My space in our home: young people strategies to access housing in Lisboa

Maria Assunção Gato

maria.gato@iscte-iul.pt
Iscte - University Institute of Lisbon, Centre for the Study of Socioeconomic Change and the Territory (DINÂMIA'CET), Lisboa, Portugal.

Filipa Ramalhete

framalhete@autonoma.pt
CIEBA – Center for Research and Studies in Fine Arts. CEACT/UAL – Center for Architecture, City and Territory Studies of the Autonomous University of Lisbon. CICS.Nova – Interdisciplinary Center for Social Sciences at Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal

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Abstract

Difficulties in accessing housing are one of the primary challenges faced by young adults during transitional phases in their lives, leading to subsequent instability. This instability arises from various factors, including constraints within the housing market such as unaffordable prices for both homeownership and renting, as well as challenges related to precarious employment and low incomes. In Lisbon, leaving the parental home poses particular difficulties, driven not only by the soaring housing prices but also by the broader impact on young people's autonomy, life transitions, and family expectations.

The increasing instability in young people's housing situations and the emergence of new residential preferences necessitate a critical examination of alternative housing solutions. In a city like Lisbon, where affordability is a major concern, it's crucial to understand the diverse strategies employed by young individuals to navigate housing access issues and gain independence during transitional phases. New urban and residential practices and values among younger adults, such co-housing, home sharing, and relocating to peripheral areas may be observed. These shifts have various impacts on their lifestyles, residential habits, and domestic experiences.

Drawing on eight exploratory in-depth interviews, this article aims to explore some advantages and challenges of young adults being compelled to share a house with strangers. A ninth interview with the creator of the documentary "A Temporary Situation" offers complementary insights into the daily lives of individuals sharing housing in Lisbon, focusing on the potential disparities between housing aspirations and realities.

Keywords: Housing, Home-sharing, Lisbon, Life trajectories, Young adults

Introduction

Lisbon has a long-standing history of grappling with housing shortages (ANTUNES, 2018). Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the city struggled to accommodate the housing needs of a considerable influx of rural migrants. These migrants, in their migration process, either sought settlement in more central locations or turned to peripheral and sprawling areas. Consequently, widespread poor housing conditions (PEREIRA; BUARQUE, 2017; PEREIRA, 1994) and overcrowded dwellings became a stark reality for many residents. It was common for multiple families to share a single dwelling, with each renting a room or parts of the house, while single individuals often took on tenants.

This form of shared housing was prevalent in working-class households across Europe until the outbreak of World War II. These households often comprised multigenerational families, extended to relative residents, and were characterized by stability, with the female householder playing a central role. Despite the challenges related to the lack of privacy and other issues associated with sharing living spaces and lives, this arrangement also brought some advantages for families, such as cost-sharing for housing expenses like rent, electricity, water, and gas, as well as the division of household tasks and, at times, shared responsibility for childcare.

Löfgren (2003) delves into the lives of the Swedish working class at the turn of the 20th century, highlighting parallels with the Portuguese context and underscoring the universality of these living arrangements across different cultural contexts. Following the emergence of the European urban middle class, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War, there was a notable shift towards a standardized pattern of family life centred on the nuclear family structure. This trend extended even to working-class households. As women gained increased access to education and entered full-time paid employment, the idea of owning a single-family house in post-war Europe, initially seen as a novel possibility, eventually became the norm. Consequently, the baby boom generation grew up with vastly different housing expectations compared to those of their parents.

In Portugal, significant social and housing changes were delayed due to the dictatorial regime, which lasted from 1928 to 1974, characterized by a colonialist structure. The independence wars in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique during the 1960s further compounded these challenges. It was not until the end of the dictatorship in 1974 and the subsequent decolonization in 1975 that Portugal underwent significant societal shifts.

With the transition to democracy, Portugal experienced a strong wave of immigration, leading to a surge in population and exacerbating housing needs, particularly in metropolitan areas. However, due to political and economic instability in the early years of democracy, addressing these housing needs became a protracted challenge. It took the state and municipalities more than two decades to begin tackling these issues, including efforts to eradicate slums, construct public housing, and implement programs to assist young people in purchasing or renting homes. This delayed response was influenced by the need to stabilize the young democracy and address the pressing economic concerns of the time.

Despite improvements in the housing situation in Portugal, some longstanding issues persist, and new challenges have emerged. Over the past few decades, the social structure of Portugal has evolved, reflecting trends seen across Europe. Traditional nuclear families (mother, father, two children) have become less common, with an increase in single-parent households and adults (both men and women) living alone[1]. Additionally, Portugal faces the complexities of an aging population with diverse housing needs [2] alongside various types of migrants, including students, working-class immigrants, digital nomads, and retirees seeking a milder climate at more affordable prices than those in their home countries.

