The SAAL Spring. Revolution, Housing and Bureaucracy in Portugal

Nelson Mota (Delft University of Technology)

Introduction
Through almost half-century, the politics of social housing championed by the totalitarian regime that ruled Portugal from 1928 until 1974 was designed to mitigate conflicts. With the revolutionary coup of April 25th 1974, this state of affairs would change swiftly but not lastingly. In the two eventful years of Portugal’s transition to a liberal democracy, the post-revolutionary governments exposed the country’s dilapidated housing stock, and implemented new policies to accommodate the urban poor. In this presentation I will examine one of these policies, the so-called SAAL process, and discuss its contribution to create an inclusive city, challenging the pervasive political tendency to render the working class invisible to the public eye.

Deus, Pátria e Família
António Salazar, the dictator that held the power for most of the dictatorship’s time (from 1932 until 1968), relied heavily on the regulatory power of residential architecture to construct the ideological agenda of the Estado Novo (New State) which was based on the trilogy Deus, Pátria e Família (God, Fatherland, and Family). Indeed, in 1944, after successfully safeguarding Portugal’s neutrality in the Second World War, Salazar stressed the importance of home ownership and independence for the preservation of the Portuguese family values. He argued,

“...The intimacy of family life demands for shelter, asks for isolation, in one word claims the house, the independent house, our house. [...] We are not interested in the big phalansteries. [...] For our independent custom, in favor of our moderate
Salazar’s pastoral view of the countryside and his scorn for the “big phalansteries” resonated with his drive to preserve the invisibility of the proletariat, promoting affordable housing in suburban settlements with patterns of inhabitation strongly inspired by rural social and spatial practices. He was not alone in this drive, though.

In the interwar period, the ideological framework of the Portuguese dictator abided noticeably on the political agenda of Mussolini’s fascism. Curiously enough, however, the affinity with Italy would continue in the aftermath of World War II, after the death of the Duce and the downfall of his dictatorship. Indeed, notwithstanding the different democratic legitimacy, the housing policies championed by Salazar’s regime resonated a great deal with those of the post-war Italian governments, especially the INA-Casa plan.

Like Salazar, Amintore Fanfani, the initiator of the INA-Casa plan, was a devout Roman Catholic whose religious beliefs strongly inspired his housing policies. In effect, both Salazar and Fanfani were militant anti-communists and active campaigning against “big phalansteries”. However, while Fanfani’s INA-Casa plan succeeded in producing approximately 400,000 dwellings over a period of fourteen years (1949-1963), Salazar’s regime was unable to deliver similar results. To cope with the housing shortage in Portugal, rather than launching a structured public housing program like Fanfani’s, the Estado Novo resorted to haphazard legislation to stimulate self-help housing, to rely on the agency of corporate interests, and to promote tailor-made housing programs for the main cities, Porto and Lisbon. While some of these initiatives produced noteworthy results at a local scale, the government’s policies would fall short in solving the housing shortage in Portugal, which was estimated to be, in 1960, between 460,000 and 600,000 dwellings.
The State failed consistently to prevent the growing speculation manipulated by the real estate sector, which was intimately connected with the bankers and the country’s biggest economic groups. In effect, the government’s shortsighted housing policies served well the private interests of those who controlled big chunks of land able to be urbanized. Furthermore, the regime succeeded in preserving the misery and the dire living conditions of the working class out of the urban bourgeoisie sight. However, the carefully planned invisibility of the proletariat would eventually end up being cracked on 25 April 1974.

The April 25\textsuperscript{th} 1974 Revolution and the SAAL Process

After forty-eight years of dictatorship, on 25 April 1974, a coup d’état led by a group of junior officials from the Portuguese Armed Forces overthrew the regime that ruled the country since 1926. The people swiftly backed up the military putsch invading the streets and celebrating the end of the dictatorship. The image of the military with white and red carnations put in their rifle’s barrel became a trademark of the Portuguese democratic revolution, also know as the Carnation Revolution.

