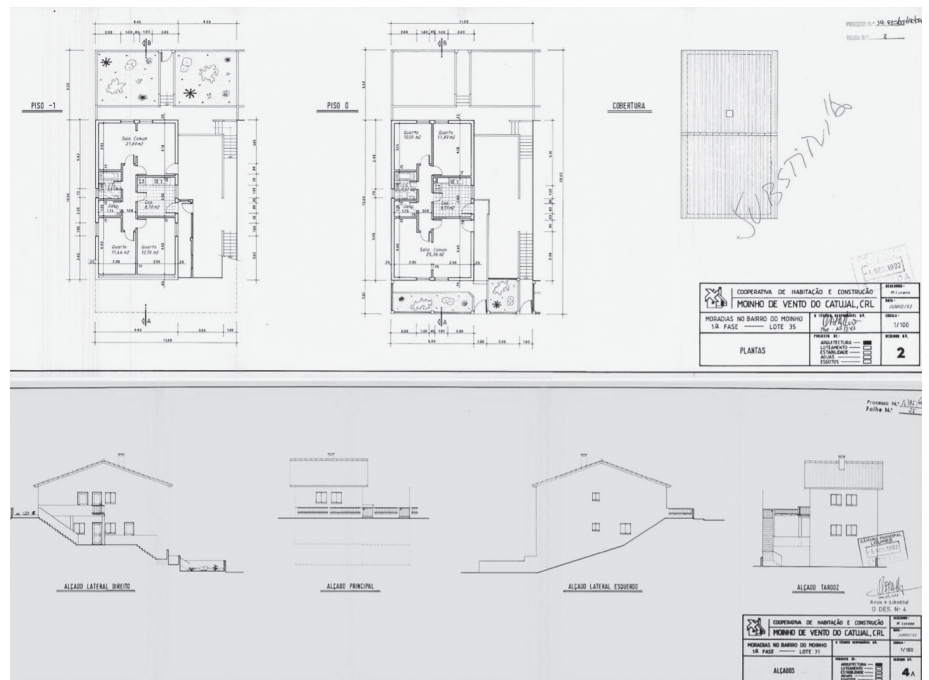


fig. 4 Catujal Workers Estate (Phase 1) General Plan, Loures, 1975 (Processo 19439/OCP, Arquivo Municipal de Loures).

fig. 5 Catujal Workers Estate (Phase 1) T2 F. Housing Typology, Loures, 1975 (Processo 14789/OCP, Arquivo Municipal de Loures)



- 37 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório do mês de Março de 1976* [Report of March 1976], 20-03-1976, Processo 23343/OM, Arquivo Municipal de Loures.
- 38 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório do mês de Julho de 1976* [Report of July 1976], 23-07-1976, Processo 23343/OM, Arquivo Municipal de Loures.

refusal of capitalist business.³⁷ After some delays due to budget adjustment, Uniurba, a construction cooperative, was hired.³⁸

Similar to most SAAL interventions — but significantly, the opposite of what would become the norm in the Lisbon city — the project proposed a set of terraced and semi-detached houses with backyards (figure 4). While the architecture is simple and contained, it gains an expressive quality through its clever interplay with the topographical conditions, taking advantage of the gentle slope over which most of the houses are placed, and which allows the inception of typological variations without morphological interference (figure 5). Thus, units with a very similar design accommodated single-family houses and two separate houses stacked together. Lacking in any particular form of decorative whim — which has often been added to later by residents' alterations to the façades, gardens and roofs — the design of the houses retrieves the straightforward and clear-cut aesthetics of many cottage housing estates — including those promoted by the state — that usually were only built for the middle classes (figure 6).

The design of the building types also provided the basis for that of the proposed equipment: the commercial units (which were never built), the association headquarters, the social centre, and the schools, built in places that were strategically linked with pre-existing neighbourhoods.



fig. 6 Catujal Workers Estate, Phase 1, 2023.

39 Varela, *Portuguese Revolution*.

40 Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*.

