

The rise of Social Dystopia or *Optimistic Suburbia*? The case of Portela

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The relevance of an urban project, from a critical point of view, lies in its capacity to pose questions about the city and its future, as well as about current and past practices of the discipline. The strength of a critical argument might initiate productive discussions within and outside the circle of practitioners, and therefore a pedagogical role can always be assigned to it.

Fernando Silva's urban plan for Portela (1960-1979) in the outskirts of Lisbon prompted important questions about urbanism, the contemporary city and the city dweller, that are still part of the contemporary architectural and urban agenda. The project raises many of the issues that have been frequently posed by architects, generation after generation: how can many individual worlds be tied together into one greater and inspiring whole? How are individuals expected to live within others? If the "home is a prime unexcavated site for an archaeology of sociability" (Putnam, 1999: 144), can we find a direct relationship between idealised ways of socialising in the home and outside it? How does the idea of home relate directly to an idea of urban? Those questions often relating private and collective unfold the concept of public space and this, in turn, the concept of community in terms such as "how does public space enhances public life" and, therefore, the sense of collectivity?

Those questions, often look for ways of being translated into spatial terms. Therefore, they imply a rethinking of ongoing problems through drawing and the cross over between multiple scales. Housing can be understood to be 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.

Drawn after the advent 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.

Architectural Design within a discourse on the social

It seems widely asserted that, after the 1960s, Western societies have shifted from social concerns and utopias, which characterized that decade, towards an inner world and subjectivity. A new era begun, and as many authors have criticised, it is an era of individualism, privatism and even narcissism – a political retreat to purely personal preoccupations and self-absorption. After the political turmoil of the sixties, a sense of decadence in society and loose of hope, resulted in social alienation, intense preoccupation with the self and private life is expected to provide a refuge against all the daily life aggressions, especially in big metropolis.

Cities have been described as "embodying immorality, artificiality, disorder and danger – as the site of treasonous conspiracies, illicit sex, crime, deviance

and disease” (Young, 1995: 264). A generalized sense of insecurity and uncertainty about a reality in constant change and mutability, and a loss of confidence in the future, resulted in an almost obsessed search for secure and humane **communities**, rejections of suburbia and architectural reactions against the new urban realities of city life, often reflecting reactionary aesthetics and conservative tendencies, trying to mask existing class struggles and denying the essence of cities, by nature, time and energy consuming, incessantly changing and transforming (Simmel, 1903), and yet a collective work which develops the expression of culture, society and the individual both in space and time.

Post-modernity has been entitled with the **end of public sphere**, the destruction of face-to-face relationships and communities, and the emergence of fleetingly functional places (motorways, shopping malls, play centres, airports, interchanges, etc.) called by the French anthropologist Marc Augé of “non-places” and contrasting with “anthropological places” - socially and historically anchored.

At this juncture, an interest in the subject of public places and social relationships has increased since the late 1980's. There is plenty of evidence that public space fulfils an important role in urban design, but what is the essence of it? What are “good” public spaces”? Can we address feelings of community and stress their importance as if they would solve all the complex social problems of cities? Often, the discussion is around issues as “how do we bring back a sense of community?” or “how can we design the public realm in order to improve social mix”? In other words, how does the private and the collective relate to each other? How does collective space, (often misunderstood as public space), enhances public life (often misunderstood with collective life)? This still means a belief in a spatial assignment to the relations between individuals.

The idea of community has been brought by those against liberal individualism, as an alternative to welfare capitalist society, positing fusion rather than separation as a social ideal. But, as argued by Iris M. Young, this ideal has “serious political consequences because it neglects the differences between individuals and therefore incites racism” (Young, 1995: 257). In fact, **gated communities** are not only those **impenetrable informal ethnic slums**, nor **social housing**, often grouping people by their income with a paternalistic design. The opposite, but also impassable, **private condominiums**, that are growing in third world countries and United States, but in Europe as well, can be, literally called gated communities, which seems, in its terms, a big contradiction.

