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Housing cooperatives in Portugal: shifts in the understanding of quality for the housing sector

Abstract

All over Europe, housing cooperatives are hybrid processes of housing production. Mid-way between public and private initiatives, low-income and middle-class families, between participated architecture and mass housing estates, housing cooperatives exist in many countries. Their contribution to the national housing stocks is quite diverse, even if a few issues take particular relevance in most contexts: inhabitants' participation, middle to low density urban fabric, typological diversity and innovations and, more recently, maintenance and energetic efficiency.

However, even if valued by architects, promoters and inhabitants as an alternative to the housing market and as qualitative experiences, we do not know much of what in fact has been distinguishing the physical living environments of cooperatives.

In order to approach this subject, this article relies on the portuguese experience on cooperative housing seeking to reveal the distinctive architectural traits of housing cooperatives in two different periods. We are interested in the urban inscription and in the architectural morphology as differentiating features.

The research work that shall be presented has been carried out exploiting the available data for the housing cooperatives in the urban area of Porto. The conclusions search for a relation between the production process and the concrete outcomes of the cooperatives.

Keywords

Housing cooperatives, Right to housing, Architecture, Urban Morphology, Dwelling type.

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Introduction

In Portugal, while existing since the late nineteenth century, housing cooperatives were not always producing dwellings with social interests. In fact, it was only after the instauration of the democracy on 25 April 1974 that a legal framing was set up in order to transform the cooperative movement's structure aiming at the diversification of the processes by which the State could address the housing problems. Before this, housing cooperatives were mostly an alternative to the private real estate market, serving the upper middleclass and building single-family houses in most of the cases. Housing cooperatives worked then as auto-financed systems and as elements of mutual help and cooperation (Matos, 2001).

The instauration of a democratic political system in the middle seventies (25 April 1974) occurred within a serious situation of housing shortage resented mainly in the two bigger cities, Lisbon and Porto, combined with a juridical frame that reinforced the role of the State as the unique social housing provider and with a depressed socio-economical context. More than a solution to these unfavourable conditions, the portuguese people was desiring mostly a renovation of the social structures in order to take its own destiny in hands, and the general attitude was of social activity and commitment. This disposition joined a political will in the redefinition of the State's role by enlarging the scope of its action: from supporting a low middleclass in the access to housing (Gros, 1982), the State was now engaged in providing a decent shelter for all the families in need of it. This political will included thus the marginalised, the excluded, the minorities, ... With a delay of 30 years, the complete notion of the Right to Housing issued from the World War II and formalised in the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights was approached in Portugal.

A significant number of programs and operations were then created from scratch (SAAL, CDH, ...) but others, such as the Housing Cooperatives, were simply redesigned in order to address the housing problems in a more adequate way. In this article, I will examine the architecture of the housing estates in before and after the instauration of the portuguese democratic system.

Global research questions & Conceptual model

My objectives are in general to understand the importance of the production process in the final result, in the built form, and in particular to clarify the specificities of the cooperative housing when responding to two different socio-political contexts. I will search for the principles of the cooperative form in the housing sector and try to reveal how differently this device or structure (the cooperatives) embodied the question of the Right to Housing. As a broad and theoretical concept, a reasoning on the Right to Housing as a social and political issue leads to a consideration of correlated notions such as: State's role, social responsibility, participation, urban environment, neighbourhood, dwelling type.

Therefore, this study aims at relating the broad concept of Right to Housing as a collective engagement (Nunes and Serra, 2004) to the concrete aspects of the urban built environment. This kind of investigation implies the identification of levels of correspondence between an abstract concept such as Right to Housing and the characteristics of the architectural reality. Rapoport refers this operation as *dismantling*, i.e., a process that allows to relate culture to housing (Rapoport, 2001). To Rapoport, this process makes the abstract concepts usable, affirming later on his article that "housing must then be considered in relation to streets, open spaces, other settings and neighbourhoods" (2001, 147) and stressing that it is important to discover the extent of the relevant systems especially when analysing complex societies.

Following this reasoning, I take as a first step the definition or circumscription of the idea of Right to Housing. The XXth century is marked by a global discussion on the rights and needs of the humanity at a general level. We can find in the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 1948, a strong attempt to fully identify all aspects of the human life that should be ensured in every country and in every condition. In its Article 25.1 it is stated that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care". With this, housing should be no longer a private affair, but mostly a public and shared responsibility. In the text, the Right to Housing is paired to food, clothing and health, raising the importance of shelter to the level of an essential dimension of survival. We shall see that, in Portugal, the recognition of this essential (fundamental) character of housing in the human life preformed the starting point for a broader consideration of the needs to be addressed by housing. The notion of shelter became not only more complex and extended, but more diverse as well.