41 Bandeirinha, *Processo SAAL*; Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*.

42 Processo 3513/OCP, Arquivo Municipal de Loures.

3 The Collapse of the SAAL and the Cooperative Epilogue

In late 1975, with the government on strike, military coups and the isolation of the most radical members of the armed forces — who were backing the alternative power held by workers and residents' associations — the revolution was defeated. From here on out, private property would no longer be questioned and cyclical elections replaced direct democracy with a representative one.³⁹ The state re-emerged as the decision maker. The Sixth Provisional Government (1975–76) created the Ministry for Housing, Urbanism and Construction, integrated by former members of the Civil Construction Industrials Guild, which may explain the shift in urban and housing policies.⁴⁰ The effects on the SAAL were naturally nefarious. Limitations started with a shift towards the forms of construction without residents' associations, and later financing was cut, prompting the resignation of the SAAL national director, José Paz Branco (1917–1997).

It is known that access to bank loans and to financing schemes in general was key to undercutting the intentions of SAAL brigades and residents' associations.⁴¹ However, Catujal emerged as an exception. Indeed, the financial management of the whole process was efficient and rigorous, ensuring that the construction of the estate would continue even after the collapse of the SAAL. With this shift, it became a possibility that the residents of the new houses would do away with the SAAL project, but this did not happen. After the dissolution of the SAAL, the residents formed a cooperative, named Moinho de Vento do Catujal (Catujal Windmill), which again marks an “appropriation” by Catujal residents to the toponomy of land parcels actually belonging to *Apelação*. The cooperative built the second phase of the estate (figure 7) and ensured the legalization of all the houses in the late 1980s.⁴² In accordance with the SAAL plan, street pavements, lighting and naming were advances, but most of the facilities were forgotten.

Located on the hill facing the first phase, the new housing employs different typologies (figure 8) although there is a clear effort — similar to the first phase — to integrate the different units in regular long slabs. Taking heed of the slope where they are built, the slabs present very dry and simple front façades opening onto the street, and more elaborate and vertical back façades facing a backyard. The basic morphology of this second phase, in long rows (figure 9), presents a deviation from the detached or semi-detached buildings which dominate clandestine developments and were also replicated in the first phase of the Workers Estate.

The whole branch links the first phase — crowned by a public plaza with a sports area — to the old *Apelação* Windmill, which has recently been restored and turned into an interpretative centre. Over time, a school was built, bringing yet another link between the Workers Estate and the remainder of the Catujal area.

fig. 7 Catujal Workers Estate (Phase 2) General Plan, Loures, 1975 (Processo 3513/OCP, Arquivo Municipal de Loures).

fig. 8 Catujal Workers Estate (Phase 2) General Plan, Loures, 1975 (Processo 3513/OCP, Arquivo Municipal de Loures).