In this dynamic social landscape, Portugal, having only recently achieved a relatively stable housing situation by the end of the 20th century, was ill-prepared to confront the challenges of the global housing crisis that emerged in Europe in the new millennium. The crisis in the global housing market posed further difficulties for policymakers and exacerbated existing housing issues in Portugal, highlighting the need for innovative and adaptable solutions to address the diverse housing problems of its population.

The evolving social and economic landscape in Portugal has led to contrasting expectations among the population, particularly among the younger generation. In this paper, we aim to delve into the consequences of the disparity between the idealized lives that young Portuguese individuals envision and the practical constraints imposed by present realities. The necessity of continuous house sharing, extending beyond the student years and encompassing individuals of various ages, is often viewed as a compromise on quality of life and a step back from the standards set by earlier generations. This reality is especially challenging for women, as living independently is often considered a significant aspect of their financial and social empowerment.

Through qualitative analysis and empirical evidence, we intend to shed light on the daily challenges and aspirations of young Portuguese people as they navigate the delicate balance between their aspirations and the significant limitations they encounter regarding housing access and opportunities for stable, higher-paying employment. Our aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of this demographic group, giving them a voice to raise awareness about temporary living conditions that are becoming increasingly permanent.

Beyond the walls: Exploring the essence and meaning of home

Houses serve as both physical structures and dynamic cultural constructs, with their significance evolving over time and space (CIERAAD, 2018). For children, material objects like toys hold importance, but the social dimension of home, particularly the presence of parents, plays a central role in shaping their perception of the space. Adolescents often associate home with their bedroom, valuing the privacy it affords for themselves and their friends. As adults, individuals expand their concept of home to include broader scales such as the neighbourhood, city, or even country, contributing to their sense of belonging and identity (CIERAAD, 2018).

While houses fulfil practical functions like providing space for everyday activities, they also carry symbolic meanings reflecting aspects of identity and social status. This blend of practicality and symbolism allows houses to communicate, represent, influence, and educate (BIRDWELL-PHEASANT; LAWRENCE-ZUNIGA, 1999).

When young adults leave their family homes, they embark on a journey of redefining home in a new environment. Materiality plays a role in this transition, as they create their own space, but so does privacy or, later on, when they start their own families, the neighbourhood. Home represents a place of belonging for a specific group of people (BIRDWELL-PHEASANT; LAWRENCE-ZUNIGA, 1999). But, through co-residence and shared use, the house is also shaped by the individuals who inhabit it.

Leaving home is recognized as a significant step in the transition from youth to adulthood, with both the physical and emotional aspects of home playing crucial roles in this process (HOLDSWORTH, 2009; RAMALHETE; GATO, 2015). Kenyon (1999) examines the experiences of young students transitioning from their parental homes to university life, highlighting the role of home in the development of adulthood, citizenship, and social and emotional growth. The author delves into the perspectives of students regarding their three existing or anticipated homes - the parental home, the temporary residence at university, and the envisioned future home. Through her analysis, Kenyon identifies four levels of comprehension regarding home: personal space, temporal entity, social construct, and physical environment. Students emphasized that a house becomes a true home when it reflects their personality and fulfils their specific needs, primarily through personalized decoration.

Interestingly, students associated the notion of personalization and belonging primarily with their envisioned future homes. Conversely, the parental home represented a profound sense of belonging and stability, where they felt a natural right to return. However, neither their temporary university accommodations nor their parents' homes were perceived as potentially permanent residences (KENYON, 1999).

These findings raise considerations about the impact of prolonged temporary housing situations on young adults' lives due to a lack of alternatives. However, it is crucial to examine these consequences in conjunction with other factors related to the transition to adulthood.

Transient Dwellings, Deferred Lives

For decades, the transition to adulthood has followed a predictable path: entering the labour market, leaving the parental home, marrying, and starting a family (RAMOS; ALVAREZ, 2021). However, within Portuguese society, the structural landscape of these milestones has shifted, reflecting broader changes in social dynamics such as increased educational access, shifts in the labour market, and transformations within the housing sector.

The delineation of individuals into age groups like young, adult, or elderly has become increasingly blurred. This ambiguity, coupled with a sense of reduced control over life choices, has significant repercussions, altering expectations and reshaping future plans for many. The delay in marriage and parenthood, directly affecting birth rates, is among the most significant consequences and contributes to the accelerated ageing of Portuguese society[3].

