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## **LONG AFTER THE RING, MASS HOUSING MAY NOT BE APOCALYPTICAL**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Charles Jencks proclaimed the “Death of Modern Architecture”, metaphorically through the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate (1972), more than 40 years ago, - precisely at a time when the private sector started to take over the welfare state almost everywhere. The contradiction between claiming an “architecture for the people” while an economic-driven market was being promulgated, obliterating the moral ambitions of architecture, is outlined in the case study of the present paper, the urban plan of Portela de Sacavém (1960-79), designed by architect Fernando Silva (1914-83).

The project is a mass-produced housing complex – one of the principles of Modern Architecture – developed by the private sector<sup>1</sup>, in the outskirts of Lisbon, for the upper middle class.<sup>2</sup> Built over the 60’s and 70’s, the project is paradigmatic of a self-representing image that arrived in the capital from the ex-colonies and was “broadcasted” for and by the emergent middle class at the time – paradoxically linked with the provision of cheap houses for the working classes.

The idea of a modern lifestyle was welcome. It included the car, the garage, the lift, the motorway, and even the stereotyped anonymous character of architecture - as opposed to the ‘ideal’ of detached suburban houses with private gardens. But, despite the modern character of the urban plan, the dwellings enclose a bourgeois Victorian vision of how private life should be lived. Given its wide acceptance and the satisfaction of its inhabitants – many of them still living there – it became the model of the housing approach in the years to come. Thus, this paper will argue that “housing for the biggest number” in the periphery of cities is not necessarily synonymous of ‘miserabilism’, as is the case with countless examples elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> In this case it was the influent constructor and promotor Manuel da Mota.

<sup>2</sup> The word Portela means precisely “door”, in this case a Lisbon “door” to Sacavém.

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The reasons for this attractiveness might be manifold and deserve a rigorous scrutiny. It also opens up a wider question about how the socialist ideals behind modernism could be so easily absorbed by liberalism and the private sector.

### **“HOMES FOR THE BIGGEST NUMBER”**

Many studies have been developed around the issue of mass housing projects during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a special focus on social housing. The middle class has indeed been ignored within this debate, with the general assumption that this model was only intended for housing or relocating lower classes. And, generally speaking, collective housing and detached houses have been, as a laboratory of experimentation and discussion, very different, not only because of their scale and programme, but also because of the themes that congregate around them, more sociological, political and strategically in the first case, and more disciplinary centred in the second.

The “biggest number”, the masses, have always been related to public policies and social housing programmes, not only in Portugal but elsewhere.

While the reality in many European countries was shaped by the ruins of World War II, and the need of mass production, from where modernism found its privileged way of emerging as a discourse, this was not the case in Portugal. On the one hand the fact that the country did not suffer spatial consequences of World War I, and did not participate in World War II resulted in a totally different reality in what concerns the urge to rehouse entire populations. On the other hand, the country was under a dictatorship that ruled for over than 40 years (1933), using housing as a way of promoting the regime.

In fact, in the capital, many neighbourhoods were built in peripheral areas of the city, somehow recreating the atmosphere of villages, most of them with semi-detached housing with private courtyards, cultivating the rural image with which most of the families were familiar, at the same time developing the idea of a “Portuguese house”: Encarnação (1940), Caramão da Ajuda (1938), Alto da Serafina (1940), Alvito (1937), Madre Deus (1942). This was, in a country economically behind its European peers, the Portuguese version of “The American Dream”.

In the mid 40's, given the interventionist climate of the government at the time, an urban plan was developed for a neighbourhood, Alvalade, that would become paradigmatic of the Portuguese urbanism. The long period that its construction took accommodated many transformations to the original design of Faria da Costa (1906-1971). Designed for 45.000 people and organized according to 8 urban cells, in line with Clarence Perry's Neighbourhood Unit, the housing schemes were more urban, organized in three storey blocks around big communal courtyards. Those hide the still non-urban character of so many people to whom owning a piece of land was very important, as well as

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keeping coops poultry, vegetable gardens and small orchards, etc. The hierarchy of the street system was coincident with those of the apartments. They were divided in three series and each one, in turn, into three typologies. If the interior arrangement recalls some of the theories of the *existenz minimum*, reducing circulation areas to the minimum, providing separate bedrooms for parents and children, and for boys and girls, and turning the living room into the main distribution space. In series II there was already the inclusion of a study room and in series III, besides that also an ensuite bedroom, closer to the kitchen, for the servant. More often than not there were no servants and these rooms were sublet for an extra income. Nevertheless, they suggested to the low middle classes the possibility of a better life.

