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Future horizons for urban form:
disruption, continuity, expansion and reverberation


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# 50th years of SAAL interventions in Portugal revisiting four neighbourhoods

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## ABSTRACT

The research intends to investigate revisiting 4 SAAL interventions, from a multi and interdisciplinary perspective, such as architecture, history, sociology, anthropology, among others. The objective is to question the impacts of SAAL. The study proposes a new approach to SAAL interventions, analysing 4 neighborhoods in Portugal: 1) In Lisbon, Fonsecas and Calçada, designed by Hestnes Ferreira (1931-2018), starting in October 1974; 2) In Porto, Lapa, designed by Matos Ferreira (1928-2015) starting in November 1974; 3) Also in Porto, Acácio, designed by Soutinho (1930-2013), starting in October 1974; and 4) in Sintra, Pego Longo, designed by Costa Cabral (b.1929), from August 1975. The investigation aims to reflect on the fragility of SAAL, in part this process was shorter than proposed, and to promote a new perspective about these neighborhoods, empowering populations for a more sustainable future, 50 years later. Through a historical, social, and cultural approach, the objective of this research is to analyse and illustrate the evolution of participatory architecture in Portugal and its relationship with critical thinking and international practices. The objective is to remember and celebrate SAAL's interventions, but also to repeat the strategies of this model to promote a more promising future for these inhabitants. What are SAAL interventions today? How will inhabitants organize their lives and activities? What resources will be needed and how will they be used for housing 50 years later? Will it be possible to promote participatory interventions, currently and in the future? Questions explored chronologically considering 3 times: past, present, and future. It is expected that the research results can contribute to increasing knowledge and literacy in 4 fundamental aspects: Citizenship (social relationships); Built Environment (housing and public space); Policies/Practices (participatory actions); Memory.

Keywords: Housing; Local Support Ambulatory Service (SAAL); Portugal.

## INTRODUCTION

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of April 25 in Portugal, the Local Support Ambulatory Service (SAAL), created in July 1974, stands as one of the most important and disruptive experiences of the revolutionary period following the Carnation Revolution. It is in this context that architect Nuno Portas (b. 1934), a researcher at the National Laboratory of Civil Engineering (LNEC) and Secretary of State for Housing and Urbanism in the 1st Provisional Government after his appointment on May 16, 1974, emerged as one of the key figures responsible for implementing this program (d'Almeida and Marat-

Mendes, 2022). His understanding of the country's real situation (social, political, and housing) allowed him to immediately emphasize the urgent need to address the housing shortage and the lack of a theoretical/scientific basis for solving this issue. Thus, on July 31, 1974, through a joint order from the Ministry of Social Equipment and Environment and the Ministry of Internal Administration, Portas propelled the SAAL program forward.

Initially, this program envisioned a decentralized service, supported by technical teams working in collaboration with the local population to build new housing and infrastructure, thereby improving existing living conditions. The order (dated July 31, 1974) safeguarded against potential speculative operations, avoiding, whenever possible, relocating residents to more peripheral areas. Several SAAL operations began across the country under the slogan "Yes to houses, no to slums!"

Two years later, on October 27, 1976, a ministerial order transferred the management of SAAL to local municipalities. At the time, 169 operations were active across the country, involving the housing of 41,665 families. Data indicated that 2,259 housing units were under construction, with an additional 5,741 units planned for imminent development. According to Bandeirinha (2007), only 13% of the land required for these interventions was available, either ceded or expropriated.

However, no operation was completed during the period when SAAL operated as a central administration service (from August 1974 to October 1976). An administrative and procedural adaptation became necessary, which in some cases reversed or nullified the initial plans. Consequently, many operations changed their intervention sites, teams, or projects; some continued with the same projects but without the involvement of the original teams, while others simply disappeared.

Fifty years later, it is essential to understand the specific contributions of the architects' prior research experience in developing these neighborhoods projects. What are the SAAL interventions today? How have the residents organized their lives and activities? What resources will be needed, and how will they be used for housing 50 years later? Is it possible to promote participatory interventions today and in the future?

## METHOD

Based on the archives of the four architects under analysis, stored at the Marques da Silva Foundation (FIMS), as well as materials archived at LNEC and the Architects' Association, we analyse the trajectory of each architect, evaluating the possible relationship between their career paths and their respective urban planning and housing projects within the scope of SAAL. This article is part of ongoing research titled "Learning from the Past: The Importance of Former Housing Participatory Production for the Coming Years."