At the same level, it is important to precise the context of cooperative housing in Portugal. Housing cooperatives exist in Portugal since the late XIX century¹, mainly as a response to the urban and suburban populations' housing needs. In the absence of a capable State provision, the cooperative form was, in the first half of the XX century, were a fragile and disperse attempt to counterweight the private housing market (inaccessible for a wide range of families) as well as the insufficient public offer (incapable of providing more than an episodic and authoritarian response to the housing problem). As the cooperatives addressed the housing question by empowering the populations already self-organized and associated, the portuguese authoritarian politic regime² tolerated but didn't support this local and de-centralized initiative (Domingues, Leite and Matos, 1999). Instead, for long decades, the State pleaded for a centralized social housing policy, relying on the

¹ The first Housing Cooperative in Portugal was established in 1894 (Cooperativa de Construção Predial, Lisbon)

² Politic regime called Estado Novo, 1933-1974.

reproduction of specific housing types organized in a neighborhood scale, encouraging the detached or semi-detached single-family house.

It was only after the revolution of 1974, that the cooperative movement became a real alternative to the housing market and to the State provision, in the form of *Cooperativas de Habitação Económica* – CHE (Economic housing cooperatives). These new CHE differ from the former housing cooperatives mostly in the State's support, given to them in the form of financial and fiscal benefits. They also operate in a democratic way ruled by the principles of free access, political neutrality and non-speculation.

From 1974³, the CHE can be defined as a free association of persons willing to take over on the housing production in order to accede to a suitable house in a convenient or affordable form. Until the eighties the CHE built eighteen thousand dwellings (Mateus, 2006) under a regime of collective ownership by which the cooperative is responsible for the funding until the inhabitant completes the payment (30 years) transferring to him then the house ownership. In 1980 there were 250 legally registered CHE in Portugal⁴.

After 1983 the State engaged a new legal frame for cooperative housing funding⁵ based on an individual loan request, which allowed the attribution of the house ownership immediately to the inhabitant. Nearly one hundred and fifty thousand dwellings were built in this period (Mateus, 2006). In the period between 1976 and 1982 the portuguese CHE mirrored at some extent the Swedish cooperative sector (Fenache, 1992) both in the juridical-economic procedures as in the dwelling type.

Just as Sweden in the immediate post war (Appelbaum, 1985), Portugal had always been a country of homeowners, being the attachment to the place and to the land a major question for the population. The CHE searched in this period for an alternative mode of housing tenure that hadn't been approached in the former experiences of cooperative housing in Portugal and that was being undertaken in Sweden especially on the post war period: the cooperative ownership. Seen as a security against the inflationary effects of the private housing market, the CHE embodied thus the vision of housing as a social and universal right. This intention was possible to setup by articulating the State's policies and the local municipal urban planning. We shall see how this vision transformed the urban settings for the cooperative housing: in its scale, localisation and morphology. As for the Swedish context, the portuguese municipalities were stimulated by the government to provide developable lands to the CHE at a very low, or even symbolic, price. However, as this wasn't a compulsory measure, the municipalities were free to support the development of housing cooperative or not. In most cases, left wing municipalities were more active than the right wing ones.

³ The CHEs were legally created with the 'Decreto-Lei n.º 737-A/74'

⁴ Decreto-Lei no 318/82

⁵ Decreto-Lei no 349/83

In addition to this, the portuguese State assumed an essential role providing not only the juridical frame for the cooperative housing sector, but the technical support as well, incorporating in the government structures technical decentralised services. Some of that specialised staff had contact with the Swedish cooperative housing sector from which several mechanisms were imported.

Thus, being a private initiative funded and endorsed (in different ways throughout the years) by the State, the housing cooperatives are today a particular context for the exploration and consolidation of knowledge concerning the role of the State in the housing provision and the potentialities of the self-organised communities in addressing their own housing needs.

Research design and methods

The work developed around these questions was done through the analysis of the housing cooperatives' architecture in a threefold approach:

- In terms of its urban inscription
- In terms of its dwelling type
- In terms of its architectural morphology

These aspects were examined by the interpretation of the architectural project's elements (plans, sections and elevations at different scales) and of the contemporary urban situation. The analysis takes in consideration the type floor plan (the dwelling layout), the ground floor plan in relation to the immediate environment (the modes of access to the building), the building morphology and dwelling type (single-family or collective houses, detached, semidetached or row houses,...) and the relation with the urban structures (streets, terrain, adjacent parcels,...).

The analytical work was carried out over the data collected in the municipal and the state's archives and organised in a database. More than permitting the accurate compilation of the material collected, the database was built to trigger the interrelation of the information gathered through instruments of different nature. It is mainly an instrument that allows the conciliation of the in-deep research work at a smaller scale with a wider extensive investigation that could provide the context for an accumulation of knowledge.

From the corpus collected within the research work presented in this article, I selected two examples of housing cooperatives in the period before 1974 and two other in the period after the democratic regime to illustrate my reasoning. Altogether, they represent three housing cooperatives: 'O Problema da Habitação' for the two projects built in the forties (1942 and 1949), 'Habitovar' and 'Gente do Amanhã' for the other two, built retrospectively in 1977 and 1980.

