

The Oporto Experience

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The Oporto Experience

PARTICIPATORY INTERVENTION IN THE CITY/THE OPORTO EXPERIENCE

There was never an attempt to prefigure the city, daily life, or socialist ways of life; there was never an attempt to elaborate a counter plan outside the conscience of the residents. It was rather a question of proposing, by practicing, a methodological alternative that, born out of a dynamic process of struggle and organization, would its provisional images, constructed its theory.

Therefore, methodically, along with the development of the struggle for the effective improvement of the workers' living conditions, always from real situations and based on viable proposals, some works that fixed in the concrete of the territorial organization the urban effects and political effects of urban movements, transforming their struggles into victories, were concretized.

Never making the true political arguments clear, hidden under the cover of technical arguments, so-called neutral, confusing the provisional with the definitive, not understanding the alternative as a process, requiring the rationality of its class logic, the SAAL experience was classified as terrorist or, more politely, immediatist, empirical, anarchic, having been, after all, methodical, patient, rational, dialectic.

The publication of some works from SAAL/Norte should be understood within this perspective: provisional, ambiguous, and contradictory projects. Fragments, nevertheless, of a city's image released by inversion of content in its usage.

271 requests for intervention, of which 174, involving 41,758 families, were satisfied.

THE PLAN AGAINST ANARCHIC SPECULATION. THE PLAN AGAINST FASCISM. THE TIME OF MARCELO CAETANO

Waking up to days more straightforward than the days in Europe: that was the way out, the only one worth pain and torture and sleepless nights.

However timid the process of new urban development may be, the truth is that the transformations induced by the weakening of the "rural" condition, whose maintenance by a State still essentially manipulated by retrograde interests, eventually gave way to the imposition of a policy of promotion and industrialization, caused in the system a situation of instability.

The growth of cities operates disorderly, constituting their implementation and the organization of spaces mere by-product of capitalist growth. The shortcomings of all order, accumulating contradictions, and the danger of explosions that "unintegrated" exploitation can cause, lead the bourgeoisie to renew its rules of action. Urban planning is one of the logical consequences of this renewal.

So that the socio-economic planning defined by industrial monopolistic groups is not hampered by the increase in urban land rents that benefit one of the sectors of the ruling class – the landowners themselves – it becomes urgent for the State to define measures to counteract land speculation.

After serving as the initial accumulation, real estate speculation is the scourge to be combated; urban land policy falls into this context.

In colloquia, round tables, and technical reports, attention is repeatedly drawn to the seriousness of the situation. The technocratic vanguard of the bourgeois class hastens to divulge "radical" solutions, such as the municipalization of soils, systematic expropriation or even the separation of the right to property from the right to build. The administration's land-based acquisition of private developers and their collaboration with private entities in urbanization and housing development works will be the appropriate instruments by which the realization of large enterprises and works, urbanization areas, economic areas, urban centers, tourist enterprises, urban allotments, etc. will be favored and increased.

Although from the 1950s onwards, a progressive generalization of rationalist concepts of urban planning is noted (the 1944 legislation makes urbanization and expansion plans compulsory), structures to fill such needs were never created. Contrary to the official discourse, accessible for the first time to the voice of technocrats, the real disinterest in planning makes it suspicious that the sociopolitical economic system in Portugal is not truly interested in its use as an instrument of an urban policy.

Caetano's era is rich in clarifying the regime's internal contradictions. Some important plans never came to the approval of the Council of Ministers.

This ambiguous situation serves for the administration to accommodate the requirements of a speculative market that could feel embarrassed by a plan to be fulfilled obligingly, but which can be used whenever it serves its interests.

The system thus imposes on the plan the adaptation to the speculative development of the city. If its potential as an instrument of social and economic development is not used,

the system needs it to apply rules in areas where conditions of instability can be generated or that need to be controlled to establish integrated products.

THE HOUSING OF WORKERS IN OPORTO. THE STRUGGLE OF THE RESIDENTS. FROM IMMEDIATE CLAIMS TO THE RIGHT TO THE CITY. THE 25TH OF APRIL TIME

Like a fresh start

Like a new time

No blemish or vice.