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Housing in Portugal has undergone significant transformations, driven by economic, political, and social factors. The greatest impact was felt after the Carnation Revolution, with profound political changes, including the nationalization of many properties and businesses. This period was especially important for the most disadvantaged classes, with the Portuguese government launching various housing programs aimed at ensuring access to housing and improving living conditions.

Housing research in Portugal reflects a balance between tradition and innovation, always focusing on cultural and identity-specific aspects. Noteworthy are the studies by Portas (1969, 2004, 2007) and the pairs Portas & Silva Dias (1972) and Cabrita & Coelho (2003). These efforts aimed to develop housing solutions that respect and enrich Portuguese cultural identity while adapting to the needs of a constantly changing global society.

However, with Portugal's entry into the European Community and the country's economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s, these social policies were gradually replaced by homeownership, facilitated by the liberalization of the market. Nevertheless, this led to the relocation of the population to the outskirts of major cities, increasing the distance between housing and work. It was also during this period that fiscal incentives and financing programs emerged to promote the restoration of degraded buildings and the revitalization of urban areas.

Housing cooperatives emerged as an alternative to the traditional housing model. These cooperatives allowed groups of people to come together to collectively build and manage their homes with controlled costs. However, since the dissolution of the SAAL programs and the transfer of responsibilities to the Housing Development Fund or local municipalities, these four neighborhoods were left to their own devices. In this ongoing investigation, we can state that despite the proactive approach and the respect shown towards all participants (technicians, residents, political decision-makers), and the efforts to meet the wishes of the local population, were not enough to fully implement the developed proposals, let alone the facilities proposed by the design teams.

## International critical thinking and its echoes in Portugal

Participatory social architecture became widely disseminated from the late 1950s onward. Various international architects and theorists, including Giancarlo de Carlo (1919-2005), Colin Ward (1924-2010), John F. C. Turner (b. 1927), and later N. John Habraken (b. 1928), experimented with different types of client-architect relationships to theorize new approaches and interpretations of architecture itself, focusing more on the process and shifting attention away from the results.

The Housing Policy Colloquium, held at the National Laboratory of Civil Engineering (LNEC) from June 30 to July 5, 1969, highlighted the concrete potential of evolutionary housing and urbanism as important alternatives to the models commonly practiced in public housing block developments. The main goal was to "establish a set of measures" and attempt to outline an "integrated strategy for solving the problems" of housing shortages (Bandeirinha, 2011: 70). Thus, the idea of integrated housing emerged at this congress, defined as "a set of goods and facilities that far exceeds the mere function of shelter" (Bandeirinha, 2011: 75). As stated in point 2 of Article 65 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (1976), "It is the State’s duty to: a) Plan and execute a housing policy included in general territorial reorganization plans and supported by urbanization plans that guarantee the existence of an adequate network of transportation and social facilities." In early July 1974, the then Secretary of State for Housing and Urbanism, architect Nuno Portas (b. 1934), signed an order entitled Program of Priority Actions, circulated among the services under the State Secretariat for Housing and Urbanism, particularly the Housing Development Fund (FFH). But after some setbacks, on July 24, architect Nuno Teotónio Pereira (1922-2022) submitted to the FFH a first document that clearly and succinctly defined the objectives, scope of action, and functional organization of the Local Ambulatory Support Service (Teotónio Pereira, July 24, 1974). On October 24 of that same year, José Augusto

Fernandes, Minister of Social Equipment and Environment, presented the programmatic text of urban policy, titled Activity Plan, which was approved the following day by the Council of Ministers. It outlined basic intentions regarding the distribution of equipment, transport networks and infrastructures, and technical and administrative decentralization (Bandeirinha, 2011). At the invitation of Nuno Portas, architect John F. C. Turner presented his housing experience in Peru in Portugal in November 1974, based on the innovative self-construction model of barriadas, which had a great impact on those attending the SAAL Brigades Seminar. The resolution of land status issues, clarification and delimitation of intervention objects, forms of resident self-organization, and modes of construction financing emerged as the main topics of debate.

However, the SAAL program had a very limited impact as a political tool. Focused on urban housing policy programs, it was innovative in the national and international context, where social and urban equity were key goals to be achieved through deep urban reconstruction, with the populations remaining in the areas where slums existed. Nevertheless, due to the context and its short duration (during the revolutionary period, between 1974-1976, and post-revolution, after 1976), it did not achieve full implementation in all its interventions, nor was its distribution equal throughout the national territory. The international political moment, combined with the Portuguese revolutionary context, helped implement and validate the equation: Theory + Planning = Democracy. The Marxist currents of Henri Lefebvre and Manuel Castells legitimized the policy through actions where architecture, urban planning, and technical knowledge were made available to the population, particularly in their struggle to transform social, individual, and collective relations.

