Introduction

During the year of 1976 there was an unprecedented interest of the international architectural media in Portuguese architecture\(^1\), which up until that year, had been seldom published abroad.\(^2\) The reason for this sudden interest of the architectural milieu in Portugal was the works produced under the aegis of the so-called SAAL process, an ephemeral housing programme created in the aftermath of the Portuguese revolution of 25 April 1974.\(^3\) Among

\(^1\) The May/June 1976 issue of the influential French magazine L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, directed by Bernard Huet, was dedicated to Portuguese architecture with the theme: “Portugal Year II”. Some months after, the November 1976 issue of the prominent Italian magazine Casabella, directed by Bruno Alfieri, featured a long account by Francesco Marconi titled “Portugal – Operação SAAL”. In the following month, the December 1976 issue of Lotus International, directed by Pierluigi Nicolin, published Álvaro Siza’s project for the São Victor neighbourhood.

\(^2\) Portuguese architecture, before 1976, was mainly known among a close circuit of Spanish and, to a lesser extent, Italian architects and architecture magazines. Arguably the first appearance of a Portuguese architect work in the architectural media mainstream was Vittorio Gregotti, “Architettura Recenti Di Alvaro Siza,” Controspazio no. 9 (September 1972).

\(^3\) SAAL is the acronym for Serviço Ambulatório de Apoio Local (Service for Mobile Local Support). It was launched in 6 August 1974, in the second provisional government of Portugal’s revolutionary period. After the first constitutional elections, in 1976, the first elected government determined the program’s obsolesce by changing completely the power relations embedded in the principles that had originated it, in 1974. Only part of the on-going projects would be eventually built. For a brief account
the projects featured, the architectural media showed a special interest in the SAAL operations developed in the city of Porto, where the work of Alvaro Siza, among others, arguably epitomized a novel approach to urban renewal.

What was, then, so appealing in these works? What was the aspect or the reasons that triggered this unforeseen interest in Portuguese architecture? The answer, I would argue, is relatively straightforward and entails the concatenation of three factors: revolution, grassroots movements, and participatory processes in architecture and urban design. The concurrence of these factors was, in fact, timely at a moment of widespread disciplinary and political debate. Now, what was the extent to which the Portuguese experience in the revolutionary period of 1974-1976 contributed to the on-going disciplinary debate? Was it a novel aesthetical approach? A new design methodology? Was it a new commitment of the discipline with social change? In this paper, I will argue that the fundamental aspects of that contribution were triggered by a reassessment of the power relation between architects and grassroots empowerment in planning and design processes. Through the discussion of the interplay between dissent and consensus-building in the SAAL process, I will illustrate how the architects working in Porto’s SAAL operations negotiated their position as authors/artists with grassroots movements and produced an hybrid architectural outcome that aspired at creating a synthesis of disciplinary autonomy with the vital impulses emerging from the collective and the everyday; a contaminated total work of art.

**Dissent: Challenging Portugal’s Fado**

To frame my account on the architectural outcome of Porto’s SAAL operations, I will first discuss how successive moments of dissent were instrumental to enable a paradigm shift in the country’s housing policies and, arguably, in the architecture discipline itself. Dissenters, according to Cass R. Sunstein, challenge and combat the emergence of three phenomena determined by informational and reputational influences: conformity, social cascades and group polarization. Hence, doing what others do, concerning about what will the neighbours think, or travelling in herds, as it were, are typical phenomena challenged by the dissenter.

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4 Ibid., 9.
In Portugal, however, dissent seems to be at odds with the character of its people. Some of the tokens of the Portuguese identity, the *fado* and *saudade*, the British traveller Aubrey Bell noted in 1912, resonate with a certain tendency for indolent resignation with the present and discouragement from an active pursuit of social change. Or, according to the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, with a tendency for self-punishment as the consequence of a bad consciousness about their own passivity. However, this resignation and apathy, was challenged on 25 April 1974 with a military, first, and then civic uprising that ended 48 years of dictatorial governments.