In the nearly thirty years that separate the project of the first two cooperatives from the project of the more recent ones, the cities and the urban societies changed considerably. The approach undertaken in this research work doesn't seek to compare them, but to reveal the diverse nature of the architecture proposed in those very distinct contexts. Some methodological heterogeneity can

be identified, therefore. For the residential buildings of the forties I took in consideration the existing urban situation as a reference, given the fact that the architectural project had as a goal to integrate itself into it. Instead, for the ones conceived in the seventies I was attentive to the urban project contained in the architectural solution. Placed in the outskirts of growing urban areas, these projects contributed to the renewal of the suburban fabrics (transforming land uses and intensifying the street system), performing sometimes the start of new territorial entities. These features are directly related to housing architecture, as we shall see.

Results

In the forties the city of Porto had only a few experiences in collective housing buildings. The first ones were built in the twenties and remained quite exceptional for more than one decade. The city's urban tissue was composed of narrow and deep lots occupied by bi-functional buildings: a commercial ground floor and a multi-storey single-family housing in the upper floors. Although this was the predominant form of housing since the medieval period (Barata Fernandes, 1999), in the first decades of the XX century, Porto knew another dwelling type: the single-family housing without the commercial ground floor. These mono-functional buildings (figure 1) reflected the preferences of the middleclass population aspiring to the bourgeois model of dwelling: an increasing sense of privacy, a hierarchical interior design, tri-partition of space (services, reception and private areas), and infrastructured service areas.

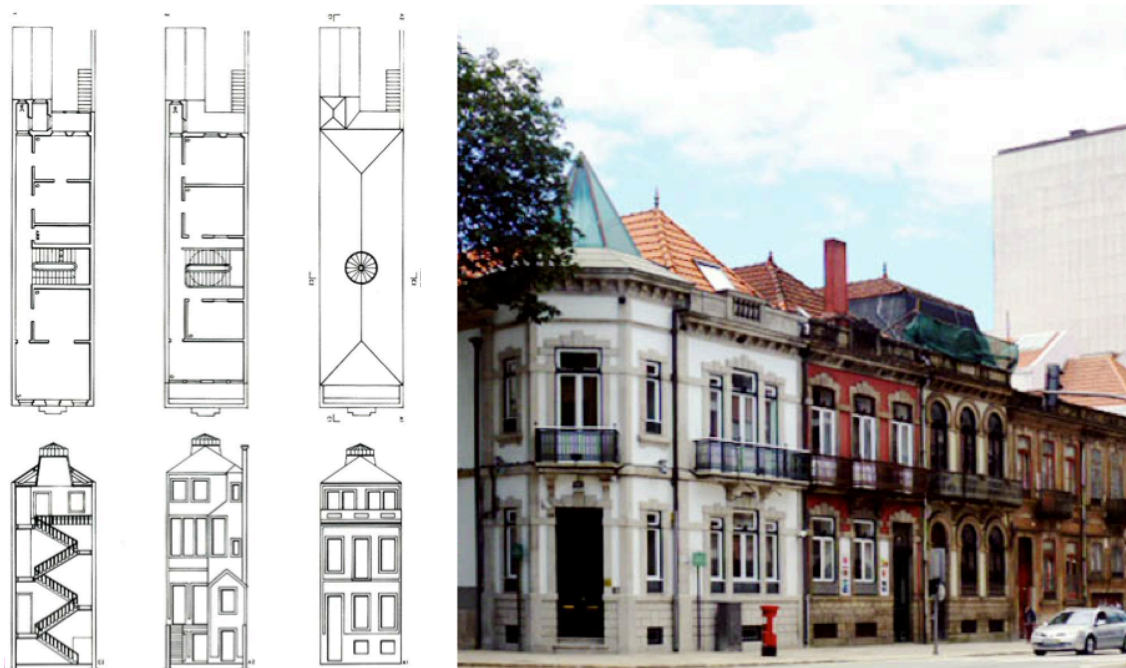


Figure 1 - Single-family terraced houses, Porto.
In the left: plans, section and elevation (Barata, 1999); in the right: photo by Marta Cruz.

In their relation to the urban system these buildings materialize a direct access from the street, even if the living spaces of the house were kept apart from the public reach by an elevation of the basement floor. Only the entrance door contacted the street directly. This typology was the main reference for the residential architecture in Porto for a long period and was in the backdrop of the cooperative housing, as we shall see.

In this cultural and architectural context, these two houses designed by the architect Alfredo Viana de Lima in 1942 (figure 2) were conceived as terraced houses, assuming a morphological continuity with the existing urban fabric. The two houses are small infill buildings accessible from the sidewalk throughout stairs. As they face directly the street we can find a narrow and deep private garden in the backyard. However, some objectual and formal concerns of the architectural design can be inferred from the mirrored façade of the two houses contributing to the strong sense of global composition.



Figure 2 - Housing Cooperative 'O Problema da Habitação', architect Alfredo Viana de Lima, 1942. Porto
In the left: urban inscription; in the right: photo by Marta Cruz.