The evaluation of the State's role must be understood in two distinct phases. In the first phase, there was the creation of base actions for continued work, implementing a framework of values, legislation, and military support. Later, in a second phase, social dynamics emerged, bringing about bureaucracy, procedural mismatches, unequal local involvement, and the complex and unstable national political process. The contradiction of a State divided between support and abandonment of this unique social movement is evident. The role of the armed forces movement (MFA) should also be remembered as it intervened in conflict arbitration, especially during the occupation of vacant houses, acting as a force of regulation and social balance between classes.

The success of the various SAAL operations, linked to the multidisciplinary competencies of housing and urban planning technical teams (architects, engineers, sociologists, lawyers, geographers, social workers, etc.), was key to strategy definition. At the same time, alliances were established with neighbourhood committees to shape and customize housing without creating economic constraints, prioritizing low-cost technical solutions. The power of the people was undoubtedly a unique feature of the various social participation phenomena. The importance of housing cooperatives is highlighted as they brought together residents of deteriorating neighborhoods, slum areas, and rented buildings. The movement also greatly impacted and changed the social role of women, who took the most significant roles in the public sphere.

The right to housing, and more specifically the right to quality of life, was the driving force behind SAAL operations. Populations, design teams, and political decision-makers went beyond housing issues, focusing on the importance of residential space and essential infrastructure, advocating for urban equipment (sports facilities, schools, daycare facilities, health facilities, among others) and

social spaces (spaces for associations, leisure areas, green spaces, among others), not to mention adequate public transportation, all part of the broader concern for the right to the place/city.

## Four SAAL Operations

In these SAAL interventions coordinated by four architects, it is important to emphasize that in all initial planes have not been fully realized, nor is the proposed schedules of the project. In this context, it is essential to highlight the professional and academic backgrounds of these architects.

Hestnes Ferreira's academic and professional path (table 1) included an internship at the Finnish Institute of Technology (Helsinki, 1958-1959), research at Yale University (New Haven, 1962), and a master's degree completed at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1963-1965). His work at the Technical Housing Office (GTH, 1966-1967) was a significant factor in his decisions and choices regarding this housing complex (Saraiva, 2011).

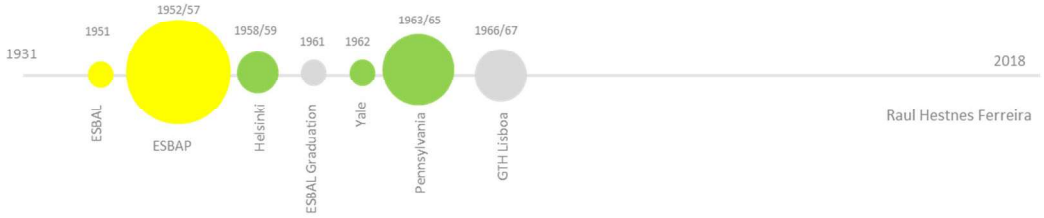



*Table 1 – Hestnes Ferreira´s academic and professional path. Source: author*

Matos Ferreira (table 2) attended ESBAP from 1948 to 1952 and, during the 1950s, was part of a group of students who shared Room 35 in a building in Praça da Liberdade, downtown Porto (table.2). He was the oldest member of this diverse group, which included Álvaro Siza, Alberto Neves, António Menéres, Joaquim Sampaio, Luís Botelho Dias, and Vasco Macieira Mendes. Távora's involvement in various International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM, 1951-1962) and his role in the "Minho" team for the Survey on Portuguese Regional Architecture (1955-1960) (AAVV, 1961) expanded Ferreira's understanding of housing and territorial issues, deeply influencing him. His personal and professional partnership with Távora (1972-1982) further shaped his approach. Unlike Hestnes Ferreira, Soutinho, and Costa Cabral, Matos Ferreira never studied or interned abroad.