In the aftermath of the revolution, from the last days of April through May, groups of ill-housed people squatted vacant houses in Lisbon. New squatting episodes followed suit in Porto. Further, in the end of May, a large group of residents living in social housing owned by the Municipality of Porto demonstrated in front of the town hall in protest against the repressive conditions in which they lived. These were groundbreaking events in a society that was accustomed to live under a regime that controlled collective manifestations and attached to the protection of private property an almost sacred contract.\textsuperscript{4}

The squatters and the emergence of organized groups of ill-housed residents were part and parcel of spontaneous grassroots movements that challenged the status quo that prevailed during the longue durée of the totalitarian regime. However, for those who led the revolutionary coup and were now in charge of the transition to democracy, the Movimento das
Forças Armadas (MFA, Movement of the Armed Forces), this sort of insurgent citizenship challenged their drive to establish a new political framework supported by democratic political parties, trade unions, and associations.\(^5\)

In order to contain the growing social unrest that grew after the 25 April coup and considering that a great deal of the proletariat lived in substandard conditions, the first provisional government, appointed by the MFA on 16 May 1974, started immediately preparing a new housing program to deliver affordable houses for the urban poor.\(^6\) Nuno Portas, an architect and arguably one of the most prominent Portuguese specialists in social housing, was nominated Secretary of State for Housing and Urban Development in the first provisional government and attempted to rearticulate the public housing policy to cater for all income sections of the society. He highlighted, for its novelty in public housing policies, a method of intervention for the “less solvable [social] strata with internal organization”\(^7\)

Portas and his collaborators drafted a program to activate the role of the citizens as key players in the new housing policy. He suggested the creation of the so-called *Brigadas de Construção* (Construction Brigades), which should become the link between the population, the Municipalities and the government.\(^8\) This shared control over the process became a key aspect conveyed in the *Despacho* (cabinet order) passed by the provisional government on 6 August 1974 that established the *Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local* (SAAL, Service for Local Mobile Support). The cabinet order attempted to articulate technical expertise, political institutions, and the ill-housed population. Indeed, it emphasized that:

> The SAAL was designed “to support, through the municipalities, the initiative of the population living in poor conditions to foster their collaboration in the transformation of their own neighborhoods, investing their own latent assets, and possibly their money.”\(^9\)
The text of the cabinet order further mentioned that, under the circumstances faced by the country at that time, the SAAL would decentralize the process to cope with the urgency of solving the housing problem inherited from the dictatorship. In order to act locally, identifying the problems of the different communities, and designing solutions case-to-case, settlement-by-settlement, the bureaucratic apparatus of the governmental housing agency (the FFH) was reorganized. The agency coordinated the SAAL program, while the technical brigades, mainly constituted by technicians recruited from the private sector, were in charge of the fieldwork, as it were.

Next to the FFH and the technical brigades, an important role was reserved to the municipalities. They should provide the land to develop the operations and build its sanitary and road infrastructure. To be sure, the cabinet order clearly stated that the initiative should always come from the grassroots, organized in housing cooperatives or residents’ associations. The role of the municipalities was fundamentally to be in charge of controlling the urbanization process and performing as mediator in the allocation of the available resources.

An important aspect of the cabinet order was related with the nature of the land that should become available for the development of the operations. The document stated,

“It should be reminded that the main reason for this [housing] policy is based on the appropriation by the lower classes of the valuable locations where they currently live marginally.”

In effect, this attempt to break up the invisibility of the lower classes would be paramount for both the accomplishments and the shortcomings of the SAAL operations. Indeed, to legitimately transfer to the lower classes the ownership of those “valuable locations” it was often necessary to expropriate those properties and a engage in a difficult competition with the real estate interests that thrived throughout the dictatorial regime. Actually, to better
understand the ins and outs of the SAAL process it is important to examine the post-revolutionary reconceptualization of the power relations in the bureaucratic apparatus of the state.

**From Corporate Control to “Dual Power”**

The 25 April 1974 revolution threatened the corporate state that ruled over the previous five decades. This produced shockwaves at all levels of political decision, including the smallest administrative divisions. In the weeks after the coup, administrative commissions replaced the mayors of the municipalities appointed by the dictatorial regime. While during the dictatorship the municipalities were ruled by local caciques faithful to the regime, now the leaders of the municipal commissions were frequently selected among members of the grassroots organizations that rebelled against that elite. This was indeed an important political transformation though not sufficiently strong to devolve the power to the people. It was, however, important to foster citizens’ participation in the politics of the municipality.

In sharp contrast with the corporative nature of the preceding regime, in the revolutionary period there was a spontaneous formation of grassroots organizations, namely workers and residents commissions. The latter performed a vital role in the development of the SAAL program and they were indeed actively influencing political decision-making at local level. In fact, as Raquel Varela put it, the dwellers associations were a “parallel power to that of the municipalities”\(^\text{10}\) In reality, during the revolutionary process the municipalities acted more as an instrument for the re-composition of the State apparatus that as actual policy makers. The dwellers associations, instead, negotiated directly with the central government and the MFA thus creating a situation of “dual power”\(^\text{11}\).