Delayed by the weak development of the productive forces, despite colonial exploitation and especially for political reasons, the first industrial revolution appears late, but with some development in the city of Oporto.

The need for labor concentration brought thousands of workers to the city that need to be housed in any conditions. This situation will give rise to the creation and expansion of a type of housing that is called "island". Its typology, 'back-to-back' houses, is, first, the direct result of the speculative use of the funds of the plots, where the street faces are implanted bourgeois houses. The Oporto slop, narrow and long, conditions the form of grouping and the typology of the dwelling that gradually becomes conscious and comes to have wide use in wider operations of speculation, becoming an orderly principle of the territory of the city. The "island" is a class dwelling that arises and develops with the evolution of capitalism and its study is inextricably linked to the general conditions of life and the struggle of the proletariat of Oporto.

After external conditions were created that forced the Portuguese economy to take the industrialization path, the already existing imbalance between the growing needs and housing supply increased. The private sector controls management and directs it to the layers with greater purchasing power. Workers excluded from the circuit are forced to accept deficient solutions: subletting, slums, or clandestine housing (speculative or self-construction), solutions that are tolerated because they are stabilizing factors in an unbalanced threatening situation.

In Oporto, where the situation is particularly serious in the degraded areas of the "islands" and in the old part of the city and through the financial profitability of certain demolition operations for the construction of new buildings, the largest and most systematic rejection operation has been developed to the periphery of low-level urban populations that must have existed in this country. In addition to its economic reasons (liberation of urban land and launch of large building programmes), this action made it possible to exercise a diabolical and violent repression on this population. "Housing occupants may be displaced whenever they become unworthy of the right granted."

The 25th of April unleashed in an explosive way the creative energy of the masses, their initiative, their capacity for spontaneous organization. The workers took over the production of abandoned or under fascist administration factories, the peasants occupied the large estates and organized production in new molds.

In urban areas, based on immediate demands, many of them at the level of survival, movements triggered by the residents of the "shantytowns" developed. Social

neighborhoods, some of them unfinished or undistributed, were occupied, and the first committees of residents and squatters were formed.

In Oporto, it was in the municipal neighborhoods of the periphery, resulting from the confluence of several factors – the violence of the expulsion from the city, poverty, and the existence of a fascist regulations – personified by the city council, that the first urban struggles began, and the first committees of residents were organized. Subletting houses, the "islands" and the poor neighborhoods followed. Everywhere, committees of residents were formed, and claimant programs, established. With the first demonstration of poor residents convened at the city level and which ended up invading on November 30, 1974, broader political perspectives were created, clearly moving towards the globalization of the struggle. The face-to-face with the new democratic municipal administration highlighted, on residents' side, the lack of overall organizational structures and above all a single program. It also made evident the perplexity of provisional power.

THE SAAL. THE ALLIANCE OF THE POPULAR MOVEMENT, TECHNICIANS AND SECTORS OF THE STATE APPARATUS. FROM PUNCTUAL INTERVENTION TO PLANNING ALTERNATIVE. STILL THE TIME OF 25TH OF APRIL

Truth is not a specialty

For literate clerics.

On August 6, 1974, the order that created the SAAL was published "to support through the Municipal Councils the initiatives of the poorly displaced population to collaborate in the transformation of their own neighborhoods, investing their own latent and possibly monetary resources".

The initiative of the operation is state-owned, albeit a response – perhaps an integrative attempt – to the first mass movements. The population should organize themselves with a view to participating in the transformation of the neighborhood, through the construction of their own houses. The SAAL program, not having a very clear initial definition, has been clarified because of a long struggle and reflection of the residents, the main stakeholders, in the sense of realizing what in the dispatch were indefinitions, ambiguities or even inaccuracies.

The poor residents, assuming the good things about the fixation that guaranteed their settlement on urban land and a certain autonomy of decision, began by refusing self-construction, considering it a process of double exploitation.