The large majority of the houses built by housing cooperatives in the first half of the XX century shared this approach to the urban context, as we can see by observing the project of the architect Mário Abreu (figure 3). However, this cooperative house, replicated later in the adjacent lot, exhibits a conservative formal language very distinct from the former example. The terminal of the roof, the flowerbeds at the window, the ironwork in the balcony or in the stairs, and the stone in the main doorframe, all that signs differ from the depurated composition of Viana de Lima.

Despite all this, the urban concerns remain those of continuity and completion of a pre-existing structure. The singularity of each lot reinforces the step-by-step process of city construction, being the door or the gate the formal connections with the public realm.



Figure 3 - Housing Cooperative 'O Problema da Habitação', architect Mário Abreu, 1949. Porto
 In the left: urban inscription; in the right: photo by Marta Cruz.

Concerning the spatial organisation and the dwelling type, we can however notice that the models had started to shift into modernity. In Viana de Lima's project (figures 4 and 5) the whole layout proposes a refinement of the housing program. In the basement several rooms are service spaces comprising the maid's room, a sewing room, the pantry, etc. In the main floor the fluidity of the living room reveals a modern everyday life complemented by some delicate features: a winter garden, an open scullery, and, already in the beginning of the forties in a peripheral country as Portugal, a functional and continuous countertop in the kitchen. In the bedrooms' floor a clear attention was paid to the design of the distributive spaces and of the bathroom with two doors allowing the flexibility of use. An alternative staircase leads to the ultimate sophistication in such a middleclass dwelling: the playroom connected to the terrace and finally, a green house. All these features derive from the bourgeois house to which the inhabitants should have aspired when they ordered the project to the architect.

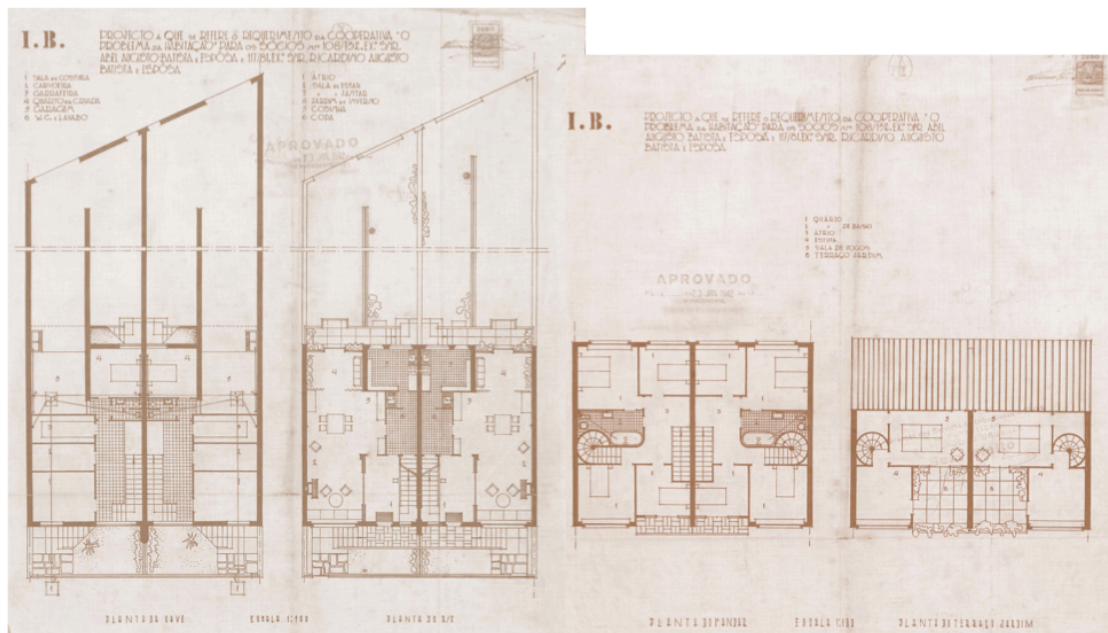


Figure 4 - Housing Cooperative 'O Problema da Habitação', architect Viana de Lima, 1942. Porto
 Plans.

