74-14
SAAL AND ARCHITECTURE

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Kaleidoscopic memories of “mutual learning” process on SAAL operation of Relvinha neighbourhood

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The SAAL process in Coimbra didn’t have the same impact it had in Porto, Lisbon, Setúbal and Algarve. In Coimbra, five neighbourhood associations joined the SAAL, however, within these five neighbourhoods, only one passed from the project phase to the construction one. Relvinha’s residents conquered the right to decent housing, through self-help construction and external aid of different groups. Its residents had technical support from the SAAL technical brigade, with whom had meetings to discuss which project best suited their needs. The neighbourhood had the support of cultural groups, student groups, groups of foreign volunteers and some companies of construction material. The period between 1974 and 1976 is remembered as a dense time in which was developed a “mutual learning” among the residents and all the groups that supported the neighbourhood. This text seeks to understand how this neighbourhood was the unique in Coimbra that reached the support of diverse groups and pass to the last phase of the project – construction and conclusion of the houses within the framework of SAAL – through the memories of the residents and members of different groups that supported them.

Starting from the research, carried out under the Master in anthropology, which intended to focus on the memories of residents of the neighbourhood of Relvinha (belonging to the Civil Parish Council of Eiras area in the municipality of Coimbra) during the period between 1954 and 1976, I will present some of the reasons for a higher level of participation of the residents of this neighbourhood, compared to other neighbourhoods in the city of Coimbra during the period 1974-1976 and I will focus on “mutual learning” (Baía, 2012).

The demands and actions of urban struggles during the two years that followed the 25 April, 1974, have focused, besides the issue of accommodation, on areas such as education, health, transport and creation of community facilities.

The occupations of houses, the fight against the subletting, the participation in residents’ commissions and associations and the involvement of some neighbourhoods in the SAAL process were some of the ways that the movements of residents met to improve housing conditions. I will focus more on SAAL process, particularly on SAAL operation of Relvinha in Coimbra.
The SAAL was a project/process created by a joint decree of the Ministry of Internal Administration and the Ministry of Social Equipment and Environment, proposed by the Secretary of State for Housing and Urban Planning Nuno Portas, and approved on July 31, 1974. This governmental project was the most visible face of state intervention during the PREC (Ongoing Revolutionary Process), to try to resolve the serious housing needs of a large number of families, crossed the notion of the right to housing with the right to the city and place, advocating the maintenance of the poor residents in neighbourhoods located in city centers and non-refoulement to suburbs and distributed responsibility for the management and control of operations by the technicians and the populations (Rodrigues, 1999, p. 49).

The work of José António Bandeirinha constitutes the major reference today for a better understanding of different perspectives discussed at national and international level around the “architecture of the 25th April.” According to Bandeirinha, this period “corresponded by unusual methodological contents and by the quality of many of the examples constructed to a period of our recent architectural culture most debated and referenced throughout the world” (Bandeirinha, 2007).

A dispatch emitted by the First Constitutional Government on 27th October, 1976, gave the city councils the control and definition of SAAL ongoing operations, from where the greatest obstacles to SAAL had emerged. In practice, this dispatch provoked the extinction of SAAL.

The dwellers movement and the SAAL process that had emerged in Coimbra did not have the same impact comparing to other cities. Most of the neighbourhood associations had weak organizations, except neighbour associations that adhered to SAAL and were marked for years by poverty and poor housing conditions: the neighbourhoods of Relvinha, Conchada, Fonte do Bispo and Quinta da Nora. Of these neighbourhoods, only one passed from planning stage to the construction stage - the Relvinha neighbourhood, whose residents have earned the right to adequate housing, replacing the wooden barracks, where they lived for 20 years, by real houses.

This research focused on the memories of informants from the period before 1954, when the majority were still children and adolescents and living in the area of the old train station. They shared a childhood of poverty, carrying out several familiar survival strategies. Hunger, floods, lack of housing
conditions were part of the routine of these children.

The familiar survival strategies reported can be considered forms of “everyday resistance”, concept developed by James Scott to designate the type of resistance carried out by Sedaka peasants in Malaysia that are different from forms of open resistance, such as strikes and demonstrations (Scott, 1985). The forms of “everyday resistance” identified were: the black market during World War II, hanging outside of the tram, exchange ration tickets by other products, steal railway line coal to light the stove, as referred by one of the residents.