But the idealized collective housing described by Yorke in “The Modern House”, “grouped in large blocks and with a moral and ethical dimension that characterized the ideology of the International Style, could only be opened up for discussion with the First National Congress of Architecture in 1948<sup>3</sup>, where Portuguese architects claimed the urban planning of cities and the application of the Athens Chart. The Congress addressed both “The Portuguese Problem of Housing” and “Architecture at a National Level”. In the same year, the first Master Plan was produced and approved. Another event of extreme importance was the Enquiry to Popular Architecture (1955-60) with the goal to prove the inexistence of a Portuguese style, – so much defended by the Regime – and wake the ethical and moral dimension of architecture. Those paved the way for the first modernist expressions in Portugal.

### LATE MODERNISM OR DRESSED TO LOOK MODERN

From the transition of the 1950's onwards, the architects started to criticise more openly the current architecture and Alvalade, in Lisbon, was the perfect laboratory for many experiences, so much so that the neighbourhood itself became a kind of catalogue of housing experiences right in the dictatorial regime.

On the one hand, those were not replicas of previous models explored worldwide but rather informed and critical, on the other hand they were hybrids of modern urban images dressing almost Victorian interiors, such as the nationally famous complex “Vá-Vá” (1952-57). Recalling Le Corbusier's Unité, even with the intermediate “street” (that in this case remain in the facade design but was never built), and despite the “modern outfit”, it accommodates flats with separate circulations and entrances for servants with their own bedrooms next to the kitchen, laundry and pantry, living room, dining room, study room, tea room, etc.

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3 Exactly between the first post-war meeting of the CIAM in Bridgewater and the CIAM 7 in Bergamo, that though representing the start of a shift from the focus on the functional city and the questioning of the designation International Style, was unable to live behind the pre-war promise of a mass architecture.

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In 1960, Fernando Silva and Ruy D’Athouguia were commissioned for the intersection between two of the main streets of the plan – Avenida da Igreja and Avenida de Roma. They adopted a strong critical position towards the existing housing schemes assuming monumentality that from an urban point of view emphasized the importance of that node: four massive housing blocks, two with a “Y” shape and the other two with an “L” shape, each with 18 and 10 storeys respectively. The “Y” buildings, despite their shape, remind Ludwig Hilbersmeir’s drawings for a “Skyscrapers’ City” and Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation. The buildings were designed on *pilotis* but over a common squared basement/plinth, clearly separating the circulation between pedestrians and traffic, and at the same time modelling the square according to the traditional traffic road system. It was as if the architects had taken the best out of three worlds.

In addition, despite the monotonous facades, with no hierarchies or variations, emphasized by the disposition of the openings, their almost abstract character accommodated luxurious flats that not only followed the 18<sup>th</sup> century Victorian floor plans but also benefited of all 20<sup>th</sup> century facilities: the modern kitchen, the lift, the garage, the storage room. It was an upgrade of the existing housing schemes of the neighbourhood, both in terms of areas and technology but what is more, in the understanding of a contemporary urban inhabitant. One was the caricature of the other. Whether this was possible thanks to private enterprises might be true, but that does not change the fact that the project reveals Fernando Silva’s wide reflection on urbanism, and a critical position turned into a proposition. Only one year after (1961) Jane Jacobs would publish “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”, and it is curious to note how Fernando Silva and Ruy D’Athouguia combined both the ideal of modern housing with the recovery of some of the traditional urbanism principles, where buildings design streets and the other way around. Some controversial subjects such as separating or not different activities, what is a proper mix and so forth were also addressed. The two housing complexes incorporated commerce and services in the lower floors, while the other two buildings, primarily were devoted to offices with a shopping centre on the ground floor, something that was rare at the time. And although it was a requirement of Faria da Costa’s plan to enhance the street intersection, the design of the complex not only achieved it, but marked definitely the centre of the neighbourhood. During the previous and the following years other examples could be pointed out, but none combining the traditional urbanism with modern architecture.