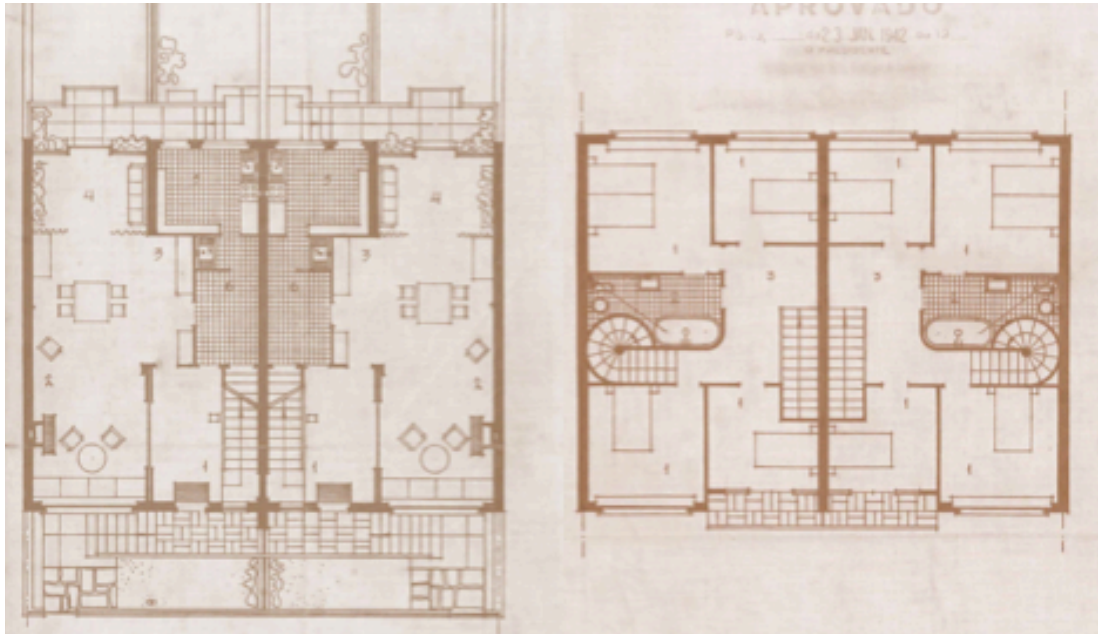


Figure 5 - Housing Cooperative 'O Problema da Habitação', architect Viana de Lima, 1942. Porto. Ground floor and first floor plans.

In a less elegant, erudite and modern language, the house conceived by Mário Abreu embodies this same desire. I wish to underline the complex relation between exterior and interior spaces organised through the balcony, the patio and the garden itself (figure 6). I notice an innovative position of the working surface in the kitchen, facing the garden, revealing the concern with the qualification of the everyday experiences and chores. And the same can be said of the first floor bathroom where the lavatory faces a wall combining a high window and, very likely, the mirror.

Even if less evident than on the former project by Viana de Lima, the search for pleasant experiences can be identified in the dissolution of the scullery in the space of the kitchen, a simple way of opening the view from the entrance till the garden in the opposite façade (figure 7).

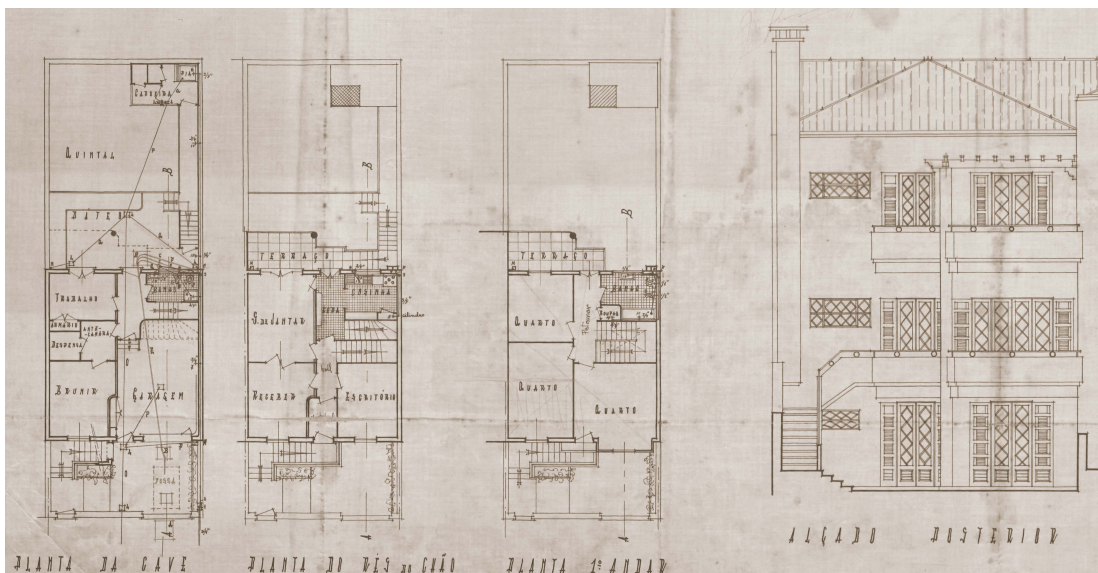


Figure 6 - Housing Cooperative 'O Problema da Habitação', architect Mário Abreu, 1949. Porto. Plans and rear facade.