Leaving the parental home remains a pivotal milestone signifying the transition to adulthood. However, the timing of this transition varies considerably across Europe. In Southern regions, including Portugal, it's traditionally observed that young people tend to reside with their parents for extended periods. Portugal stands out within the European Union as one of the countries where young adults leave their parental homes later (XEREZ et al, 2019). The average age is 26.5 years old, contrasting sharply with 19 years old in Sweden, according to Eurostat. This trend has worsened over recent years[4], encompassing not only a majority of young adults delaying achieving independence but also some adults returning to their parental homes due to loss of autonomy conditions. This scenario has recently experienced a notable exacerbation, yet its underlying causes are deeply rooted.

Over the last 15 years, rapid price increases due to inflation, coupled with declining disposable incomes, have worsened Lisbon's housing crisis. Many young people opt to share accommodation with friends or even strangers as they begin their independent lives. However, this transitional phase exposes them to the constant threat of eviction and steep rent hikes. Consequently, they are constantly on the lookout for better and more affordable options, enduring the exhaustion of frequent relocations. Sometimes, they resign themselves to staying in houses they don't like and in locations they wouldn't choose if given the option. Sharing situations also bring additional fatigue, but resolving them becomes even more challenging in the face of a housing crisis that has persisted for several years and has worsened dramatically.

Figure 1 – Príncipe Real Square, Lisbon, 2024 (Photo by the authors).

According to the National Statistics Institute (INE), over a five-year period (between 2017 and 2022), the median value of rents in the municipality of Lisbon grew by almost 40%. Added to this difficulty is the challenge of accessing limited support programs such as the "porta 65" program5, which requires applicants to have a previously signed rental contract without guaranteeing support for rent payment upon application.

Data from the 2021 Census underscores the challenges of living alone in rented accommodation: in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, the population aged between 20 and 40 years living alone decreased by 26% between 2011 and 2021. The Census also reveals a notable increase in "private households without family units" and "unrelated persons" in Portugal, rising by 192% compared to 2011.

Many young people find themselves in homes where they do not wish to live, trapped in sharing situations that are problematic and exhausting. Challenges of shared housing include waiting for access to shared facilities like the kitchen, laundry, or bathroom, as well as coordinating guests and household chores among residents. Consequently, many young adults opt to return home to their parents, seeing it as a more viable solution.

Even an average salary falls short of supporting rental market prices, especially considering the prevailing precarious employment conditions and low salaries. High job insecurity among young people, coupled with low and irregular incomes, presents significant barriers to accessing housing. In Lisbon, these challenges

have been compounded by various factors, including public policies such as tax benefits for non-habitual residents and the "Gold visa" regime, alongside the unregulated growth of short-term rentals under favourable legal regimes, compared to long-term rentals.

Diving into Home-Sharing Strategies

Shared households embody both physical and social dynamics that are crucial to understanding various socioeconomic contexts, particularly concerning family compositions, social mobility, life trajectories, and housing shortages. The causes that currently lead to home sharing continue to be multiple, especially considering the age group of young adults, as is the case in this article. However, the context of economic instability continues to be one of the most prominent (HARVEY; PERKINS, 2023). While the concept of home sharing is familiar, there remains a gap in exploring the intricacies of living, utilizing, and managing both communal and private interior spaces of homes. Qualitative data analysis emerges as an indispensable tool to disentangle the specificities of each household (HARVEY; PERKINS, 2023).

Figure 2 – In transit, Lisbon, 2024 (Photo by the authors).

Having these considerations in mind, one of the main objectives of this research is to shed light on the challenges young adults face in accessing housing and gain insights into the strategies they employ to address this issue. A qualitative approach was chosen based on exploratory semi-structured interviews, and following a narrative analysis perspective. "Narrative inquiry is first and foremost a way of understanding experience" (CLANDININ; CAINE, 2008: 542). Therefore, it offers a contextualised view, both in space and time, of the interviewees, allowing for the construction of a narrative through a dialogue among participants' discourses to facilitate the reader's interpretation (CLANDININ; CAINE, 2008; AYRES, 2008).

Eight young adults, including four women and four men aged between 23 and 35, residing in Lisbon, were interviewed[6] . Among them are two architects of Italian descent who relocated to Portugal for their PhD studies. Lara arrived in 2017, and Luis in 2021. Of the remaining six, four are Portuguese from various regions (Luisa, Júlia, Mário and Ana) and only two already lived in municipalities neighbouring Lisbon (Bruno and Paulo). Among these six interviewees, two are musicians, two are dancers, one is a teacher, and one works in a restaurant, supplemented with other occasional jobs.