The interest aroused by the qualities of the dispatch, combined with the unexpected ability of the populations to move forward with claiming processes that tend to cover all the poorly housed, transformed the SAAL methodology into a dynamic process that far exceeded its initial perspectives and was one of the main factors of unification of the residents' movement. A program was born from the necessary discussion of the process and the constant need for evidence of strength cemented the relations between the committees. The political discussion, the difficulties of its implementation, was giving the movement its anti-reformist and anti-capitalist character.

The SAAL, as understood by the residents who were part of it, could, at the time of its extinction, be defined as a priority intervention subject to the implementation of the right to housing and the right to the city under the control of organised residents, based in more detail, on seven fundamental principles:

The priority of the intervention, initiative, and organization of the poor residents, over the location of housing centers, control over the technical support work, construction management, control over the financing process and social management of homes and neighborhoods.

The land, corresponding to degraded ones and attached free areas, are delivered, after expropriated, in surface law, to the associations of residents, so that they can carry out their program of restructuring, renovation and equipment of the area, with financial assistance from the State. Each association develops its own process, supported by a technical brigade of local support.

Requests for intervention are multiplied throughout the territory of the city. The areas of influence of each association – operational units – begin to neighbor each other. The need for agreements is a pretext for the development of more general programmes. The depunctualization of interventions, moving from the neighborhood to the area, from the area to the city, is accompanied by increasing complexity in the organization of residents and in the central coordination services.

The plan and its interests clearly appear as a barrier. The residents participated in their criticism and in the definition of new alternative proposals, on the way to a global project that solves the city with another logic, that dignifies the workers' homes, that frees another culture for the first time assuming the entire past of the city without destroying it for profit.

This simplicity is a method. It had its practice, design, construction. Its theory was elaborated, its techniques created. It had the elementary and indisputable logic that starts from the urgency of primary needs.

It had the strength of thousands of Portuguese who saw a new society on the 25th of April.

It existed despite the attacks – which went as far as terrorist bombings – and all sorts of blockades. Defeated, it will leave memories and, above all, action data for all and future moments.

THE PLAN AGAINST ROUGH SPECULATION AND AGAINST SAAL. THE TIME OF THE 25TH OF NOVEMBER OR OF THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF DEMOCRACY.

- He's not dead, he doesn't die, when I put down, someone - and blessed himself - lifts him up.

The urban social movements that emerged after the 25th of April, to which the SAAL is directly linked, took place in a situation of change of political conjuncture, but of great uncertainty at the level of the dominant power and divided between the historical party commitment and which had to do with the so-called bourgeois legality and certain political-military instances that were the privileged places of what can be called

revolutionary legitimacy. The class struggle, however, broke this whole power space down to its hypothetical linearity and equated it in terms of conflict.

The SAAL, as a state apparatus, enjoys the privilege of its overall weakening and can adapt to the political project of the masses. It has the ambiguous nature of a relationship of non-conflictive collaboration with urban movements and at the same time as assistance towards the legal referral of its claims, with all the implications that this entails – a portion of the state apparatus identified with the popular aspirations of structural change, channeling against the state apparatus these aspirations. After all, it is the weakening of the State that opens this field of action that the masses take advantage of. The bourgeois reorganization will make these contradictions clear in terms of conflict within the apparatus of state in which the SAAL is a foreign body to be expelled or integrated into its class perspective.

As predicted, even before the right-wing coup of the 25th of November 1975, the SAAL came to be, in practice, extinct in October 1976, at a time of despair and weariness of the residents' movement.

Better than in the 1950s, away from the most retrograde stratum, the system, after organized political and economic activity and having appropriated control of productive activity, can propose a plan of concrete activities. It is time to relaunch the master plan.

This is used against SAAL intervention, according to the increased state intervention and consequent appreciation of the role of technicians in the ideological line of "rationality and urban neutrality", whose roots lie, as we have seen, in the last years of "Marcelismo".

SAAL/North's position on the planning issue was evident in the conclusion of the July 1975 Meeting:

"With regard to existing planning and considering that it translates the defense of the interests of the bourgeois class, it is understood that SAAL interventions, by defending the interest of residents, challenge in practice such planning.