### FREEDOM NEIGHBOURHOODS

From the mid 1950's, with the founding of the MPLA (“Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola”), instability began to be felt on the Portuguese territory. By Portuguese territory we mean mainland as well as the colonies, territories that since the abolition of the Colonial Act in 1951 – which was an adaptation of the UN Charter – were then called overseas provinces, namely officially

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members of Portugal. In the early 1960s with the creation of FRAIN (“African Revolutionary Front for the Independence of Angola”), supported by the anticolonial positions of the ONU General Assembly, the political climate culminated in the beginning of the colonial war in 1961. Like all revolutions, this was a slow process and for which contributed in a decisive way the “25<sup>th</sup> of April” or “Carnation Revolution” as it was also called the political event that put an end to the dictatorship government in 1974. Moreover, it paved the way to the subsequent decolonization that occurred between “April 25<sup>th</sup>” and “November 11<sup>th</sup>” of the next year (1975), when it was proclaimed the independence, the cessation of Portuguese sovereignty and the immediate liberation of the colonies. It is important to note that the decolonization of British and French Empires had happened much before, between 1946 and 1960, partially due to urban strategies that are not within the scope of this paper.

The political climate proper of a dictatorial government, the civil war in the so-called overseas provinces; the subsequent decolonization; the poor conditions in which people lived in<sup>4</sup>; the return of many families from the ex-colonies to a country that for most of the second generation was unknown, had a strong impact in the territory from the point of view of housing and urbanism.

During the 70’s the number of slums in the city fringe of Lisbon increased significantly given the continuous flow of people from the interior of the country to its capital that started in the previous decades, in search for a better quality of life<sup>5</sup>. Consummated the decolonization in Angola and the consequent return of the descendants of original white settlers from the former colonies to the capital (amounting about 305 000, approximately half of whom settled in the region of Lisbon), together with the gradual process of rural depopulation, and to a lesser extent the return of emigrants from Europe, had an extreme impact on the overall urban shape of Lisbon during the last five decades. Indeed, more than a decade after the start of the first Master Plan of the Lisbon Region (1961) the housing situation in 1974 was described as extremely serious: aged and poor housing, poor public sector involvement in housing promotion, having been calculated the need of 600 000 dwellings. Where have these populations, in particular the more educated ones, with higher financial capacity, established? The middle class had other aspirations as there was an increase in the average salaries. Gradually the family structure changed, reducing themselves to the nuclear family, the use of the car became generalized, with new consuming patterns. Many of them tended to fix around the second ring of the city for geographical reasons. The location of the river Tagus on the south of the city privileged its expansion towards the north and, as a natural consequence of urban growth, but also given the lack of

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<sup>4</sup> In the 1960’s only 18% of the population had sewer system and almost 8% of the capital lived in slums.

<sup>5</sup> In 1900’s, Lisbon’s population amounted 365.000 and by 1960’s it doubled to 802.000 with a step fall to 750.000 in 1970 (França, 1997:116-18). The majority came from places without sewers, piped water or even electricity.

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housing offer in the city centre with the conditions that these populations sought, and consequent land speculation.

If in the years that followed the revolution, the country witnessed a greater state intervention, particularly with regard to underserved populations, during the 1980s housing policies tended to promote the use of credit systems for purchase of proper homes that have resulted, over time, in increased land speculation. Indeed, these factors significantly contributed to the sprawl of the suburbs and the development of peripheral territories that represented opportunities to experiment with new urban typologies. The sprawl of the suburbs and the redefinition of the metropolitan area were also possible given the development of the existent infrastructures, partially given the structural funds that came from CEE between 1986 and 1991 to expand the economy to the level of the former partner countries, resulting in drastic transformations of the landscape with a long term impact on the transformation of the territory.

Furthermore, given the gap between Portugal and other countries, these post-revolution middle class neighbourhoods express a singular dialectic between modern and the so-called post-modern. We cannot forget that it was precisely when Portugal was able to cut the ties with the past that the first Biennale of Architecture in Venice took place (1981), curated by Paolo Portoguesi, paradoxically entitled “The Presence of the Past”, and the catalogue’s introduction “The End of Prohibitionism”. And so, in a way, this paradoxical situation enabled Portuguese architecture a freedom and distance without falling in any kind of orthodoxy.

### LOOKING BLUE DOES NOT MEAN BEING BLUE

One of such examples in the outskirts of Lisbon is the present case study, **Portela de Sacavém**, which prompted important questions about urbanism, the contemporary city and the city dweller, that are still part of the contemporary architectural and urban agenda as they imply a rethinking of ongoing problems through drawing and the cross over between multiple scales.