All of them have lived in shared houses for several years and face this reality with ambivalent feelings. Positive aspects include good coexistence and a friendly spirit with housemates: "*I've been sharing houses since I started university and that's been positive for me, as I'm a very sociable person and living with other people has been a natural fit*" (Lara, 35, architect); "*Sharing a house with friends was the only viable option to get out of my parents' house. I wanted my independence and to live in Lisbon*" (Paulo, 26, musician). However, the primary reason for employing this housing strategy is the need to share the cost of rent: "*In addition to splitting the cost of rent, house-sharing even helps you to be more flexible and tolerant, to understand people better*" (Bruno, 24, musician); "*In adulthood, you prefer a different kind of life. But if you want to stay in Lisbon, you have no choice but to live with other people in shared houses, because nobody can afford to pay these rents on their own*" (Mário, 33, teacher).

Looking ahead, interviewees express a growing aspiration for housing stability, either as sole owners or as couples: "*I'd prefer to live with one person at most, because when you have partners or want to invite friends round for dinner it's more difficult*" (Ana, 32, waitress); "*When I'm in my mid-30s, it would be great not to have to share a house and to have my own space. If I had the chance now, I'd want to live in a house of my own, because it's a natural thing to become independent*" (Luis, 28, architect); "*Giving up house-sharing is an idea that's becoming more and more common in my head, because I'd like to have my own space and not have to be subject to landlords. I'd like to be able to organize my space and decorate it the way I want*" (Julia, 24, dancer). These narratives reveal accumulated fatigue, not only from managing daily situations, but mainly from the instability inherent in renting.

Despite rent increases being regulated by fixed percentages annually, some landlords employ various tactics to maximize their income, leaving tenants with few options but to seek alternative housing. One strategy to captivate landlords, especially when relationships and dynamics among the parties are favourable, is to exhibit "good behaviour." This encompasses keeping the house tidy and cared, respecting coexistence rules within the building, and fostering positive relations with neighbours: "*Cleaning the house is important, especially as the rental agreement is in my name and I have a commitment to look after the house. I have a good relationship with the couple who rented me the house and I want to keep it that way*" (Lara, 35, architect); "*I was the one who was welcomed into this house. I already knew one of the boys. They liked the fact that they were going to share the house with a girl to help them be more organized. In the other house, the landlady let us choose the third occupant because she wanted a quiet house*" (Julia, 24, dancer).

Another commonality among interviewees is how they found their homes. Networks of acquaintances and friends serve as the primary means of transmitting information,

whether they are looking for a room to rent or a partner to share a house: "*The third element was chosen through friends, and we were lucky. I think one important factor is that we're all workers, more or less the same age and with the same lifestyles. We all have experience of living together [house-sharing] and at the moment we don't have any major problems*" (Mário, 33, teacher); "*This house was found through the contacts of friends. They knew I was looking and knew who had a room available*" (Ana, 32, waitress).

In the process of matching supply and demand for shared housing, having some kind of references becomes important for selecting potential housemates, alongside the natural empathy that can develop during selection "interviews". Usually, landlords give the initial or longest-staying tenant the opportunity to select their housemates, and being responsible for establishing selection processes and even set rules for spatial management and cohabitation. In some cases, the initiative to increase the number of occupants comes from the tenants, as a strategy to lower individual costs and household expenses: "*I organized with another friend to move in together and find someone else. We just had to inform the landlord that we were going to do it and he didn't mind*" (Paulo, 26, musician); "*The living room is being used as a bedroom because it has a window. We opted to have one more person to share the expenses*" (Ana, 32, waitress); "*The room that used to be the living room is next to the kitchen. It's a bit annoying because we have to be much more careful not to make noise at certain times of the night or morning, to avoid disturbing the colleague who sleeps there*" (Bruno, 24, musician).

Capturing the Sense of 'Imminent Tragedy'

In her autobiographical documentary "A Temporary Situation," Portuguese filmmaker Ânia Bento provides a poignant insight into the daily struggles of two young women pursuing their dreams in Lisbon. Despite their aspirations, they face the harsh reality of having to share a home, experiencing common challenges such as cramped living spaces, chaotic shared areas, and the constant negotiation required to coexist with housemates.

Figure 3 – Homesharing (From the documentary "A Temporary situation", by Ânia Bento).