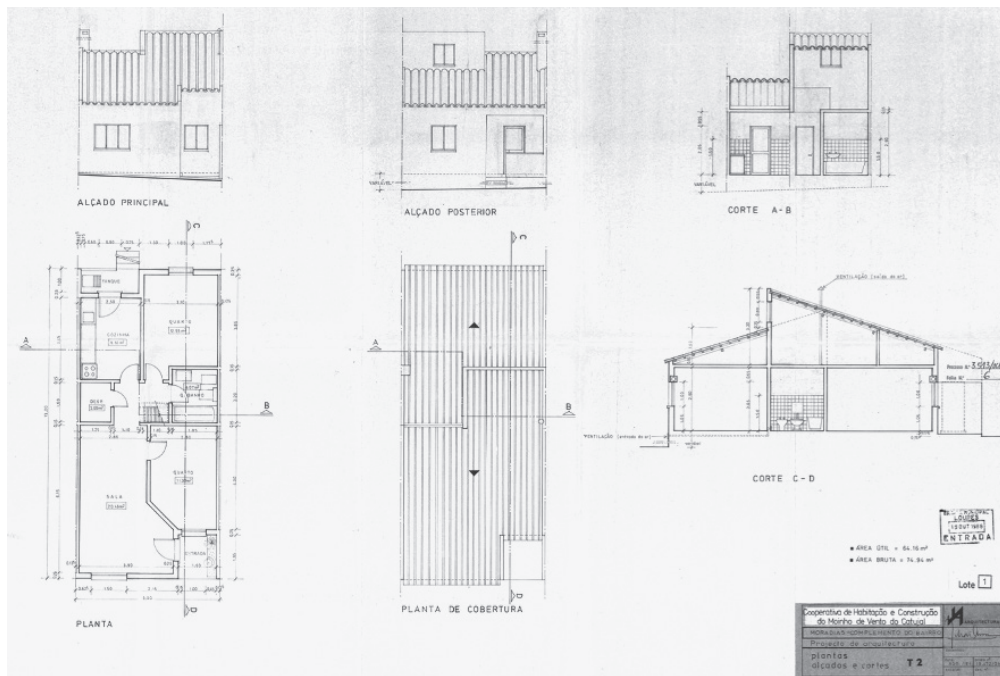
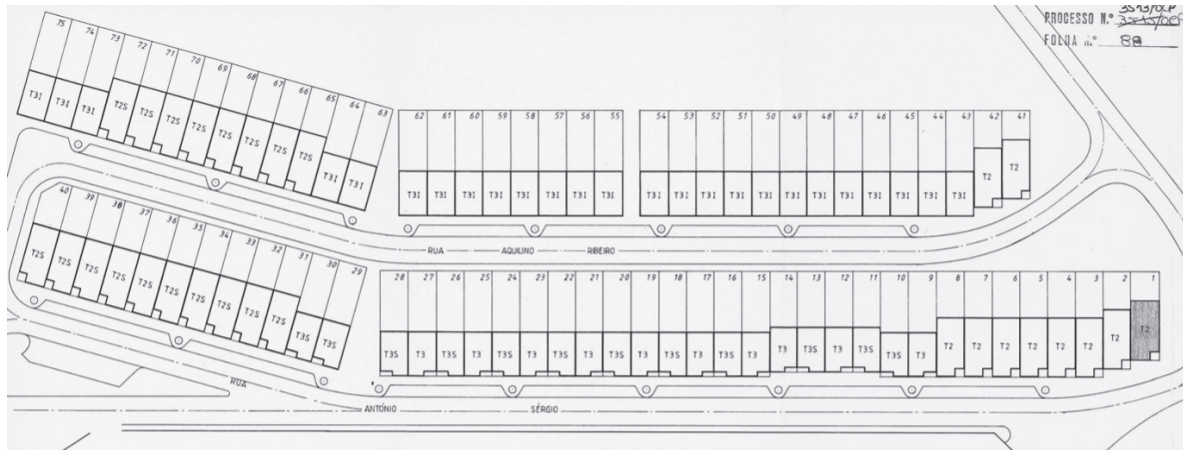




fig. 9 Phase 2 of the Catujal Workers Estate, 2023.

43 Varela, *Portuguese Revolution*.

44 *Relatório – Novembro 1974*.

45 *Bandeirinha, Processo SAAL*; Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*; Borges & Marat-Mendes, *Viagem à capital de Lisboa*.

4 Discussion

The reports on the SAAL operation in Catujal, today deposited in the Loures Municipal Archive, record an experience of revolutionary fervour, of enthusiasm and deep belief in the ability of people to take their lives into their own hands. They testify to a social and architectural experiment where common working people organized and decided about one of the most basic aspects of their existence: their habitat.

It has been hypothesized that the SAAL prompted the state to quench residents' commissions.⁴³ In Catujal, this does not apply, as the SAAL brigade seems to have acted in accordance with the residents and to understand its role to be formalizing — in the sense of giving spatial form to — the demands resulting from democratic decision-making. The whole process was deeply imbued by the banality of everyday concerns, but these were given an unprecedented legitimacy over both bureaucratic resistance and capitalist interests. The population revendedicated the right to a house and a school, to transportations and paved roads, but also despaired over delays in obtaining land for a garden and resented opportunistic landlords who sought to influence decisions for personal gain.⁴⁴ Historical relevance here lies in bizarrely ordinary problems: the everyday life and the process of historical transformation are merged.