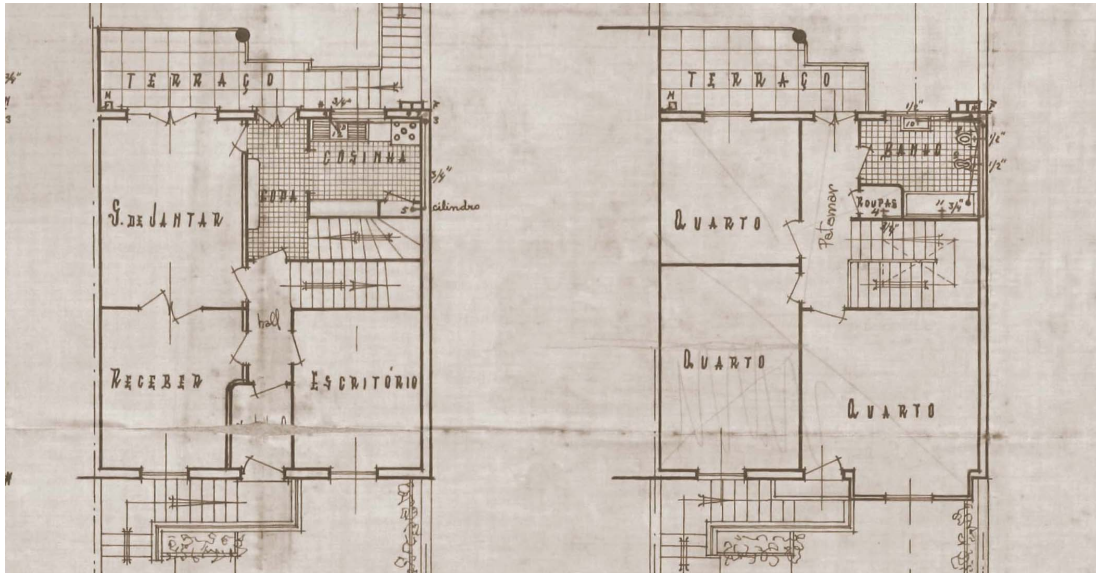


Figure 6 - Housing Cooperative 'O Problema da Habitação', architect Mário Abreu, 1949. Porto
Ground floor and first floor plans.

Part of the city and designed for the upper middleclass, these two examples perform a good starting point for the analysis of the projects of the other period under study. We saw how the domestic interior reflected some of the principles of the modern architecture (space fluidity, intentional treatment of the windows and views, terraced and green roof and functional | simplified kitchen area) while integrating the urban structures in a conventional mode.

In the next two examples, we will observe the inverse situation: the simplification of the domestic spatial devices, together with the elaboration of the relations with the urban context.

In the seventies and in the eighties most European cities expanded their residential areas to the suburbs, while remaining linked to the same historical centre for the institutional, functional and symbolic dimensions of the urban life of their inhabitants. Unlike the industrial urban transformations of the XIX century, these inhabitants were very often young families that desired to live in less dense territories and to accede to the propriety of their own house.

This desire of a new residential practice was a response to the unpleasant life in the city centre made possible through the generalisation of mobility provided either by public transportation systems or by increasing use of the automobile. These possibilities were articulated with a different perception of the importance of childhood, sports practice and leisure time spent in the nature. As the families were changing, so were their routines. The women spent less time at home, the children went to school from an early age, the mechanisation of the domestic chores sprawled. The middleclass populations started to invest in holiday's destinations and consumption goods and to consider that the best attribute to a house is to be functional and adapted to their lifestyle.

The housing cooperatives shifted their standards and objectives in this period. As explained before, the socio-political context changed as well, but what I want to introduce here is the difference of a

housing providing that integrates the inhabitant in the city and the housing providing that produces the urban structures (at least in part) as part of a residential project. From the single-family dwelling, the housing standards of quality started to include the access to public or collective open areas and the immediate extensions of the dwelling: patios, gardens or balconies.

In parallel to this, the urban elements of the city were in a renovation, in a reinvention phase. The streets, the squares, the access to the buildings, the parks or gardens, everything could be re-designed in order to propose a new vision of inhabiting.

The two selected projects reflect these common objectives. In Matosinhos, a city nearby Porto, the architect José Pulido Valente designed a residential project composed of four long buildings connected to the volume of the garage set and comprehending a green and play area in between. Two dwellings constitute the buildings of four stories, being acceded by a separate door directly from the outside (figure 8).



Figure 8 - CHE 'Gente do Amanhã', architect José Pulido Valente, 1980. Matosinhos

The dwellings are simple two stories apartments enjoying a large kitchen area, a living room, three or four bedrooms, laundry and bathrooms (figure 9). No other space as a balcony or a terrace is offered. But instead, large open areas seem to complete the residential indoor spaces. The main distinguishing trait of this project is the urban design that was intended to create a sense of community and of neighbourhood. The constructive standardisation and the simplification of the domestic interiors tried to promote some spaces for the family gathering: the living room, but mostly the kitchen, prepared for taking the meals in there.

The direct access to the dwellings from the exterior without any common staircase or entrance was seen as an opportunity for establishing privacy in a very close environment of a low-medium density housing.