These conditions, though viewed as temporary, are accepted with resignation, underscored by the protagonists' visible disenchantment over time. A significant moment occurs when one of the protagonists confesses to her mother the shame she feels about her living situation, lacking access to mailbox keys and a permanent address for potential employers.

Both women work in a fancy bijouterie shop in Lisbon, yet they reside in different locations, barely earning enough to cover living expenses and rent. The documentary juxtaposes the glamour of the tourist flow with scenes of poverty, homelessness, and elderly individuals in the city center and the protagonists' neighborhood, highlighting the challenges of realizing young people's dreams in such an environment.

For Ânia, house-sharing is not a choice but a necessity due to the absence of viable alternatives. She confides to her mother the desire to be alone to avoid the constant negotiation with fellow tenants. Through her documentary, Ânia seeks to give voice to those experiencing similar conditions and spark a conversation about the scarcity of affordable housing and precarious living situations in Lisbon.

Figure 4 – Homesharing (From the documentary "A Temporary situation", by Ânia Bento).

Although the feeling of "imminent tragedy" did not explicitly emerge in the previous eight interviews, it can be inferred that all interviewees accept their provisional housing situation as a necessary strategy for emancipation and transition into adulthood. However, it remains crucial to understand the potential emotional toll when they perceive themselves as mature adults trapped in the same housing situation.

In conclusion, "A Temporary Situation" sheds light on the harsh realities faced by young adults in Lisbon, where house-sharing becomes less of a personal choice and more of a necessity. Ânia's documentary serves as a call to action, urging society to address the scarcity of affordable housing and the precarious living conditions that many individuals endure.

Final Notes

House-sharing is not a new phenomenon in Lisbon, a city that has a long history of struggling with housing shortage and poor housing conditions. It was not until the last quarter of the 20th century that the medium class young residents could aspire to rent or buy a house by their own or as young couples. Before those days, a young woman would never live by their own, a young man would probably rent a room in a family house and it was common for young couples to live in a multiple generation family house, with their in-laws.

However, for the younger generations, born in a democratic society after the April 1974 revolution and after Portugal became a membership of the European Union (1986) – with higher education levels and a more equalitarian gender distribution in the labour market – the expectations are different. On one hand, young adults are the most qualified Portuguese generation ever and see themselves as part of a European cultural context. But, on the other hand, they feel trapped in a transitory housing situation which seems to leave no room for improvement.

In this context, after university years, sharing a house with strangers is seen as an advantage only from the financial point of view, an economical strategy to allow them to live in the city. But from the social and emotional point of view, it is perceived as a failure and a personal limbo, where the inconveniences are hard to deal with. Interviewees always thought that this was a transitory experience and that, in a near or distant future, they would go back to a "traditional" family home, where they would build a home rather than sharing a house. But, for the moment, that seems a distant dream, impossible to achieve.

In the present European economical context, it is difficult to foresee what the long-term consequences of these situations will be. The film maker Ânia Bento decided to go back to her hometown in the South of Portugal. Although we don't have official numbers yet, empiric data seem to indicate that young people are giving up living in the city centre. Covid'19 pandemic may have accelerated this process, together with real estate speculation. After Covid, housing prices continued to raise, broadening the gap between aspirations and expectations concerning housing and ways of living.

Residential patterns are never rigid nor static, and are always a mirror of social structures and family patterns. In this sense, the data presented in this paper are just one more chapter of the Portuguese domestic life history. Still, it is worth mentioning that, for the first time in decades, we are facing a change in housing patterns that is not perceived as a social improvement but, on the contrary, as a loss of fundamental rights.

Acknowledgements

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[1] According to the National Statistics Institute, the percentage of single-parent families in Portugal increased from 15% in 2011 to 18.5% in 2021, with 85% of these families being mothers with children (INE, Censos 2021).

[2] The percentage of people living alone rose from 21.4% in 2011, to 24.8 per cent in 2021, with a clear predominance of elderly women, who have a higher life expectancy compared to men.

[3] According to Eurostat, Portugal has the fastest rate of population ageing of all 27 European Union member states. The median age has risen by 4.7 years in ten years. In 2022, half of the Portuguese population was over 46.8 years old, the second highest median age of all the countries analysed, after Italy (48 years).

[4] In 2020, the average age of young people leaving their parents' home was of 30 years old, and in 2021 was 33 years old (Eurostat).

[5] Porta 65 is a national policy program to help the access of young people to housing, in which tenants can apply for a subsidy to help pay their rent, depending on their family income.

[6] The names of the interviewees are fictional to ensure their anonymity and protect their identity.