It is true that as a planning policy, SAAL benefited from over ten years of discussions and debates in architectural publications and congresses.⁴⁵ Those debates were often rooted in the extensive practical experience and research endeavours of some of the architects involved in the SAAL, namely those who had worked for the Lisbon Technical Office

- 46 Bandeirinha, *Processo SAAL*.; Antunes, *Políticas*.; Borges & Marat-Mendes, *Viagem à capital de Lisboa*.
- 47 Nuno Grande, ed., *The urban being: on the trails of Nuno Portas* (Lisbon: INCM/Casa da Moeda, 2012).
- 48 Bandeirinha, *Processo SAAL*.; Francisco Silva Dias & Nuno Portas, “Arquitetura Evolutiva,” *Arquitetura*, no. 126 (October 1972): 100–121.
- 49 Bandeirinha, *Processo SAAL*.; José António Bandeirinha, Tiago Castela, Rui Aristides, Joana Gouveia Alves, “O Fundo de Fomento da Habitação de 1969 a 1982 Ordenamento, alternativas e mercado,” in *Habitação – Cem anos de políticas públicas em Portugal*, ed. Ricardo Agarez, (Lisbon: Instituto da Habitação e da Reabilitação Urbana, 2018), 235–80.

for Housing (*Gabinete Técnico da Habitação — GTH*) on Olivais Norte, Olivais Sul and Chelas; or on studies and surveys conducted at the Housing and Construction Department of the National Laboratory of Civil Engineering (*Laboratório Nacional de Engenharia Civil — LNEC*).⁴⁶ This can be witnessed in one of its key proponents, Nuno Portas (b. 1934), who worked in the GTH and the LNEC, published several books and had an important role in disseminating international theories and projects in the architectural press. He also collaborated in the studio of Nuno Teotónio Pereira (1922–2016) including in projects for state-sponsored housing.⁴⁷ Despite the undeniable importance of these precedents, there is also much about the SAAL that is in fact new, at least in the Portuguese context. Despite its modest scale — one of the cornerstones of its detraction by the First Constitutional Government (1976–78) — it provided architects with opportunities to experiment with forms of single-family or low-density housing, often attempting to create housing that could evolve as familiar needs demanded it or that would be suitable for low-intensity construction, sometimes self-construction.⁴⁸

The Catujal Workers Estate was a typical SAAL intervention for Loures, although the work effectively carried on here was more sporadic than, for instance, its neighbouring Camarate, which prompted three small SAAL projects (Torre, Santo António, Angola) and another for refugees of the colonial liberation (*Comissão de Apoio a Refugiados — CAR*).⁴⁹ However, this was not due to the brigade or the residents’ commissions being oblivious to the more general problems. It can thus be argued that, if the alternative power they constituted had not been drained politically and financially, it would have been possible, in principle, to establish a new pattern for urbanization. The complete plan indeed repurposed the preferred housing type to a coherent and balanced habitat form including facilities, services, and public spaces necessary for both the quality of life of residents and the proper occupation of the available land.

As things turned out, the SAAL new estate ended up being a small exception in local urbanization, and soon land ownership resumed its role as its main driver.

In contrast with the eclecticism of the clandestine neighbourhoods where, over time, roads and facilities — relatively limited — were added, in the Catujal Workers Estate, the regularity of the façades and the nearly continuous strips of small gardens that guard the entrances to the houses immediately communicate a sense of unity and of amenity, a contained but dignified system for the relation of each house with its neighbours and of all to the street (figure 10). Architecturally, the Catujal Workers Estate bears a resemblance to the severe architecture of the working-classes, including the traditional villas and patios, and even in the assistance neighbourhoods of philanthropic promoters or the state. However, all of this is rendered in generous spaces, with minute transitional areas separating the main entrances from the façades, with back gardens or yards, with small but delicate public spaces, walkable streets and a picturesque relation

fig. 10 Street view of the Catujal Workers Estate, Phase 1, 2023.



50 Teresa Marat-Mendes, Sara Silva Lopes, João Cunha Borges & Patrícia Bento d'Almeida, *Atlas of the food system — Challenges for a sustainable transition of the Lisbon Region* (Bern: Springer, 2021).

51 Sarmiento, interview by the authors.

52 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório do mês de Maio de 1975* [Report of May 1975]; Sarmiento, interview by the authors.

53 Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*.