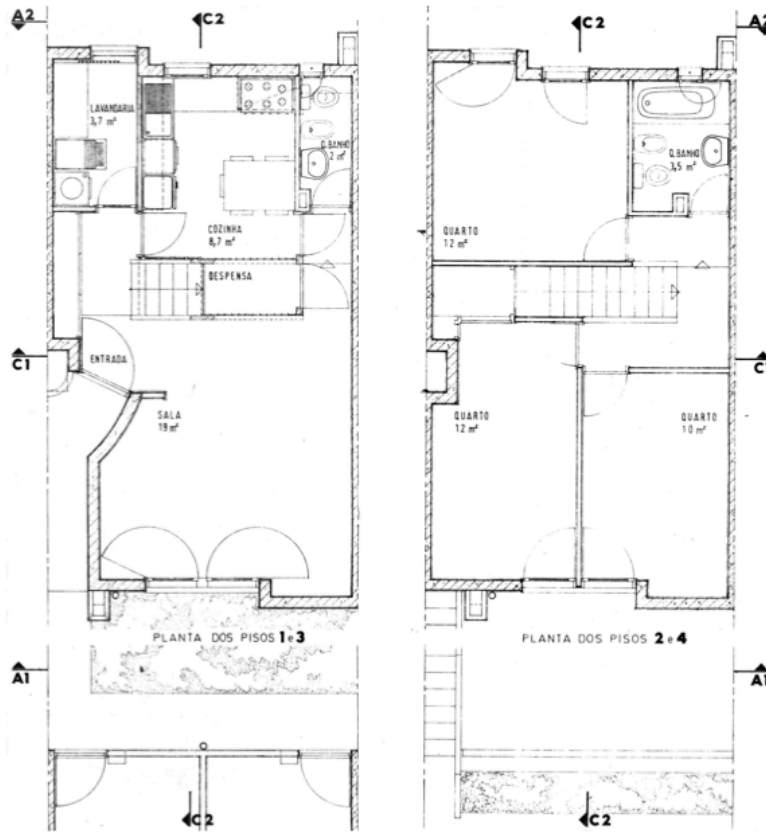


Figure 9 - CHE 'Gente do Amanhã', architect José Pulido Valente, 1980. Matosinhos

In the other case, the architect, Alcino Soutinho searched for a typological diversity within the same residential operation. In fact, the cooperatives also played an important role on providing effective choices in the dwelling type and size to the inhabitants. We can see on the global plan that the variation in the building morphology was the motif to a variation of the houses and of the green areas as well (figure 10). The dwelling type, even if very simplified as we saw in the former example, proposes a more complex relation to the exterior spaces adjacent to the house. In the type showed below - the row houses - the architect provided two patios, one in the front and the other in the back of the house (figure 11). This disposition allows a separation of the uses of these spaces increasing its usefulness for the dwellers and the retraction of the house from the street.

In regard to the interior layout, I wish to underline the immense open space of the kitchen given to the inhabitants as the possibility of deciding the uses of it and the interest of the two doors: one directly to the kitchen, the other on the opposite side leading to the living room.