Housing can be understood as a major element articulating the individual and society, the neighbourhood and the block. The spatial arrangement as a whole has a social content and therefore stands as an object of reflection.

#### *Neighbourhoods for the “happiest families in Europe”<sup>6</sup>*

At the time much had been said and written about housing, modernism and post-modernism, urban sprawl or compact city, the need for public spaces, and so forth, and Fernando Silva was probably

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<sup>6</sup> From a newspaper add to the housing complex “Parque Europa”.

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aware of the debates outside the national circle. Drawn after the advent (and fall) of modernism, Portela's urban plan is probably one of the most eclectic within the Portuguese culture, and can be analysed as an exercise that reflects over more than one century of urban theories, combining and reinventing new relations between those, revealing awareness and deep knowledge of the history of urbanism which led him to take the opportunity to design an entire site as an exercise to rethink major urban strategies, being simultaneously heir and a challenge to previous models through the way it combined features that, when looked carefully, are not only anachronic but also coming from disparate discourses. After Fernando Silva and Ruy D'Athougia commission in Alvalade, the first was again in a position to explore and continue the research started at the time.

Although, as referred previously, the middle class has been almost ignored, in most of the housing and urban studies, the truth is that this social group was responsible for the expansion of the city towards outside its 2nd ring, i.e., to the suburbs. In fact, a significant territory was built by the strength of liberal pressure for economic privatisation, private interests and promises of a new life style to those that benefited from the general rise in salaries; widespread use of the automobile; transformation of the family structure, from an extended group to its reduction into a nuclear family; new cultural experiences and practices of consumption as well as the transformation of the housing market, increasingly aggressive; and the spread of an easier access to bank loans for the acquisition of private dwellings.

Portela was designed 6km away from the city and though now it has clearly defined borders, both visual and physical, that was not the case when it was built in a "space-endlessness" of 5 farms (Ferro, Casquilho, Vitória, Alegria and Carmo), and a seminar. Strategically located between the municipalities of Lisbon and Loures, it had at the time important connections crossing it, such as part of the first motorway connecting to the north; and in the south the first ring of the city connecting Moscavide (a locality nearby with the airport; and at East the train line Sacavém-Benfica (a Lisbon's borough).

Conceived as a satellite city, Portela's current physical borders are mostly speedways, connecting it with Lisbon and other sites and in that sense, it can be seen as an interpretation of Howard's Garden-City – replacing the railway and the train with roads and cars, and the houses with blocks of flats. It has a centre as well from where everything else is organized. That centre though, has an ambiguous character. It is not the park that Howard envisioned and, like in medieval cities, it has a church, but it became slightly peripheral, stressing the importance (both in terms of position and scale) of the shopping centre. Together with other facilities such as tennis and football courts, the centre does not stress the importance of intensifying a sense of collectivity but promotes the occasional encounter of those sharing the same interests. What seems to join Mumford and Francisco Silva's understandings

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about the meaning of sharing the same territory is what both saw in the principles of the Neighbourhood Unit, of which he was an advocate, an instrument to enable occasional association as well as to promote “freedom, pleasure, and effectiveness in meeting the needs of family life”, “the only practical answer to the gigantism and inefficiency of the over centralized metropolis” (Mumford, 1968: 70-72) that, if nothing else, would be justified in economic terms. Mumford counters this: “The fact that many of the significant activities of the city are occasional ones, and lie outside the neighbourhood, or that a large part of an adult’s life may be spent far beyond his own domestic precincts, does not lessen the importance of neighbourhood functions. Nor does the coming and going of population of a big city lessen the formative result of good neighbourhood design” (Mumford, 1968: 73).

Portela could be a satellite city in its very beginning; a district, since the sprawl of Lisbon led to a gradual homogenization of the territory changing the logical relationship between centre and periphery; or even a Neighbourhood Unit. However, the project does not reassemble the modern principles of zoning or follow any kind of Functionalist logic of this sort. In fact it does not try to achieve an ideal combination of work, dwelling and leisure in a perfect, if not autonomous, environment, nor a non-segregated social equilibrium. Louis Wirth suggested that the city dweller only became a neighbour if forced, reinforcing the idea that the metropolis does not develop on the basis of proximity relations. However, the theme of the “urban village” remains an important issue in current analysis, theoretical debates and actual proposals. The urban is at the heart of an enlarged and ever-renewed sociability and needs to address and adapt to multiple lifestyles. The urban village, as a concept, is interpreted in a different way, through the strong image of the blocks that tie together the all complex.