The first, often appear naturally, informal settlements with no apparent urban design. The latter, a product of elites of individuality, act like islands and do not establish any relationship with their surroundings. More, that is exactly the aim of those, representing incapacity to solve not only political and social problems, but what is more, design problems, and a comfortable isolation of them. Nevertheless, they become part of the collective imaginary their idealized life in cities. Furthermore, it silences an important fringe of society and contributes to the sprawl of the informal outside its gates, as it disclaims the

political and social responsibilities of governments in their relation with the urban, transposing them to the private sector.

However, as I shall argue, gated communities don't exist only as two extreme poles within the city. There is a third kind of gated communities, those designed for middle class families, often disregarded by the intellectual faction of professionals given its suburban location. Communities here are only understood by the geographical proximity of a certain group of people, and their spatial way of grouping. The word "gated" can also acquire several meanings defined by its design such as urban enclosures, defined artificially or naturally depending on the site, etc. Portela is one of such cases for several reasons that will be further explored.

The critique of Privatism

The current significant trends towards privatisation are in clear contradiction with the ideal of public space as a way of achieving social cohesion. A capitalist society, highly competitive and driven by uncontrollable market forces has been criticised and accused of being responsible for social instability and a fear of rapid change. The constant state of insecurity, as suggested in the provoking movie by Michael Moore *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) is the biggest reason for so many of the mind sets of people and that reflects in society and society, in turn, shapes the cultural and popular thought. As many authors have stated our society is becoming more and more individualistic, and the call for safety leads, in effect, to the privatisation and control of urban public space.

Richard Sennett's critique of narcissism in his book *The Fall of Public Man* implies a devaluation of the personal realm because, in his view, the best things in the Western Cultural tradition derive from the conventions that once regulated impersonal relations in public. These conventions, now condemned as constricting, artificial, and deadening to emotional spontaneity, formerly established civilized boundaries between people, set limits on the public display of feeling, and promoted cosmopolitanism and civility. In 18th century London or Paris, sociability did not depend on intimacy. "Strangers meeting in the parks or on the streets might without embarrassment speak to each other". They shared a common fund of public signs that enabled people of unequal position to conduct a civilized conversation without feeling exposed. In the 19th century, however, the balance between public and private became weakness, and public actions were seen as revelations of the inner personality of the "actor" and therefore belonging to an immoral domain. The private realm, idealized by the family, was conceived as a refuge from the society and its threats. The romantic cult of sincerity and authenticity eroded the masks that people once had worn in public and the boundary between public and private life. As the public world came to be seen as a mirror of the self, people lost the capacity for detachment and hence for playful encounter, which presupposes a certain distance from the self. Sennett stresses the importance of a public domain: "one's personal

strengths might not develop if one did not expose oneself to strangers – one might be too inexperienced, too naive, to survive” (Sennett, 1974: 17-24).

Similarly, for Hannah Arendt, “all human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together”. But it is “only action that cannot even be imagined outside the society of men”. The activity of “labour does not need the presence of others, though a being labouring in complete solitude would not be human but an animal *laborans* in the world’s most literal significance” and what rises when the public falls is “the social realm” (Arendt, 1958: 22) .

In our own time, according to Sennett, relations in public, conceived as a form of self-revelation, have become deadly serious. Conversation takes on the quality of confession. Class-consciousness declines; people perceive their social position as a reflection of their own abilities and blame themselves for the injustices inflicted on them. Politics degenerates into a struggle not for social change but for self-realization. When the boundaries between the self and the rest of the world collapse, the pursuit of enlightened self-interest, which once informed every phase of political activity, becomes impossible. The political men of an earlier age knew how to take rather than desire and judged politics, as he judged polity in general, to see “what’s in it for him, rather than if it is him”. The narcissist, on the other hand, “suspends ego interests” in a delirium of desire.

Far more intricate and suggestive than a brief summary can indicate, Sennett’s argument has much to teach us about the importance of self-distance in play and in dramatic reconstructions of reality, about the projection of the search for self into politics, and about the pernicious effects of the ideology of intimacy.