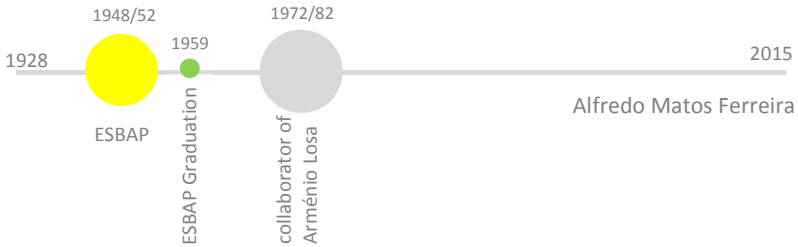



*Table 2 – Matos Ferreira´s academic and professional path. Source: author*

Alcino Soutinho (1930-2013) earned his architecture diploma from ESBAP in 1959. As a Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation scholar in 1961, he conducted research on museology in Italy, where he was influenced by his Italian peers. Simultaneously, he worked at the Welfare Funds Foundation, designing

numerous social housing projects in northern Portugal until 1971. From early on, he balanced his design practice with teaching (1972-1999). Soutinho was actively engaged in architectural discourse and dissemination through conferences, debates, publications, and articles, as well as holding significant public roles in institutions such as the Portuguese Design Centre (1998-2001), the Árvore Artistic Activities Cooperative (2003-2006), and the Order of Architects (1999-2002). (table 3)

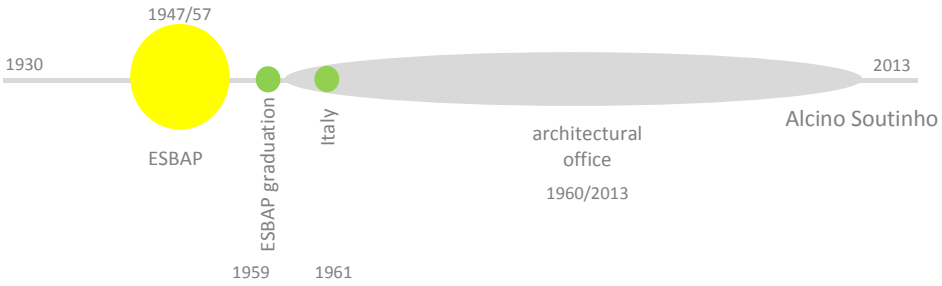



*Table 3 – Alcino Soutinho´s academic and professional path. Source: author*

Costa Cabral's internships at the Centre Scientifique et Technique du Bâtiment (Paris, 1962), London County Council (London, 1965), and LNEC (Lisbon, 1967) had a significant impact on his approach to research and housing design (d'Almeida et al. 2022). Under the guidance of Nuno Teotónio Pereira (1922-2022), Cabral became involved in Portugal's cooperative movement, working with the Federation of Welfare Funds (FCP) and GTH on the social housing project for Olivais. Two decades later, as part of the SAAL program, he was tasked with developing the Pego Longo neighbourhood (1975-1977) in Sintra (d'Almeida and Marat-Mendes, 2022).

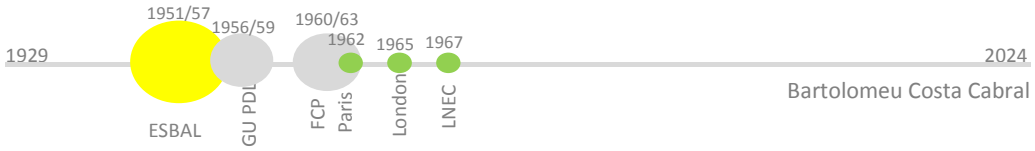



*Table 4 – Bartolomeu Costa Cabral´s academic and professional path. Source: author*

The professional experience gained by Soutinho and Costa Cabral at the Federation of Welfare Funds, as well as Hestnes Ferreira's experience at the Technical Housing Office of the Lisbon City Council, were decisive in realizing new housing proposals. Matos Ferreira made a significant impact in academia by proposing the graphic documentation and characterization of interior living spaces in his design courses. For this architect (Ferreira, 1995), a building must adhere to three essential principles: formal simplicity, economy, and clarity in spatial organization.

If we analyse the geographical characterization of each intervention, the Hestnes Ferreira coordinated Fonseca and Sidewalk neighbourhood is located on the outskirts of Lisbon, in an expanding area with relatively flat topography at the time. In contrast, the Proposal of Matos Ferreira for the Lapa neighbourhood is in a central area of the Port (zone 3 – central ring area of the 18th and 19th century

expansion ring), which was and is still a highly degraded area with steep topography, restricted further by the rail line (now used by the subway), representing challenges to its implementation.

The neighbourhood of Acacio, later renamed Maceda, is in the eastern part of the city, near its border, in Campanhã (zone 8 – eastern suburban sector). Implementing the project on the ground prioritized the creation of collective spaces and considered the historical, social and cultural significance of urban tissue where the operation occurred.

