Housing for the greatest number in Lisbon: Olivais and Telheiras

DOCTORAL DEGREE IN ARCHITECTURE

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Throughout the 1940s, the shortage of housing in the metropolitan area of Lisbon increased inordinately, leading to the appearance of illegal dwellings and shanty towns in many areas of the city: in 1959, there was an overall shortage of 140,000 homes. To solve the situation, the Municipal Council of Lisbon (CML) created the Urban Studies Office (GEU, 1954) and the Technical Department of Housing (GTH, 1960), to build new housing with affordable rents for low-income households.

Olivais Norte (1960-1972), with 1,889 houses for 8,500 inhabitants on 40 ha, was conceived as a smaller scale trial for the major operation that would follow it to the south, the neighbourhood of Olivais Sul (1963-1972), providing 7,996 dwellings for 38,250 inhabitants on 186 ha.

In 1971, efforts were made to create, within the ambit of the municipality, a business structure, the Public Company for Urban Development of Lisbon (EPUL) to tackle the housing shortage for the urban middle class, since the GTH was primarily focused on the more disadvantaged. Occupying an area of 63.5 ha, the Telheiras Sul (1974) plan included 3,300 dwellings for 14,400 inhabitants.

With great autonomy, 49 teams of architects had the opportunity to explore programmatic innovations and new ways of living, adapting the homes to manners and customs within the context of the minimal areas and limited budgets.

Olivais Sul, 1970s, espólio Vítor Figueiredo IRHU/SIPA, vf-foto 009814

The neighborhoods of Olivais Norte, Olivais Sul and Telheiras Sul are paradigmatic examples of the Portuguese State's response to the housing shortage that was acknowledged in Lisbon, in the period of the post-WWII. Because of their size, their role in the city's plans for expansion eastward, on land bordering the city, and because the architectural design of the various buildings and facilities were entrusted to different teams of professionals, these neighbourhoods provided unprecedented conditions for exploring modern planning in Portugal and made the GTH and EPUL laboratories for urban and housing development.

Telheiras Sul, 1988, PT/AMLSB/CMLSBAH/PCSP/003/PVA/000965

Olivais and Telheiras represent important moments in the history of the planned expansion of the city of Lisbon. This is evident in the way it managed to surpass the intermittent and punctual architectural housing production, promoting solutions to the housing question at the city scale. The fact that they succeeded one another chronologically enables a critical reading to be made of the evolving interpretation of the Modern Movement in Lisbon, from the rejection of the traditional city lexicon, to the reconciliation with history; from an initial period when society was divided between two extremes – a wealthy social group that held power, and an extremely poor, labouring or rural, working population – to a time when the middle class arose, alongside and in step with the democratization of access to higher education.

Featuring a varied catalogue of architectural trends, this set of projects demonstrated extensive structural, formal, and spatial experimentation that revealed the concerns and quest by their designers to respond to the need for housing for the greatest number. Although the buildings were not pioneering in introducing formal and architectural vocabularies, Olivais and Telheiras were paradigmatic cases of the search for modernity in building design, as an attitude that values universality, rationality, and a fair and effective response to new social and technological orders.

Olivais and Telheiras have been assimilated and, today, are a consolidated part of the city. Designed and occupied in just over thirty years, their consolidation as urban territories, developing their own character and a recognizable identity in such short time, is evidence of their coherent conceptual frameworks. Regardless of the differences in their intended objectives, the models that oriented each of the interventions, the circumstantial frameworks within which they were implemented, and their ability to embody a spirit of place – in contrast with the anonymity of many of the mass housing developments commonly located on the outskirts of large cities – are, in themselves, a sign of success.

The research is being carried out in order to analyse the processes inherent to the evolution of the concept of comfort in the living space of case studies, and respective social and architectural transformation, from its origin to the present day, exploring the relationship between the interior architectural design and the socioeconomic categories for which buildings were designed and later occupied, while identifying the national and international cultural influences on their production.