In the Preliminary Project of Beautification of Urbanization and Extension of the City of Coimbra, presented by De Groër in 1948, it was expected the city’s growth to the north, which occurred in the 50’s. This is when started the enlargement of the Fernão de Magalhães Avenue to the area of the train station (Old Station, also known as Coimbra B).

This extension of the limit of the urban agglomeration of Coimbra followed the zoning policy, the division of the territory into zones that would be destined for housing, industry and services. This division also divided the territory according to social class, destining normally the most remote areas for the industry and for the habitation of the working class.

Twenty-eight families living in the Old Railway Station area had their houses demolished in 1954 due to construction of the Fernão de Magalhães Avenue. After being displaced and lived in chamber neighbourhoods for about three years, they were relocated in 1957 by the City Council in twenty-eight houses (barracks) of wood, provisionally, but which ran until 1974. The image used by one of the informants to describe this construction gives life to the avenue, “When the avenue got there, it demolished everything” (Jorge Vilas da Fonseca, 2009).

Between 1957 and 1974, the everyday life collected in the life narratives, continued to be everyday poverty. The wooden barracks offering very precarious living conditions, because they have been degrading as time went by. The fact that the floor of the houses was made of cement, and the rain went inside the houses, there was a high degree of humidity, the houses were cold and mud that formed in the small streets between the wooden barracks increased the level of unhealthy and potentiated the onset of various diseases. The lack of electricity and water and
hunger were other problems pointed out by the informants.

The negative aspects of the change of houses geographical location identified by residents were the increasing distance from the river, the Choupal Park, the city center and the isolation of the neighbourhood.

The student movement from 1958 to 1974 provoked several episodes that shook up the city of Coimbra, from academic crises, demonstrations, strikes, that led police loads and arrests. Some residents began attending spaces where they met members of the opposition movements to the fascist regime, such as cafes, taverns and republics (communitarian houses of students). These spaces were places that joined students, intellectuals, workers, where they discussed politics, which allowed some residents to have a greater awareness of their social conditions and gaining will to change the living conditions of the neighbourhood and to have access to information, otherwise, it was fenced due to their scanty schooling.

One resident of the neighbourhood refered two actions that occurred in the late sixties, that exceed the forms of “everyday resistance". These actions were carried out at night and clandestinely: the breaking of a septic tank, which content fell on the entrance of the building of the vice President of the Coimbra City Council and the placement of garbage bags on the stairs of the house of the mayor of Coimbra.

Following the 25 April a window of opportunities oppened and the Relvinha neighbourhood did not miss and joined the SAAL project. In the municipality of Coimbra, in 1975, there were four ongoing Operations that intended to house worthily 260 families in four districts of the city: in the neighbourhood of Relvinha, Conchada, Fonte do Bispo and Quinta da Nora (Conselho Nacional do SAAL, 1976).

Of these four neighbourhoods, the Relvinha neighbourhood was the unique that adopted the necessary procedures to accelerate the construction process of 34 houses and the only one to pass from the design phase to the construction phase.

The SAAL brigade which designed the project and followed up the work was composed by architect Carlos Almeida and by engineers Simões Pereira and Carlos Tavares. The residents decided to join the self-building, which consists in the active participation of
the residents in the house building process. According to one of the residents, the architect Carlos Almeida “wanted to accelerate it as soon as possible because he said, and well, that it was necessary to start to do something, with funds or not, for people to believe, if not, everything was ruined” (Oliveira, 2003, p. 81).

Nuno Portas, Secretary of State for Housing and Urban Planning after the 25 April, creator of the SAAL project defended, according to José Antonio Bandeirinha, “it was necessary to work with all the physical and psychological implications of the action, for such appropriation could be more intense” (Bandeirinha, 2007, p. 122). Some SAAL operations resorted to self-building as one of the forms of participation of the residents in the work costs. The self-building was not consensual and was refused on various committees and residents associations in various SAAL operations, as well as by several architects who considered self-building as a “double exploitation of the worker”. However, some neighbourhoods joined the self-building, as a way to reduce the final cost of the work, in particular the Relvinha neighbourhood.

One informant describes the self-building process:

“People putting brick, women, children, everyone there to help. It was beautiful and then the people came from the outside of the neighbourhood, students from various countries. It was a great involvement. (...) It was one of the most beautiful moments in the history of the Relvinha neighbourhood” (José Fernando Martins de Almeida, 2009).