But, according to Christopher Lasch, Sennett’s equation of successful ego-functioning with the ability “to take rather than to desire”, which seems to enshrine rapacity, as the only alternative to narcissism, is quite dubious. Furthermore, his idea that politics turns on enlightened self-interest, the careful calculation of personal and class advantage, hardly does justice to the basics that have always characterized the relations between dominant and subordinate classes. It pays too little attention to the ability of the rich and powerful to identify their ascendance with lofty moral principles, which make resistance a crime not only against the state but also against the humanity itself. Ruling classes have always sought to instil in their subordinates the capacity to experience exploitation and material deprivation as guilt, while deceiving themselves that their own material interests coincide with those of mankind as a whole.

“The fact is that men have never perceived their interests with perfect clarity and have therefore tended, throughout history, to project irrational aspects of themselves into the political realm. To blame the irrational features of modern politics on narcissism, the ideology of intimacy, or the ‘culture of personality’ not only exaggerates the role of ideology in historical development but underestimates the irrationality of politics in earlier epochs” (Lasch, 1979: 29).

C.Lash compares Sennett's conception of proper politics with the Tocquevillian, pluralistic tradition from which it evidently derives an ideological element of its own. According to him, their analysis, exalt bourgeois liberalism as the only civilized form of political life and bourgeois 'civility' as the only uncorrupted form of public conversation. From the pluralist point of view, the admitted imperfections of bourgeois society remain inaccessible to political correction, since political life is regarded as inherently a realm of radical imperfection. Thus when men and woman demand fundamental alterations in the political system, they are really projecting personal anxieties into politics. In this way liberalism defines itself as the outer limit of political rationality and dismisses all attempts to go beyond liberalism, including the entire revolutionary tradition, as the politics of narcissism. In spite of its idealization of the public life in the past, Sennett's book participates in the current reaction against politics and against the hope of using politics as an instrument of social change.

Sennett's eagerness to restore a distinction between public and private life, according to C. Lash, ignores the ways in which they are always intertwined. The socialization of the young reproduces political domination at the level of the personal experience. In our own time, this invasion of private life by the forces of organized domination has become so pervasive that personal life has almost ceased to exist. Reversing cause and effect, Sennett blames the contemporary malaise on the invasion of the public realm by the ideology of intimacy. For him, the current preoccupation with self-discover, psychic growth and intimate personal encounters represents unseemly self-absorption, romanticism run rampant. C. Lasch suggests that the cult of intimacy originates not the assertion of personality but its collapse – "ur society, far from fostering private life at the expense of public life, has made deep relationships difficult to achieve. "As social life becomes more and more warlike and barbaric, personal relations, which ostensibly provide relief from these conditions, take on the character of combat" (Lasch, 1979: 30).

Both authors are concerned with the supervalorization of individuality, although in different levels. Sennett is more concerned with the weakness of the public realm and, contrary to David Riesman in his book *The Lonely Crowd*, considers that American and Western Europe society is moving from an inner to an other-directed society. C. Lasch is more disturbed with the effects of such a culture in personal relationships and in the decline of the importance of families in Western societies. One could speculate from his argument about its consequences in traditional familiar hierarchies and structures and therefore about the spatial changes in housing and cities in general, but that is not the object of this essay.

The erosion of the public sphere reflects in political democracy, in cities, in education and in personal relationships. But, taking the historical narratives about the public of Jürgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, Russel Jacoby and Alan Bloom, Bruce Robbins asks: "**For whom was the city once more public than now?** Was it ever open to the scrutiny and participation, let alone under the control, of the majority? Was there ever a time when intellectuals were really

authorized to speak to the people as a whole about the interests of the people as a whole? If so, where were the workers, the women, the lesbians, the gay men, the African-Americans?” For this author “the public is a phantom” that has to be redefined according to our times (Robbins, 1993: viii).

In another book, *Flesh and Stone – the Body and the City in Western Civilization*, Richard Sennett sought for an analogy of bodily form and experience, and urban form through Western History. As in *The Fall of Public Man*, he finds in the 19th century the origin of today’s passivity and lack of physical awareness between human beings. For him, mass media (as for Marc Augé the excess of imaginary references) has the effect of anaesthetizing bodily awareness, because the experience of our bodies becomes more passive than in other times, when people feared their sensations. In everyday life we can presence the general efforts to deny, minimize, contain and avoid conflict with strangers and as people became less and less aware of each other, more and more the fenced, gated and guarded planned community is sold to buyers as the very image of good life. “Today, order means lack of contact” (Sennett, 1994: 21).