The SAAL program thus developed through 1974 and 1975 in the context of a system of “dual power” as the leading form of government. This situation was particularly acute in a period of crisis in the revolutionary process. Indeed, from the failed attempt to operate a
reactionary coup d’etat on 11 March 1975 through the paramount political event that would interrupt the revolutionary momentum on 25 November 1975, the class struggle was pervasive and manifested in occurrences that showed the workers power and workers control of the means of production.

The squatting movements were widespread, the strikes proliferated and the companies were self-managed or co-managed by their workers. Next to it, the provisional government started a massive campaign of Land reform and nationalizations that included banks and the nation’s biggest industrial conglomerates that had hitherto virtually ruled the country with the support of the dictatorship. The primacy of the private property maintained through Salazar’s regime was thus strikingly threatened.

For the progressive sector of the post-revolutionary government, this was then the moment to develop public housing policies that had always been thwarted by the conservative soil politics of the former regime. For a brief period of time the SAAL program testified to a national movement towards a social organization of the demand for housing. For its specific characteristics, the case of the implementation of the SAAL program in the city of Porto illustrates the conditions in which the legacy of totalitarianism affected the transition to democracy.

**The Right to the City**
The SAAL operations in Porto were strongly influenced by the sociological and typomorphological characteristics of the proletarian ilha. The proletarian ilha (island) is a vernacular housing type that was ubiquitous in the city of Porto from the late 19th century through the 20th century. It is basically defined by a single or several rows of small rental houses with only one front, grouped at the backyard of a middle class house, usually owned by the landlord of the ilha. Each small housing unit, usually with only one or two partitions,
connects with a narrow open common courtyard that is linked to the street through a passage under the landlord’s house.

Although the *ilhas* were built in Porto’s 19th century industrial periphery, in the 1960s they had already been integrated in the city and their real estate value had drastically increased due to speculation. The *ilhas* were no longer important as the *locus* for the reproduction of labor as they used to be before. Rather, their premium location in the interior of the blocks became a millstone for the real estate interests. In effect, demonstrating its dependence of, and subservience to, the power of the capitalist apparatus, in the mid-1950s Porto’s municipality approved a slum clearance process, relocating the residents of the *ilhas* in social housing complexes built in the city’s periphery. After 1974 this policy to render the working class invisible would trigger vivid protests. While during the dictatorship the residents of the *ilhas* were enforced to accept the relocation to peripheral social housing complexes, after the revolution many groups of residents associations from Porto’s *ilhas* were keen in asserting their “right to the place”.

In the project developed by the Antas SAAL brigade this insurgent citizenship is richly illustrated. Some *ilhas* in the Antas neighborhood survived the 1960s demolitions, and the slum residents battled to remain in the same area, demanding a betterment of the neighborhood’s living conditions. The technical brigade, coordinated by Pedro Ramalho (b.1937), surveyed the existing *ilhas* and concluded that type of building “was not only a territorial unit but also part of a rich complex of social life.”\(^{12}\) 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 were created in adjacent areas already cleared out. Conspicuously, these new units were designed following organization principles clearly inspired by the morpho-typological characteristics of the *ilhas*. 
In another part of the city, the S. Victor SAAL brigade, coordinated by Álvaro Siza (b. 1933), delivered yet another instance of a design approach that used the figure of the *ilhas* as the basis for a new urban paradigm. This disciplinary reconceptualization of what Henri Lefebvre called in 1968 *le droit à la ville* (The Right to the City), would eventually reach an international audience when, in 1976, Siza published a text with the title “The Proletarian ‘Island’ as a Basic Element of the Urban Tissue” in the influential magazine *Lotus International*. In this text, notwithstanding the charged public opinion about the hygienic and material condition that characterized the life in the *ilhas*, Siza delivered an apologetic account of that urban model. Indeed, he attached to it an instrumental capacity to pursue a new social and political agenda in the country’s housing policies.

The actual implementation of said agenda was all but smooth, though. The expropriation processes were painfully complex and long. The legal advisors that were part of the SAAL brigades struggled to overcome the legacy of the bureaucratic apparatus of the dictatorial regime. However, there was an urgency to build that could not wait for the legalization of the land. To take advantage of the engagement and the revolutionary momentum of the residents’ commissions, the SAAL brigades were compelled to advance immediately with actions that could be built on land owned by the municipality or swiftly acquired. This strategy thus generated design proposals that were contingent with the structure of land ownership in the short run, and planned according to a new paradigm of urban renewal based on the idea of an inclusive city that, in the long run, would cater for people’s right to the city.