The neighbourhood obtained support of student groups, cultural groups, parties and catholic groups, companies, besides that, they advocate that they were never colonized by any group and followed an independent path. They had the support of a group called Companions Builders, formed by foreign volunteers who participated in the neighbourhood construction process.

Some people interviewed from these external groups and from the neighbourhood reported that there was a “mutual learning” among different cultures, different classes, different knowledges. The “mutual learning” is an emic concept that I developed from my research into Relvinha which is related to a mutual learning among residents and external groups to the neighbourhood. From these groups also existed a learning process, because they had began knowing a reality that was sealed for them and they had to learn new ways to communicate their knowledge. A member of the Companions Builders refers to the importance of realizing that in the 70’s, Europe had such different realities:

“Knowing how people live and what difficulties they face. Knowing the reality of the country. All this was interesting to see up close, talk to people. This is one of the interesting aspects, see what life was like in a wooden barracks neighbourhood. It was a very poor neighbourhood, with poor and marginalized hygienic conditions.” (Hans-Richard Jahnke, 2009).

One of the persons belonging to a group of medical students who intensively collaborated with the neighbourhood refers to this process of mutual learning:

“And then the things that remain in memory forever. The conversations with the women there. It was interesting. Were completely different experiences and that at the time were completely new things for us.” (Letícia Ribeiro, 2009).

Mutual learning is also present in the testimony of this informant:

“Creating something that everyone aspired. All fighting together to achieve this goal and then the crossroads of cultures, of different degrees, students, young people from other countries, illiterate, people without any culture. Everyone there with the same goal. And that was enriching.” (José Fernando Martins de Almeida, 2009).

Conclusion:

The Association of Relvinha residents collaborated with associations of neighbourhoods of Coimbra that have joined the SAAL, but whose projects were never constructed. Relvinha residents also collaborated with workers committees and
with the Agricultural Cooperative of Barcouço which sold the cooperative's products in the neighbourhood. The inhabitants of Relvinha participated in local and national demonstrations for the right to housing, against extinction of SAAL and in the most decisive moments of the period between 1974 and 1976, taking position and moving to strategic sites in the region and the city (Aerodrome of Cernache and Bridge of Santa Clara).

The greater involvement and participation of the residents of the Relvinha neighbourhood after 25 April is related to different factors.

The fact that they come together from the area of the old station and have to resort to various familiar survival strategies, created a strong bond among residents and a high sense of identification with the neighbourhood. According to Amalia Signorelli, who studied the Pietralata neighbourhood that was dislodged from the center of Rome and relocated in wooden barracks on the outskirts of the city, the shared memory of common needs felt during these periods and the importance of place, may be reasons that could contribute for further identification of the residents with the neighbourhood, contributing to the existence of a closer union of the residents.

The passage of a daily resistance to a new type of resistance, even before the 25 April, forms a common memory of some struggles, which may have influenced later a strong involvement and a larger organization.

I think that the historical and geographical context are very important, since, according to informants, there was more contact between different social groups and classes at a time, in "long 60's", in a city that marked a generation and that originated a 'mutual learning' repertoires of struggle, forms of organization, intersection of different ideas and political experiences. As the residents of the Relvinha neighbourhood before 25 April had contact with the student movement and opposition movements have better use of the window of opportunity that opened up following the 25 April, using social networks already established. These networks allowed contact with other groups who agreed to help the residents of Relvinha quarter on resolution of technical and bureaucratic issues, arranging various ways of raising-funds to support the self-building, such as sales stickers, concerts organization, information sessions.

Finally, I would like to stress the importance of the study of this period for the understanding of Portuguese society. The SAAL process is essential whenever discussing housing policies, even today. It would be interesting through the use of oral history to collect testimonies of the various actors in this process (architects, social workers, engineers and especially the neighbourhoods residents) and study operation by operation, their variations, provoked by different contexts, like the city, the region, the architect the association or committee of residents. I think that a multidisciplinary project (involving, sociologists, anthropologists, historians and architects) that could cover all operations could provide information to better understand this process and its specific features and this period so complex that, in my view, can give clues for the present and for the future and permit us to ask what is the role of architecture in society at a time when the housing question is in discussion again.
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