Self-absorption leads us to believe community is an act of mutual self-disclosure and to undervalue the community relations of strangers, particularly those that occur in cities. At first glance, Portela, regarded as a symbol of anonymity, would 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. Iris Marion Young, this duality, by no means, exhaust the possibilities for conceiving social relations and undoubtedly there is a common logic underlying their polarity: the denial of difference and the desire to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity. In fact, this ideal expresses a desire of social wholeness, symmetry, a security and solid identity (Young, 1995). Nevertheless, it denies and represses social difference and polity cannot be thought of as a unity in which all participants share a common experience and common values. Face-to-face communities are the last visible of entities in a society as fluid, interconnected, and heterogeneous as our own. The desire of sharing the same space with only our similar, without conflict, neglects metropolitan life style and that does not seem to be a new discovery as Aristotle had already noted in *The Politics* that a city is composed of diverse people and similar kinds of men cannot bring a city into existence.

The Guetto

Iris Young and Sennet agree that the myth of community produce and implicitly legitimate racist and classist behaviour and policy: “while there may be a dominant group with a distinct set of values and life style, within any

locale, one can usually find deviant individuals and groups. Yet the myth of community operates strongly to produce defensive exclusionary behaviour: pressuring the black family that buys a house on the block to leave, beating up the black youths who come into 'our neighbourhood', zoning against the construction of multiunit dwellings" (Young, 1995: 261).

But the ideal of community imply more than merely respecting other's rights, it entails attending to and sharing needs and interests, which is certainly not the case of people inhabiting Portela. Between them there is a comfortable sense of proximity that never extends beyond the use of the lift at the same time and a circumstantial chat about the weather conditions.

Although not acting as a "community", in the common sense of the term, Portela can be considered a "voluntary ghetto", using the words of L. Wirth in his book about the history of the Jewish ghetto. Of course it could look like an inappropriate comparison, once the circumstances and history of both are completely different, but what makes them similar is exactly the fact of being a product of desired social distance from "strangers", creating barriers to unwelcome contact. The voluntary ghetto of the Jewish marked "the beginning of a long process of isolation which did not reach its fullest development until the voluntary ghetto had been superseded by the compulsory ghetto" (Wirth, 1928: 27). The aim of isolation can find its reasoning in this new psychological imagination of life, where public life became a matter of social obligation: "A new kind of society encourages the growth of its psychic components and erases a sense of meaningful social encounter outside its terms, outside the boundaries of the single self, in public". Through history we can find the ghettos of poor (slums), the ghettos of criminals (prisons); the ghettos of insane (sanatoriums in ex-URSS); the racist ghettos (which are today being kept as a way to attract tourists, like the case of China Town in New York; Banglatown in London; or to Santa Marta, Vila Canoas and Rocinha's favelas in Rio); in our days we have the ghettos for rich people, for middle class, as well as for certain professional or intellectual groups (in their gentrification of, many times, obsolete industrial areas among others).

Contemporary societies, as referred by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, expect from their citizens a certain type of behaviour imposed by several rules, all of them aiming to normalize its members and to avoid spontaneous or unexpected actions. But the true is that as much people as we put together, as much it increases the possibility of them not tolerate each other's behaviour. The contradiction in the idea of community lies in understanding the public as a realm of unity and mutual understanding, whereas by definition public space is a "space accessible to anyone, where anyone can participate and witness". In "entering the public one always risks encountering those who are different, those who identify with different groups and have different opinions or different forms of life" (Young, 1995: 268).