There is still no alternative structure of the city/territory; it is up to SAAL to make its contribution to the creation of this alternative, thinking that its implementation will only be possible because of a new structure of the power under the direction of the working class.

SAAL interventions should be, in the current political context, possible interventions that defend the immediate interests of workers without ochering to the development of the revolutionary process".

The inevitability of the contradiction between the interventions in the territory of the SAAL and the bourgeois project is, thus, verified.

It is, therefore, clear that when voices of "democratic power legitimized by free elections" cry out against urban anarchy, it is in an ambivalent way: for the rationality and harmonic development of capitalism against anarchic speculation existing before the 25th of April and, simultaneously, against the "anarchy" of the proposals of urban movements (and their partial, but legal coverage by the services of the SAAL), which aims at profoundly change the logic of the system.

The extinction of SAAL demonstrates the coherence achieved again in the State apparatus, which thus clarifies the interests it defends.

What was called a return to initial purity (the terminology is identical to that of the 25th of November – return to the ideas of the 25th of April) consisted in the integration of SAAL operations in the municipal councils, extinguishing the coordination services, on the pretext of the need for urban control, legally within their competence. The new administrations would represent the popular will expressed in municipal elections.

The institutionalization of the mechanisms of bourgeois democracy fills the legal vacuum until then occupied by the basic popular organizations. The existence of a popular program, assumed by the residents' associations, with a broad support base, conditioned the first phase of the process of extinction of the SAAL, characterized by the attempt, still timid, to control its effects before they reached situations of rupture with the system.

The "SAAL process", understood as a system of relations between the movement of residents, its organization and coordinated technical and legal support, was gradually losing its global character, dispersed by several municipalities, away from the technicians who were connected to it and extinguished the public service that gave it coverage and real viability.

Taking advantage of the consequent and inevitable demobilization and division of the movement of residents, the local administration proposes solutions demonstrating, moreover, a great ineffectiveness and incompetence. To get some support, it also accepts the handover of the land that residents choose, imposing the condition of being used the new projects.

The SAAL models, projects elaborated from a deep collaboration between technicians and residents, respect, and recovery of the cultural values of the city, simple constructions to avoid sophisticated technologies, to be executed by small companies and cooperatives of unemployed under the control of future users and guaranteed by them their maintenance, are replaced by new models that prefigure the images that will be imposed in the next peripheral sets. These models, surplus of European social democracy, will be, unlike those proposed by SAAL, those who will "resolve" desperate situations faster.

By resuming the city to build some blocks in the center, it tries to conquer the connivance of the residents to continue to destroy it for less humanitarian purposes.

The abandonment of the popular program or the change of its content will drag those who identify with it and, finally, the associations of residents who resisted will move to docile transmission of the power...

Ambitious program of a power as arrogant yet fragile!

The historical experience of residents and technicians has not been, as we have said, only memory, and it has not been easy to try to demonstrate the unfeasibility in the planning of the implicit global proposals and under study from the work of the Coordinator SAAL and the technical brigades. The reaction to the city proposals of other responses to the needs of the population has highlighted the awareness and information of the residents' associations and their representatives.

The maneuvering area is still very wide. The class struggle remains alive in Portugal. The recent fall of the socialist government shows the general difficulties that exist in our country. The political situation is unclear and the social democratic reorganization scheme, in fact characterised by an increasing handover to the reactionary right wing, in a country of an economy on the verge of collapse being sold to imperialism, has not been



able to stabilize itself, especially since workers seem willing to defend April's achievements.

You don't see easy victories, or any victories. Only a new maturity in the movement of residents in the search for different tactics is recognized, to continue defending what has already achieved in the sense of their dignity and what is usually called right to the city.

For architects, it should not be close to the implementation of their proposals, not even the conclusion of the initiatives. Architects who dramatically cannot use their new tools, acquired just as their historical crisis seemed outdated and architecture found, because it had not resigned, its authentic dimension.