The structure of the urban plan constitutes what Kenneth Frampton coined of “megaform as urban landscape”, a “form-giving potential of certain kinds of horizontal urban fabric capable of affecting some kind of topographic transformation in the megapolitan landscape” (Frampton: 1999, 16).

### ***The block: “the reality of the future”<sup>7</sup>***

It was around the years from 1920 to 1930, that the design of collective housing became part of a clear international agenda for architects, urbanists and other professionals. Architectural typology was, to a large extent, bound up with the whole idea of the city. From Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse to Hilberserimer’s Vertical City and from Gropious’ studies for city dwellings to May’s urban design in Frankfurt, the residential schemes of those years were indissolubly linked to radical perspectives for

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<sup>7</sup> From an add to the housing complex “Parque dos Príncipes”.

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the renovation of the city. The new modern movement represented both a style and social break; and assumed a symbolic role indicating a real and emphatic shift in how life was to be lived.

With a few exceptions, European architects have remained faithful to the modern movement in one form or another ever since its emergence as a dominant force, so much so that “modernism has effectively become the vernacular in Europe” (Doubilet et al., 1999: 8). Although in a variety of ways architects draw upon the whole history of modern architecture and therefore in order to understand their work it is necessary to understand the legacy of modernism that shapes the intellectual and physical context within which they build.

The block owes more to Hilbersmeier than Alvalade project. In fact, the original design provided aerial passages that linked housing, the commercial centre and the transport stops, with a 2m width. Nevertheless, the aerial passages were never built, and the reasons are yet to be found.

### ***The dwelling: “the nobility of the past”<sup>8</sup>***

The same applies to Fernando Silva who designed apparently modernist blocks, perpendicular to the streets. Paradoxically, behind their strong socialist aesthetics, the flats have generous areas and, were considered at the time to have high standard materials, and clearly propose a bourgeois lifestyle, implying what we would like to call a new “code of civility”, one century after “The Gentleman’s House”: there are proper parking places, collective rooms specially thought for the owners’ meetings, clothes were not to be hanged outside, there were guest toilets and a separation of the bedrooms by gender and the eventually study-room, rescuing some Victorian principles of privacy at home. But are those same external aesthetics that give a certain recognizable identity to Portela, a certain feeling of belonging to, of being part of that same community of people behind those carefully designed stripes. Fernando Silva provides a notion that a sense of belonging to a space could be achieved through a certain coherence of architectural expression, both through the general plan and through the individual design of buildings. What people can share is unbuilt, it is rather a lifestyle.

The project emphasises the intimacy of each dwelling, and public spaces in the rest of the plan suggest a de-problematization of the urban organisation of certain sociability. Individualisation does not necessarily refer to individualism, but rather to the possibility of producing an identity-related space for all. This desire may even extend to a reconsideration of the boundaries between public space and private space. The question of de-territorialisation does not address simply the social question, by assuming a mono-functional territory it also expresses a will to extend the city to all its inhabitants and stresses the importance of an idea of diversity on a broader scale. In a sense it accounts for the unavoidable importance of the city centre and the impossibility of creating an autonomous district

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<sup>8</sup> From an advertisement of the housing complex “Parque dos Príncipes”.

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given the contemporary way of living. What happens to local facilities when increasingly both partners in a couple work full time? Who uses those local facilities on a daily basis?

The blocks define the streets very precisely, while the rows give continuity and structure to the overall plan, creating visual relations with the surroundings and introducing a variety into the urban fabric, thereby establishing a different system of hierarchies and relations. While the overall plan resembles early modernist schemes of parallel rows, unlike it (which progressively tended to abandon the traditional relation block-street to favour alternatively blocks placed on site according to sun exposure, rather than following an existent pattern) the blocks follow the system of streets through a kind of platô.

### ***"Absorbing modernity": when upper classes rescue modernism***

The strength of Portela project lies in its reflection on urban design as a discipline, rejecting any strategies derived from fixed assumptions, establishing a dialogue with modernity and, at the same time, reinterpreting some of its formal proposals, and challenging some of its propositions and ambitions.

Addressing the unfinished task of imagining post-modern democracy, democracy in an age of mass media, technical instrumentality, commodification, and social heterogeneity, Fernando Silva, far ahead of his own time looked for ways of conceiving how the modern urban life should be lived, responding to the irreducible diversity of identity, adequate to the connectedness of power, the politically uncompromising consumer culture of global capitalism, at the same time "instructing" Portela's inhabitants of what he might imagine it was a good "code of civility".