**The First Moment of Dissent: a Carnation in the Rifle Barrel**

Since 1926, Portuguese society had been living with repressed political and civic rights, first governed by an authoritarian military government from 1926 until 1933, and afterwards under the *Estado Novo* (New State) dictatorship from 1933 until 1974. In the 1960s, a technocratic sector of the regime advocated a swift process for the country’s modernization, which ensued next to increasing political tensions triggered by the regime’s anachronistic perseverance in keeping its colonial empire in Africa, fighting a war that created increasing discontent among an important faction of the military. Thereafter, the regime faced growing opposition and dispute in the 1960s and at the end of the decade it could no longer hide the internal opposition to its policies, which became conspicuous in labour activism, student protest and political mobilization. In the early 1970’s, those tensions and conflicts relentlessly grew fuelled by an economic crisis caused by the drainage of capital demanded by the African war effort and to overcome the social and economical problems sparked by the oil crisis of 1973.

It was in this context that a group of junior military officials organized in the Movement of the Armed Forces (Movimento das Forças Armadas - MFA) challenged the dominance of conformity and triggered the collapse of the regime on 25 April 1974, through an almost bloodless military coup which would become know as the Carnation Revolution (Revolução dos Cravos), beautifully epitomized by the image of a child depositing a blooming carnation in a rifle barrel. This was, then, the first moment of dissent, which would be deeply influential to determine the launching and the architectural outcome of the SAAL process.

**The Second Moment of Dissent: SAAL and the Social Organization of the Demand**

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An immediate outcome of the 1974 revolution was the emergence of demonstrations of public unrest fostered by the poor material and social living conditions in which the worse-off class lived.

The first provisional government after the revolution, formed on 16 May 1974, appointed Nuno Portas, an architect, as Secretary of State of Housing and Urbanism arguably with the intention of neutralizing the social unrest sparked by the squatters’ movements and the ill-housed proletariat. According to Nuno Portas, the minister responsible for his Secretary of State envisioned a pragmatic military approach to it, such as the construction of prefabricated barracks that could solve the problems as swiftly and cheaply as possible. Portas, however, refused to comply with solutions of this nature and, instead, developed further some ideas on incremental housing and self-construction that he had been researching on since the late 1960s, chiefly inspired by the theories of John Turner, Manuel Castells, and Chombard de Lauwe, consisting in fostering grassroots initiatives in housing policies. The outcome of this strategy was the publication, on 6 August 1974, of a government’s resolution creating the SAAL (the Portuguese acronym for Service for Mobile Local Support), which was a break with the past regarding the social organization of the demand. Instead of a top-down housing policy determined by a centralized agency, the SAAL programme, according to the text of the resolution, aimed at contributing with technical and financial aid to support "the initiative of the population living in poor conditions to foster their collaboration in the transformation of their own neighbourhoods, investing their own latent resources." The fundamentals of the SAAL operations, however, were chiefly modelled to combat the housing problems signalled in Lisbon and in the neighbouring cities of its industrial belt. These problems, resonant with “third world” cases of slum upgrading publicized by John Turner, for example, were mainly related with communities of relatively recent rural migrants living in slums located in peripheral areas. They were, however, inconsistent with the specific problems of the second biggest city of the country, Porto. There, the housing problems were epistemologically distinct; the communities had a long history of living in the city, though in

7 The declarations of Nuno Portas about this can be seen in João Dias, As Operações SAAL, Documentary (Midas, 2007).
poor sanitary conditions, and they were fighting not only for the right to have decent houses but also for their right to live in the city.

This was thus the context for the emergence of a third moment of dissent, one in which a group of well-knit network of technicians working in the city of Porto would challenge some of the subsumed principles embedded in Portas’ resolution, e.g. self-construction and other methodological approaches designed for the rural world or suburban areas.

The Third Moment of Dissent: A Critical Confrontation With the Real.