The neighbourhood of Pego Longo, designed by Costa Cabral, is in a peripheral area of the Sintra, which at the time had little infrastructure and steep topography, influencing the architectural proposal.

| SAAL intervention | Architect | Local | Association | Population | | Dwellings | | Typology | Project | Construction |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | families | total | Planned | Built | | | |
| Fonsecas and Calçada | Raúl Hestnes Ferreira | Lisboa | Economic Housing Cooperatives (C.H.E) 25 de Abril | 310 | 950 | 1600 | 335 | T1+(1); T2; T3; T4; T5 | 1974 - 1976 | 1976 - 1986 |
| | | | Calçadas Economic Housing Cooperatives (C.H.E) Unidade do Povo | 288 | 1000 | | | | | |
| Lapa | Alfredo Matos Ferreira | Porto | Lapa Residents' Association | 482 | 1700 | 500 (250 new+ 250 recovered) | 74 | T1; T2/T3; T3/T4 | 1975 | 1976 - 1977 |
| Maceda | Alcino Soutinho | Porto | Maceda Residents' Association | 52 | 186 | 43 | 33 | T1; T2; T3; T4; T5 | 1975 | 1974 - 1977 |
| | Andrea Soutinho | | | | | | 10 | | | 2016 - 2020 |
| Pego Longo | Bartolomeu Costa Cabral | Sintra | Pego Longo Residents' Association | 143 | 500 | 150 (47 new +60 recovered) | 81 | T1; T2; T3; T4; T5 | 1975 | 1977 |

*Table 5. data information- 4 SAAL interventions. Source: author*

The table 5 resume all data information about these four interventions, the local, the name of the association involve, the characterization of the population (no. of families and total of population), dwellings (planned and built), the typology, the year of the project and the years of construction.

All the neighborhoods are typologically different: 1) Fonsecas e Calçada is a large development of four-story multifamily buildings, with mostly left/right vertical access, and small access galleries for three housing units at building intersections; 2) Lapa is a medium-sized development of two-story terraced houses with backyards, forming blocks; 3) Maceda is a small development consisting of eight terraced housing units, of which only five were initially built; 4) Pego Longo is a large development of terraced single-story and two-story houses, with front and rear yards, forming blocks.

The rehabilitation interventions in the Fonsecas and Calçada and Pego Longo neighborhoods, promoted by the municipalities of Lisbon and Sintra in 2016 and 2017, respected the participation of the local population and allowed for the redevelopment of public spaces, the improvement of pedestrian and road accessibility, and an overall enhancement of the quality of life for these communities. In 2016, the regularization of the construction situation was finally made possible, with the legalization of all blocks through the issuance of the respective Occupancy Licenses and the creation of Identity Cards for the 355 housing units, resulting from the BIP/ZIP58 process implemented by the Lisbon City Council and endorsed by Hestnes Ferreira. In 2019, the municipality of Sintra invested around 600 million euros in an intervention area of 18,460 square meters to rehabilitate public spaces and improve pedestrian and road accessibility, thereby enhancing the quality of life for the population.

On December 9, 2019, the Porto City Council, through Councilman Pedro Baganha, announced at a council meeting the development of an Urban Study for the Lapa area. It envisioned the creation of new urban fronts, particularly residential areas, a green urban park covering 19,000 square meters (and a second one with 16,000 square meters), the redesign of access to the Lapa metro station, and the completion of the existing road network with the creation of new streets. This project for the Lapa area in Porto considers the reprofiling of Cervantes Street, from its intersection with Alves Redol Street to Antero de Quental Street. This work will have a significant impact on the Lapa neighbourhood, as Cervantes Street is the main access route to this SAAL intervention. Fifty years later, these neighborhoods and their owners, some of them second-generation, finally gained access to the habitation certificate and full ownership of their property.

## CONCLUSIONS

These four SAAL interventions did not evolve in the same way, nor do they present the same results. While the intervention for the Lapa neighbourhood was never fully completed, the interventions for the Fonsecas and Calçada neighborhoods, Pego Longo, and Maceda extended over time and space. The active involvement of the architects, particularly with the residents of the latter two neighborhoods, promoted the continuity of their work and spatial ideas among the residents. Alternative approaches, such as collaborative housing and affordable rental models, are gaining ground, offering new solutions to persistent housing problems. In short, the evolution of housing in Portugal since the 1960s reflects a combination of government efforts, community initiatives, and global trends, with a growing emphasis on sustainability and social inclusion.

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