Marc Augé critics the post-modern sensibility which is a result of accelerated transformations in contemporary world, expressly our changed perception of time and space and, as well as the previous authors, with the excess focus on the individual and his ego: "In western societies, at least, the individual wants to

be a world in himself; he intends to interpret the information delivered to him by himself and for himself". He claims attention to a paradoxical aspect of our time: in one hand it seems possible to think in terms of unity of terrestrial space as big multinational networks expand; on the other hand the space of "supermodernity" deals only with individuals and produces the exact opposite of utopia because it does not contain any organic society. What he calls "the non-places" are a product of "supermodernity", and cannot be defined as relational, historical or concerned with identity. Therefore, they represent exact the contrary of anthropological places and create neither identity nor relations, "only solitude and similitude" and provide "an experience of solitary individuality combined with non-human mediation between the individual and the public authority" (Augé, 1995: 103). However, it is precisely the "solitude and similitude" of Portela that assigns to it a strong sense of identity and therefore also an idea of "community" despite with a different conception.

Project description and urban context

During the 70's the number of slums in the city fringe of Lisbon had 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. 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.

The political climate proper of a dictatorial government, the civil war in the so-called overseas provinces that begun in 1961; the subsequent decolonization from mid-70's onwards; the poor conditions in which people lived in (in the 1960's only 18% had sewer system and almost 8% of the capital lived in slums); the return of many families from the ex-colonies to a country that for most of the 2nd generation was unknown, had a strong impact in the territory from the point of view of housing and urbanism.

Much have been said, studied and published about it, and yet, the middle class has been almost ignored, when in fact it 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.

At the same time, those projects, in the suburbs, in the outskirts of Lisbon, were fertile territories (and laboratories) to experimenting new urban concepts, detached from the traditional city model.

Portela's urban plan was conceived by Fernando Silva (1914-83), around half a century after the advent of modernism, providing him the opportunity to

design an entire site and rethink major urban strategies. What is Fernando Silva's position within this most basic kind of problem solving (physical, social and moral) that has characterised modernity and that drew visionary architects to propose not only alternative built forms but also alternative societies? In which ways does he challenge previous models? Its urban plan has probably one of the **most eclectic designs** possible, combining the experience of more than one century of debates. Furthermore, it also reveals Fernando Silva's 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 by the way it combined features that when looked carefully are not only anachronic but also coming from disparate discourses.

City, district or neighbourhood?

Modernity saw cities, quintessentially, as disordered places, infinitely harder to manage than small towns or villages. It aimed to produce an optimum social environment and to re-humanise the city through a new order of space and population, which has led to the reduction of the social and the collective to smaller entities that are easier to manoeuvre, and to the constant re-evaluation of strategies of grouping.

The first attempt to project the city as a whole was done by Ebenezer Howard and his vision became widespread not only in Britain but also in the rest of Europe and America, producing a series of variants that more often than not ended up being completely different proposals. He inspired further investigations that drew upon some of his principles, criticising some and repositioning others. Howard aimed to solve, or at least ameliorate, the problem of the Victorian city by exporting a large proportion of its people and its jobs to self-contained constellations of new towns built in open countryside, far from the slums and smoke, and, most importantly, from the overblown land values of the giant city. He proclaimed radical hopes for a co-operative socialist civilisation, which he advocated could only be fulfilled in small communities embedded in a decentralised society, away from the ulcers of the existing cities. In his series of garden cities, linked by railways (forming a polycentric social city), all had two kinds of centres: the neighbourhood centres and the (one) civic centre. Neighbourhoods were "slices in the circular pie", each comprising one-sixth of the town. The basic unit in the neighbourhood was the family living in its own home surrounded by a garden, and the most important neighbourhood institution was the school. There are two cohesive forces that bring the residents out of their neighbourhoods and unite the city. The first is leisure (Central Park), the other is civic life (located at the centre of the Park). Co-operation was expected to take place within the new building type that he developed, together with his associates Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker: the Cooperative Quadrangle. In essence it was designed to support co-operative housekeeping, its series of garden apartments dependent of a central dining room and kitchen. Housing and domestic work were shared by co-operative tenants as the basic social unit of an ideal garden city.