Porto’s SAAL operations developed a strategy that Alexandre Alves Costa called “a confrontation with real”, where the outcome of power negotiation between technicians and dwellers is conspicuous.\(^{10}\) To illustrate this, I will summarize the architectural outcome of four SAAL operations in that city, which were arguably those more celebrated by the architectural milieu: Leal, Lapa, Antas and São Victor.

Leal SAAL Operation

In the Leal operation, the successive projects developed by the technical brigade delivered a contingent answer to the development of the local grassroots movement. As their claims for more available land and buildings evolved, so the brigade would produce and discuss the projects for the new sites. They suggested the rehabilitation and renovation of existing houses (Zone 1) and designed new housing for vacant plots (Zone 2 and 3).\(^{11}\) The projects designed by this brigade show a careful morphological response to the topography, and a clear goal to recreate in both shape and scale vernacular urban spaces such as streets, alleys, and courtyards. Typologically, the buildings are predominantly row houses with two floors. This option for a low-rise independent house resulted, according to the coordinator of the brigade, Sergio Fernandez, from “the factors that the population itself thinks are important.”\(^{12}\) It is, thus, an operation of careful urban renewal, where the architectural outcome preserves the fundamental spatial characteristics of the neighbourhood, as well as its social cohesion. The projects accommodate spaces for the collective and at the same time, answers individual demands for ownership. Hence, the architectural outcome of

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\(^{11}\) Eventually, only the new houses designed for Zone 2 would be built.

this brigade seemingly mitigates the tensions of the power relation between the technicians and the dwellers.

**Lapa SAAL Operation**

At a nearby location, the Lapa brigade, coordinated by Alfredo Matos Ferreira, developed a plan also with three nuclei. One was the rehabilitation of the existing Lapa neighbourhood and the other two consisted of new housing ensembles built on each side of the neighbouring valley. In this case, however, the new building ensembles were defined by clear-cut slabs (phase A and phase B), though their distribution was also carefully responsive to the topography, either replicating it in the shape of the roofs, or mirroring it. This strategy yielded a dramatic interplay between the new buildings and the neighbouring area, as can be seen in the building facing the railway tracks in the southern part of the zone. The members of the brigade argued that this outcome was produced by a “formula for a housing unit which could be used in any site, which would be both horizontally and vertically modular”. This formula, they claimed, “would be able to create the uniformity cherished by the dwellers themselves in their desire for justice, while still allowing for further variations and changes determined by experience.”

Though the originality and ingenuity of the architectural outcome of Lapa’s brigade is evident in the project’s plans, sections and models, it was, the brigade contends, determined by the aspirations and desires of the dwellers.

**Antas SAAL Operation**

The project developed by the Antas brigade illustrates an operation that had to cope with the renewal of an emblematic case of Porto’s proletarian housing type, the so-called “ilhas” (islands), which in the last decades had been deemed for demolition for both sanitary reasons and real-estate speculation. After the revolution, the residents of the surviving “islands” in the Antas neighbourhood demanded to remain in the same area, but with a betterment of living conditions. The technical brigade, coordinated by Pedro Ramalho, surveyed the

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13 The proletarian 'island' (ilha) is a vernacular housing type ubiquitous in the city of Porto, and is basically defined by a set of small row houses with only one front grouped in the backyard of a middle class house, with a narrow open common courtyard linked to the street through a passage under the "main" house. The first 'islands' date back to the end of the eighteenth century, but were widespread with the belated, yet rapid industrialization of Porto at the last half of the nineteenth century and the real estate speculation associated with it.
existing “islands” and concluded that type of building “was not only a territorial unit but also part of a rich complex of social life.” They thus decided to preserve the rich communitarian life style triggered by the morphological qualities of the “corridor-island” type, eliminating the ghetto-character of the courtyard/corridors, though. To solve the overcrowding problem, some new units would be created in adjacent areas already cleared. In fact, this new units were conspicuously designed following organization principles clearly inspired by the “islands” type, thus revealing a keen determination in preserving formal resonances with the vernacular type. The layout of the houses, however, shows an inventive structure with split-levels articulating different street heights on both sides of the house, and the possibility to accommodate growth over time. The architectural outcome of the Antas brigade shows a novel translation of vernacular references, which seemingly resonated with the fulfilment of the demands of the dwellers for an upgrading of their living conditions, preserving their social relations, though.