After more than 40 years of its completion, and although this debate was brought to stage some decades ago, the ghost of community is still obscuring urban debates and suggesting the return to old models. Likewise Portela keeps its pertinence as it still addresses most of the discussions on housing and urbanism, centre and periphery, on privacy and community. Implicit in his project is the conviction that sociology itself is unable to define the city.

Was it a disbelief in utopia? We believe it was an optimistic way of looking at suburbia through the careful construction of what we could also call a *cadavre exquis*, a montage or collage that reinvented their original purpose:

*"First, the base is an address, to be connected with the infrastructural networks, both mass media and physical transport systems. It welcomes the car, the bypass and the free-way culture. The base should be designed as a drive-in, a drive-on, a drive-over. The convenience of the car and the beauty of the car are an elementary inspiration for its design."*

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*“Second, the need for individuality, intimacy and privacy. In the hectic contemporary life with hundreds of decisions and fragmented landscapes, it should be a safe and defined spot that prioritises enclosure before the view. The base is probably introverted and incorporates nature within instead of exposure to it (...) the entrance [is] the gate to the hectic life. The architecture is not a complicated composition but expresses simplicity and clarity and tries to catch the daylight without losing privacy.”*

(Adriaan Geuze)

### CONCLUSION: THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF IMAGE?

Modernism was probably never in a pure state in Portugal. However, its image was necessary to show how the country was modern despite the suffocating 40 years of dictatorship. Nevertheless, Portuguese “modernism” was always a post-modernism, a reinvention of its principles, a reconfiguration of its ideas, but a special combination, many times eclectic, of different design reasoning.

Portela could be regarded as a collage where the paradoxical design of modern urban blocks and the traditional urban design were reinvented in a new whole that clearly neglected any idea of *existez minimum*, both in terms of areas and spatial distribution and/or circulation. The idea of a modern lifestyle was welcome. It involved the car, the garage, the lift, the motorway, and even the stereotyped anonymous character of architecture - as opposed to the ‘ideal’ of detached suburban houses with private gardens. The design, so many times ignored by the elite of critics, was able to combine simultaneously qualities that contemporary urbanites look for: the anonymous, the intimacy of the domestic space and the *virgilian* dream. Furthermore, it represents an image of auto-representation of a high middle class and the “returnees” from the ex-colonies and of an idealized life style.

Portela, regarded as a symbol of anonymity, could look exactly as an answer, a refuge from an uncontrollable society, a materialization of an ideal of community, because it denies the ontological difference, the basic asymmetry within and between subjects, through its undifferentiated design, in the most socialist tradition. Nevertheless, and ironically, community has been preconized as an alternative to liberal individualism and to welfare capitalist society, where individuals are able to occupy private and separate spaces as propelled only by their own private desires.

The fact that so many of the arguments that made up modernist urbanism and architecture could be adapted more easily by the private sector and by more liberal urban politics is per se a contradiction of its original idealism. Modernism was fundamentally a vision of society remade through architecture. But what happens, what is left when there is nothing of utopic, epic or heroic? What remains when the moral and social ambitions of architecture vanish? Just architecture itself. Nevertheless, the nation

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rebuilt and represented itself through architecture that wanted to mirror a certain, and yet not so much, ideology.

### EPILOGUE

History can be sometimes very perverse. In 1974 there was a need of 600 000 dwellings<sup>9</sup>. A few days after the 25<sup>th</sup> of April's revolution, 1000 inhabitants from Chelas, a very poor area in the outskirts of

Lisbon, squatted 23 new and empty housing blocks. Today there are in Portugal 735 000 empty dwellings, almost the reverse situation. Slums are still a reality and the number of homeless people is difficult to precise. If the city centre recovers from its slowly abandonment in the last decades, we might be experiencing a phenomenon of city shrinking and the gradual abandonment (?) of the suburbs. Are we on a borderline of a housing revolution of this kind, but with a much wider scale? Portela does not point out in that direction since it is as lively as it used to be. For that reason it stands as an object of reflection on many of the (still) current debates about the historical centre versus the suburbs, the compact city versus city sprawl, and might inform further urban strategies.

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<sup>9</sup> This reality was so well known that it was even part of a private promoter's add in 1975.

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