**The end of the SAAL Spring**

In the months ensuing the events of April 1974, the strategic alliance of the political parties that opposed the dictatorial regime deteriorated. On 28 September 1974, 11 March 1975, and 25 November 1975 successive political and military clashes demonstrated the inherent contradictions of the politics pursued by the main actors that supported the 25 April 1974
coup. The full-fledged development of the SAAL process suffered with the deterioration of the strategic alliance of the political parties that ruled the country in the post revolutionary period. Eventually, after the first legislative election, on 25 April 1976, the tensions between the new elected government and the residents’ commissions and associations involved in the SAAL process surfaced conspicuously. The latter acknowledged that the new government, although democratically elected, was paving the way for a reorganization of the corporate power that prevailed during the dictatorship. In large demonstrations they claimed:

“Expropriations yes, Boycotts, no!”, “Municipalities at the service of the people”, “SAAL shall be what the people want”, “Right to the place”, “Houses yes, Shacks, no!”.

On 28 October 1976, roughly one week after a major demonstration in Porto, the government would virtually dismantle the SAAL process, arguing that it strayed from the spirit that led to its creation. Contesting accusations of incompetence and waste of public money the SAAL brigades replied with figures showing that in twenty-six months the program produced plans for 41,665 new dwellings units, able to accommodate approximately 150,000 inhabitants. Indeed, even compared with the successful Fanfani plan, an objective observation of the results produced by the SAAL brigades could hardly validate the government’s accusations.

In the coming years the worse expectations of the SAAL brigades and the residents were indeed confirmed. The government’s keen interest in shifting the coordination of the SAAL process to the scope of the municipalities, though seemingly underpinned by their democratic legitimacy, concealed a hidden agenda. On the one hand, the relation between the SAAL brigades and the population created short-circuits in the social and political system. The challenges tackled by the brigades were not only technical or disciplinary issues, but also political. Their approach resonated with a system of “dual power” that threatened the power relations established by the post-revolutionary political scene. On the other hand, after the relative stabilization brought about by the new constitution and the first free elections held on
25 April 1976, the reorganization of the pre-revolution capitalist apparatus unfolded swiftly and its influence soon infiltrated the operation of the public institutions.

The political boycott to the expropriation processes created serious problems to the implementation of the plans developed by the SAAL brigades and thwarted their objective of creating a new model for the city. Then, in October 1976 the government decided the transference of the coordination of the SAAL process to the municipalities. This decision virtually determined the end of the program. Despite the ambitious plans and projects already produced by the brigades, once under the umbrella of the municipalities, only those parts of the operations that had already started were actually finished. Further, more often than not the buildings were erected with poor or no infrastructure at all, a deliberate strategy to promote their *ghettoization*, and to spark a general discontent and disbelief among the residents in the SAAL process. This situation was, obviously, good news for the political and economical interests of those that saw the SAAL process as a menace to the traditional power relations and to the *business as usual* of the real estate market. The time of the “dual power” was over and the SAAL spring ended.

Notes:

3 This amount of dwellings roughly corresponds to one fourth or one fifth of the number of the country’s families, and it is a conservative estimate that did not considered the poor living conditions of existing buildings. See Marielle Christine Gros, *O Alojamento Social Sob O Fascismo* (Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 1982), 144.
During the dictatorial regime, there was only one official political party, *União Nacional* (UN, National Union), renamed in 1970 *Acção Nacional Popular* (ANP, Popular National Action), except for a short period after World War II when the Movimento de Unidade Democrática (MUD, Movement of Democratic Union) was accepted as a legal opposition party. However, during the whole dictatorship, the most active and continuous opposition to the regime was done clandestinely by the *Partido Comunista* (PC, Communist Party). Over this period the workers were organized in unions controlled by the corporative regime.

The first provisional government was a coalition of all the political tendencies that opposed the dictatorial regime. In effect, the members of the cabinet represented a wide spectrum of political sensibilities, ranging from the liberals, through the social democrats, to the communists.


Estudo interpretativo dos objectivos a proseguir através do SAAL (Interpretative study of the goals to be pursued by the SAAL). Document reproduced in Ibid., 1:61–64.


Ibid., 272. The notion of “dual power” as a form of government was famously used by Lenin in an article published in *Pravda* on 9 April 1917.


At the end of 1976, the number of families involved in SAAL operations in the whole country was 41,665, which represents an universe of approximately 150,000 residents. See Conselho Nacional do SAAL, *Livro Branco Do SAAL 1974-1976*.

In 1977 the public and semi-public agencies built 5848 houses (16.8% of the total). See António Fonseca Ferreira, *Por Uma Nova Política de Habitação* (Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 1987), Quadro I, p.239.