São Victor SAAL Operation
The project developed by the technical brigade coordinated by Álvaro Siza for the São Victor neighbourhood was the most published and discussed SAAL operation. In fact, the neighbourhood became an epitome for what was at stake in Porto’s SAAL operations. It conflated some of the problems mentioned in the cases discussed above: severe sanitary problems, overcrowding, ghettoization, material decadence and compulsive demolitions. But it also had their qualities: a strong community life and a central location. The plan of the technical brigade defined two different zones: one in the São Victor “islands” block, and the other in the Senhora das Dores block. The strategy was straightforward. In the São Victor zone, as in the Antas neighbourhood, a thorough renovation was planned, preserving the “islands” type and improving its sanitary conditions. In the Senhora das Dores zone, a more contingent approach was pursued, with different types of intervention comprising building new housing ensembles, filling in gaps, and renovating existing buildings. Eventually, the São Victor brigade would only renovate three houses and build ten new row houses in the middle of the block, on the area cleared for the construction of a parking lot. Curiously enough, in this case the new row houses showed a conspicuous detachment from the vernacular housing types. Its references were neither the “islands” nor Porto’s middle-class housing types, rather a deliberate option to recuperate the models of the 1920s and

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1930s modernist mass housing, in order to emphasize the fragmentary character of the intervention. There was, thus, a conscious ambivalent approach in the São Victor brigade. On the one hand, the renovation of the “islands” seemingly appeasing the dwellers’ claim for an in-site betterment of their living conditions, and, on the other hand, an architectural approach apparently conflictive with the resident’s demands.

**Architects, Power and Grassroots Empowerment: Conflicts and consensus-building**

These projects demonstrate that the influence of a self-conscious disciplinary apparatus cannot be overlooked in the assessment of the architectural outcome in the participatory processes of Porto’s SAAL operations. The confrontation with the real, however, would also contribute for an ambivalent account of power relations in citizen’s participation in the design process. On the one hand, the architectural outcome is clearly determined and filtered by the codes of the discipline. On the other hand, the architects strive to frame their approach as the outcome of a consensus-building process, seemingly trying to conceal the tensions emerging from power relations and the conflictual negotiations stemming from it.

The problem was thus the definition of a methodological apparatus that would frame that process of transformation of the real and accommodate the aims and ambitions of the stakeholders in the participatory process, which were not necessarily coincident. For the grassroots movements, the SAAL operations were an opportunity for a swift upgrade in their living conditions, and their reference models were, in opposition to what some members of the technical brigades maintained, those of the middle class. Rather, for the architects, it became an opportunity to test the limits of disciplinary autonomy, participating in a process of social change.

This interplay between architects and grassroots movements brings about a delicate negotiation between the power of the first and the empowerment of the latter, which is vital to discuss the relation between participatory processes and architecture’s disciplinary autonomy. What is, then, the extent to which conflicts undermine this negotiation?