54 Bandeirinha, *Processo SAAL*; Rodrigues, *Direito à Cidade*.

with the topography, making use of the hill shapes and the limited pre-existing rural elements (notably the windmill) as punctuating moments. Importantly, another influence of the scheme, including the delicate profile of its roofs, can be found in some of the compact rural settlements whose morphology had been captured a decade earlier in the “Survey on Portuguese Regional Architecture” (1959–61).⁵⁰

Considering the care clearly put by the residents into both the houses and the neighbourhood, and considering that most, if not all, were happy with and even proud of their homes, the Catujal Workers Estate must be considered a successful example of a SAAL intervention.⁵¹ Although the population seems to have not been directly involved with architectural design, they approved the proposed solutions, and these were rooted in previous, highly specific surveys conducted by the architects with the residents, discussing their aspirations and needs.⁵²

After its haphazard collapse, SAAL was considered to have been a failed experiment, an argument often based on the negative campaign promoted to justify its elimination.⁵³ Furthermore, many other problems stifled SAAL operations, namely the slow, complex processes for expropriating land and obtaining the necessary financing, the indefinite scope of action of the local brigades and the inertia or even active blockade from the municipalities.⁵⁴ In the case of Catujal, land expropriation was slow to take off, and was made harder by new shacks and clandestine homes sprouting on land included in the plan. The obtained financing seems to have been quite rational, and it covered continuing construction after SAAL ended. The brigade seems to have had great relations with the

55 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório do mês de Novembro de 1974* [Report of November 1974].

56 Francisco Pires Keil do Amaral, *Relatório do mês de Janeiro de 1976* [Report of January 1976].

residents' association, and a positive collaboration was established from the start. The Loures municipality posed no obstacle to the works, and indeed acknowledged they were necessary to counteract clandestine development. However, important bureaucratic boycotting emerged from other state institutions, namely the National Aviation Authority (*Autoridade Nacional da Aviação Civil*) who claimed part of the land as a crash zone with precluded construction ability.⁵⁵ For a long time, the Ministry of Education also posed serious resistance, resisting the instalment of a school in Catujal.⁵⁶ But between the main actors of the intervention — population, brigade and municipality — there was a relationship of collaboration.

The difference between the estates resulting from the SAAL plan and the clandestine areas is self-evident, but it is curious to note that there was no fundamental deviation from the clearly established prevalence of single-family homes or small apartment buildings, to which one cannot find many exceptions, even today. In a sense, there was no attempt to introduce a shift in the urbanization pattern, but rather to present an improved version of the same basic morphology, suggesting that architects interpreted the aspirations of the residents in two ways: one direct, by interviewing the specific future residents, and another indirect, by observing (and critically interpreting) the houses of the already settled population. Thus, the methodology set by the SAAL operation, which straightforwardly refused to deal with landowners or profit venturers but only with the residents' commissions, proved to be effective, and reached its goal. Moreover, the level of satisfaction has proven to be an important factor in the good preservation of the original architecture: aside from colour adaptations and the construction of supporting sheds in the yards, the architecture has proven notably resilient.

On the other hand, the intention expressed in 1975 to extend the intervention to the rest of the area of *Apelação*, Catujal and Unhos was abandoned. The SAAL brigade sought to improve the existing settlements — and even achieved this in some instances — but this did not imply necessarily that this was a process of retroactively improving a grassroots or community-based urbanization. Indeed, in many cases, the construction of clandestine houses had nothing to do with the resident community, but rather with the speculators — owners and constructors — who desired to make profit.

SAAL shows a group of architects who understand themselves to be at the service of the population, and not of a state or municipal institution, an experience that would seldom be repeated in the future, even for architects who found themselves working on projects for social housing. It may be said that part of the enthusiasm that seems to pervade the reports from the SAAL in Catujal can be attributed to revolutionary fervour, but its origin may also have lain in the simple fact that, for the first time, decisions were being based on the direct intervention of those who would live with them afterwards.

Regardless of its origin, this fervour, which has generated a sometimes romantic view of the SAAL, can be said to be its greatest inheritance: taking the discussion around habitat out of the intellectual circuits of the press, and into the actual streets that were taking shape. Indeed, this was the first and only time in Portuguese modernity that urbanization was — for better or for worse — decided from below, from the organized working classes, and that alone makes it worthy of close attention, especially when it was successful.

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