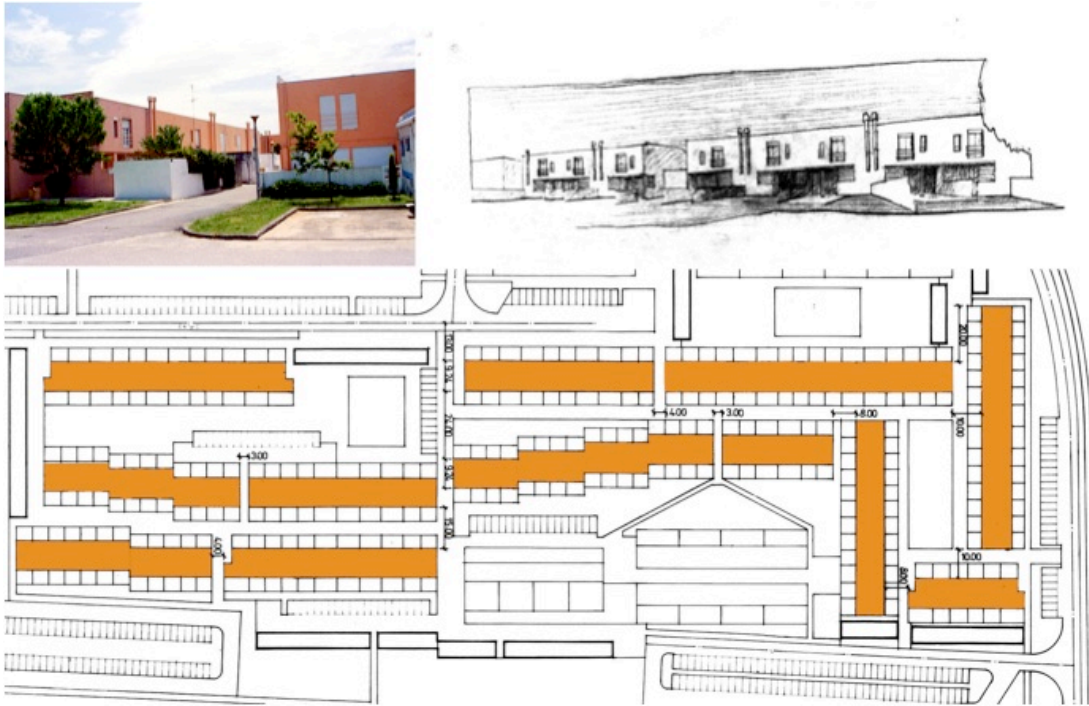


Figure 10 - CHE 'Habitovar', architect Alcino Soutinho, 1977. Aveiro

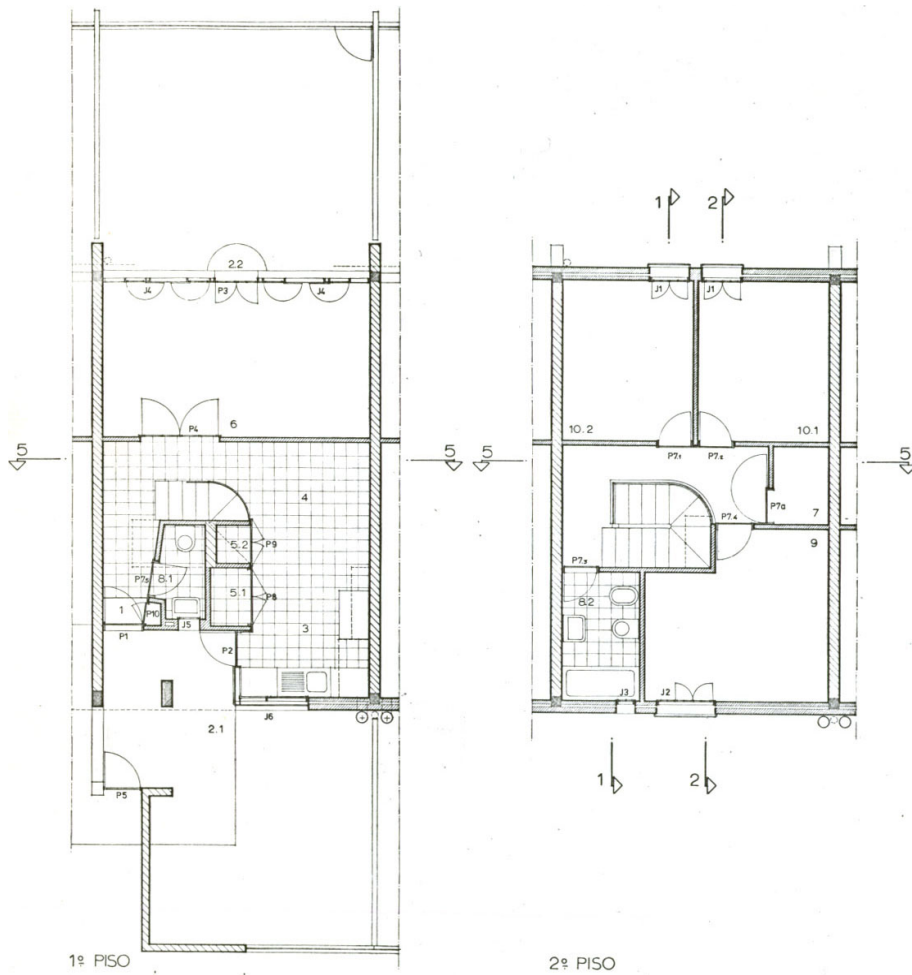


Figure 11 - CHE 'Habitovar', architect Alcino Soutinho, 1977. Aveiro

Discussion | conclusions

In this paper I have stated that the idea of Right to Housing as a common and shared responsibility introduced perceptible changes in the architectural design of the cooperative houses in Portugal. I argued that the vision of housing as a universal right, contributed to enlarge, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, the notion of inhabiting. This reasoning was based in the analysis and interpretation of the residential architecture built in the north of Portugal during the XX century by the housing cooperatives. We saw that when the cooperatives embodied the mission of providing affordable housing in a democratic and non-speculative way their architecture became more complex and diverse. By relating the residential building to its urban context we noticed that there was a shift from an infill building in the pre-existing fabric to a purposeful urban system capable of generating new developments and of offering to the inhabitants not only the house itself but also the immediate urban environment as green and play areas, common spaces for meeting and reunion, transportation, and service and commercial facilities.

The methodology allowed working and analysing the built reality from the interpretation of the elements integrating the architectural project: plans, sections and elevations and from the observation of the concrete situations in study. The results reached through this approach confirm the potentialities of these instruments as research tools and the validity of architecture as a determinant field of knowledge regarding the housing issues. The physical environments of societies need to be understood in their architectural form in order to seize its impact in the human behaviours and in the social structures. As we saw in this article, the architectural analysis is also an interesting mode of identifying new themes and subjects in the housing studies and of confirming the results of other disciplinary approaches.

Regarding the cooperative form, I would like to stress as a conclusion of this article the characteristics of the particular position in which they operate: directly issued from the populations' initiatives, self organised and democratically ruled. However, this study revealed as well the imperative role of the State endorsing the cooperatives. Being bottom up structures, the cooperatives need to be articulated a global vision of society without which they hardly promote more than the individual interests. The presented research work seeks for the identification of the variety of housing providers and the role of the State beyond legislating and financing.

At a time like ours, when housing is a main concern in regard to the public debt of nations and to the private debt of families, it is our believe that research on housing can contribute in a multitude of subjects to a global reasoning on the Welfare State reforms.

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