According to Bent Flyvberg, there are two main lines of thought related to this: one supported by the ideas of Jürgen Habermas and the other by Michel Foucauld’s. He contends "Habermas, among others, views conflict in society as dangerous, corrosive and potentially destructive of social order, and therefore in need of being contained and resolved. In a

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15 In the documentary "As Operações SAAL" some residents declared that when the architects asked them which kind of house they wanted, they just replied: "One like yours!”. Cf. Dias, *As Operações SAAL*.
Foucauldian interpretation, conversely, suppressing conflict is suppressing freedom, because the privilege to engage in conflict is part of freedom."\textsuperscript{16}

In the description of the projects discussed above, the technical brigades often referred to the designed outcome as a translation of the people's preferences. It was not, however, a consensual translation, but sometimes a rather critical and conflictive one. The emergence of conflicts between the stakeholders, however, though often muffled in the published accounts on the projects, was inevitable and, according to Siza, for example, not necessarily unwanted. Siza claimed that in the SAAL operations there was an urgent need to build, to confront all stakeholders in the process with a tangible outcome that would fuel the engagement of the grassroots movement in a shift towards a social organization of the demand for housing. Only then, he argued, a genuine dialogue could arise.\textsuperscript{17}

This strategy thus resonates with a deliberate resistance to conformity, which, concomitantly, often resulted in conflicts. In 1983, talking about his experience in the SAAL operations, Siza recalled that “the dwellers wanted the intervention of the architect but they didn’t easily accept architecture. Their attitude was sometimes authoritarian, they denied all awareness of the architect’s problems, they imposed their way of seeing and conceiving things. The dialogue was very contentious.” However, Siza argues, “to enter the real process of participation meant to accept the conflicts and not to hide or avoid them, but on the contrary to elaborate on them. These exchanges then become very rich, although hard and often difficult.”\textsuperscript{18}

By this token, and following the Foucauldian approach, architecture's disciplinary autonomy contributes to foster the empowerment of grassroots movements by actually exerting its power rather than shunning from doing it.

**Architectural hybridization as Gesamtkunstwerk**

I would thus argue that a process of consensus-building that accommodates the conflicts triggered by the interlocking relation between disciplinary autonomy and the everyday, generates an hybrid architectural outcome, both autonomous and rooted in life, which

\textsuperscript{16} Quoted in ibid., 86–87.

\textsuperscript{17} Álvaro Siza, “Architektur Und Partizipation,” in *5 Architekten Zeichnen Für Berlin*, ed. François Burkhardt (Berlin: Archibook Verlag, 1979), 118.

resonates with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s plea for a reconceptualization of the notion of total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk).

In his *Painting, Photography, Film*, published in 1925 as one of the volumes in the Bauhausbüche series, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy called for a purification of optical experiences, which should emerge when expressional elements and means are rooted in biological law, purposeful, unambiguous, pure, and not in the intention to produce art.\(^\text{19}\) He considered the Gesamtkunstwerk - architecture as the sum of all the arts, - a direct consequence of the triumph of specialization, which destroyed the wholeness of life. He thus argued that the Gesamtkunstwerk, as an organized addition of different specialities, could no longer satisfy the challenges of that day, because they were severed from the everyday; they were only concerned with personal standards and overlooked matters of universal concern. “What we need”, Moholy-Nagy thus contended, “[is] a synthesis of all the vital impulses spontaneously forming itself into the all-embracing Gesamtwerk (life) which abolishes all isolation, in which all individual accomplishments proceed from a biological necessity and culminate in a universal necessity.”\(^\text{20}\)

The hybridization of the architectural outcome in the projects developed by the SAAL brigades of Leal, Lapa, Antas and São Victor, bears witness to the vitality of the participatory process, and, I would argue, resonates with Moholy-Nagy’s appeal for a synthesis of all vital impulses into a work that is rooted in the life of a collective entity. Dissent and the negotiation of power relations, as inherent components of successful participatory processes, contribute to the Gesamtkunstwerk. Indeed, according to Álvaro Siza, “a participatory process moves within conflicts, tensions, convulsions, engagement, jolts, halts; it comprises mistakes and also its critique; it accumulates experience; it tends to globality.”\(^\text{21}\) It is, I would argue, a process that accepts contaminations, transforming these into constituents of a total work of art. The Gesamtkunstwerk becomes thus a contaminated Gesamtkunstwerk.

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\(^\text{20}\) Ibid. Original emphasis.