The concept of the Garden City, though very different in theory, anticipated the Neighbourhood Unit principle of Clarence Perry in the 1920s. Before being translated into urban terms, the Neighbourhood Unit was a sociological concept, conceived to enhance familiar relationships as well as community relationships. The aim was for residents to become aware of each other by sharing common facilities and daily life experiences. This was also to provide for family and community supervision.

If we were to compare the Garden City and Neighbourhood Unit diagrams, we could conclude that they did not necessarily contradict each other, and the ward-and-centre diagram for a garden city has a lot in common with the diagram for a neighbourhood unit. Both diagrams imply a variety of scales within the city and define complete units, one at the level of the city, the other at the level of the neighbourhood. The first because of its concentric form, closed off by a green belt; the second because the development was defined according to the number of families needed to support an elementary school. But while the diagram for a garden city has a pre-established limit for growth and extension defined by the very nature of its drawing, the diagram for the Neighbourhood Unit alone does not restrict change and growth, establishing a more dynamic set of possible relationships with other neighbourhoods or even with the civic centre. That is to say that this diagram creates a complexity that allows its translation to drawing in multiple ways that does not necessarily mean the reproduction of one fixed model but creates the possibility for overlaps and different formal approaches. Even if it would constrain the drawing to a rigid structure, the city itself was still allowed to expand and grow and therefore to coexist with proposals derived from distinct diagrams. Even though both drew upon social approaches, Howard's model appears to be a "closed" entity, while Perry's diagram establishes solely a set of relationships that could be spatially organised in different ways.

The concept of the neighbourhood unit dominated almost four decades of urban planning as a means of a strategic and sustainable growth of cities through a fully developed social life, but its conceptual scheme was an incredible abstraction of the urban complexities and soon the reactions appeared. The idealised social life did not take place and it became obvious that social grouping cannot be imposed and social relationships within the city tend to patterns that do not have anything to do with the spatialisation of the neighbourhood.

Le Corbusier's first urban project, *La Ville Contemporaine* (1922), was essentially a reinterpretation of the Garden City of Howard, projecting a centre for 600,000 inhabitants that was circled by a green belt, around which would be situated a series of "garden cities". *La Ville Radieuse* (1930) already contains the organisational principles of his ideal city: housing units with the facilities in high-rise constructions to free the ground for green amenities, and creates the basis for subsequent projects. Both projects add to the Garden City of Howard the "language" of modern architecture. They were definitely influenced by the concept of the neighbourhood unit, but contrary to the English strand that developed research of the sociological model focused on the community of

dwellers. Le Corbusier started with the architectonic typology and looked for the built model, simultaneously housing and integrating at the same time all the elementary facilities. The ideal of community, or social grouping, was in fact transformed, from the horizontal diagram of the Neighbourhood Unit into a vertical one (his *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille being its best example) representing the morphological element of organisation and composition of the "collectivist city". Surprisingly, it was Corbusier himself who called his project a vertical garden city, but the scale and unit of planning was definitely closer to the Neighbourhood Unit, the architectural counterpoint to it. As it has been frequently acknowledged, Perry was the mentor of modern planning, while Corbusier was the mentor of modern architecture.

Both Le Corbusier and Perry reflected on the work of Ebenezer Howard in terms of his ideas and their practical application, and both proposed antidotes to his influential views. Nevertheless, they all considered housing to be the basic urban unit, which when grouped together with social facilities and services would constitute the urban system, the latter being the means of social life polarisation. They all proposed to solve not only the urban problem but also the social problem, in the belief that architecture and urbanism could organise and structure society and, ideally, a community of mutual interests and aspirations. All of them, including Howard, foresaw the same vision: a social mix that would overcome class distinctions.

A project for a residential district with the scale of the one to be analysed raises the question of how to govern communities of people through architecture. Its urbanism might be located in relation to the question of the neighbourhood, as a spatial way of grouping. The neighbourhood has been regarded as an answer to social sustainability and, whatever its urban form, it should encourage social interaction, provide self-sufficient communities, and develop a strong local identity and control over local resources. In that sense it seems to mean more the degree of autonomy a district has than its physical form. Fernando Silva intentionally situates his work within a different theoretical reasoning, one in which community is not regarded as a place but rather as a **self of social ties, an extra-spatial social phenomenon** not to be confused with neighbourhood.

Neighbourhoods have been, historically, a natural consequence of the growth of cities. Munford mentions Paris and Venice to illustrate cities where neighbourhoods appeared spontaneously organized, according to medieval principles, in relation to a dominant church or square with a market place adjoined to it, "facts that did not prevent the city to function as a whole", and that not necessarily have consolidated the activities of the inhabitants in a limited local area. Sennet also refers the medieval city as a place where people could feel a "passionate attachment to the places in which they lived" and one which promoted an "experience of compassion for one's neighbours, based on imagining the sufferings of others as one's own" (Sennet, 1994: 157-158). Echoing some of the claims of Jane Jacobs in the USA in the early 1960s, he applauded the dense and traditionally unplanned city for allowing men to "become more in control of themselves and more aware of each other"

(Sennet, 1971: 198). While the church or the plaza would relate to the district, other spaces within the city were thought of on a larger scale, bringing the different neighbourhoods together. Many of the functions of a city tend to be distributed naturally, and a church, a small park or a local library do not have the same role in the city as a cathedral, a 'Hyde Park' or a central library. The different scale of these elements structures the city in different ways and constructs a certain hierarchical order that was not always planned as such. This suggests a certain inevitability of group formation that, despite not necessarily being social, can be physical, visual or simply temporal. Accordingly, neighbourhood could be defined in a broader sense as simply being people who live near one another. In this line of reasoning, Munford continues:

"To share the same place is perhaps the most primitive of social bonds, and to be within view of one's neighbours is the simplest form of association. Neighbourhoods are composed of people who enter by the very fact of birth or chosen residence into a common life. Neighbours are people united primarily not by common origins or common purposes but by the proximity of their dwellings in space. This closeness makes them conscious of each other by sight, and known to each other by direct communication, by intermediate links of association, or by rumour. In times of crisis, a fire, a funeral, a festival, neighbours may even become vividly conscious of each other and capable of greater cooperation; but in origin, neighbourliness rests solely on the fact of local cohabitation. There is nothing forced in this relationship and to be real it need not be deep" (Munford, 1968: 59).

Portela, designed away from the city, has clearly defined borders, both visual and physical. The physical are mostly speed ways, connecting it with Lisbon and other sites and in that sense can be seen as an interpretation of Howard's garden-city – though substituting the railway and the train by roads and cars, and the houses by apartment block. 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 mall. 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 Munford and Francisco Silva's understandings 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" (Munford, 1968: 70-72) that, if nothing else, would be justified in economic terms. Munford 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” (Munford, 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; but also 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, habitation and leisure in a perfect, if not autonomous, environment, nor a non-segregated social equilibrium. Louis Wirth suggested that the city dweller is only 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 block

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 Hilberseimer’s vertical city and from Gropius’ studies for the siting of the city dwelling to May’s urban design in Frankfurt, the residential schemes of those years were indissolubly linked to radical perspectives for the renovation of the city. The new modern movement represented both a stylistic and social break; it 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 is necessary to understand the legacy of modernism that shapes the intellectual and physical context within which they build.

The same applies do Fernando Silva who designed apparently modernist blocks, perpendicular to the streets. Paradoxically, behind their strong socialist aesthetics, the apartments have generous areas, 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 bedrooms 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 drawn stripes. The 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. Conviviality is de-territorialized, as is the spatial distribution of economic and social activities. Hence, the forms of our cities and the “neighbourhood” become a simple contract of spatial cohabitation. The contemporary city-dweller is still a social animal, but his social contacts are by no means with his neighbours.

The project emphasises the individuality 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 monofunctional 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 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*.

Conclusion

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 at the same time as 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 the public responding to the irreducible diversity of identity, adequate to the connectedness of power, the politically uncompromising consumer culture of global capitalism.

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, on centre and periphery, privacy and community, etc. Implicit in his project is the conviction that sociology itself is unable to draw the city.

Was it a disbelief in utopia? We believe it was an optimistic way of looking at suburbia through the careful construction of 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.

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)

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