

# The Journey of SAAL in Italy. An Itinerant Exhibition (1977)

SAAL, Exhibition, Journey, Italy, Portugal

## /Abstract

Following the outbreak of the Portuguese Revolution on April 25, 1974, and the subsequent creation of SAAL – a semi-state service supporting citizen-led housing initiatives – Italy showed a strong and growing interest in the Portuguese experience. This was first reflected in a series of articles published in major architectural journals, and in the release of *Politica e Progetto. Un'Esperienza di Base in Portogallo*, the first book dedicated to SAAL. That interest later materialized in the organization of a travelling exhibition across the main schools of architecture in Italy, under the direction of Emilio Battisti and Francesco Marconi, and featuring the participation of Álvaro Siza, Alexandre Alves Costa, and Nuno Portas. The exhibition emerged as a unique moment of cultural exchange, marking the first international presentation of SAAL and prompting the Portuguese architects to construct a narrative around their recent experience. From Turin to Palermo, the three architects travelled across the Italian peninsula, presenting the SAAL process to professors and students, and fostering a meaningful dialogue between the architectural cultures of the two countries. Reconstructing this experience offers the opportunity to identify the key figures who played a decisive role in the dissemination of SAAL in Italy, while investigating their relationships and contributions within a particularly active and dynamic cultural context.

## /Author

Laura Camerlingo  
Università Iuav di Venezia  
lcamerlingo@iuav.it

Laura Camerlingo studied Architecture at the Università Iuav di Venezia and at the Instituto Superior Técnico de Lisboa. She graduated in 2024 with a thesis in the History of Architecture that explored the reception of SAAL (Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local) within the Italian architectural context during the 1970s. Since 2024, she has been a member of the C.SCARPA Advanced Research Centre at the Università Iuav di Venezia, where she is pursuing a PhD in the History of Architecture focused on the analysis of co-design approaches within the Italian architectural context between the 1960s and the 1980s.

In 1974, an unexpected event occurred, capturing the interest and attention of the international community. This event was the Portuguese Revolution.

Also known as the *Revolução dos Cravos*, the Revolution broke out on the 25th of April, bringing a new sense of hope and romanticism throughout the country and across Europe. Alongside the political and cultural upheavals, the architectural community maintained a steady focus on Portugal and the innovative forms of dwelling, social, and cultural design that were being developed during that period. International groups of students, architects, and intellectuals travelled to Portugal to document the Revolution and the subsequent events, becoming part of and bearing witness to History. Italy also expressed a clear interest in the matter, with a series of publications on what was one of the most significant processes to emerge after the Revolution: the SAAL service.

## The Emergence and Structure of SAAL

In the months following the Revolution, critical housing issues – accumulated over years of crisis – erupted with renewed urgency<sup>1</sup>. SAAL (*Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local*) was promoted as a response to this pressing situation<sup>2</sup>.

Promoted by Nuno Portas – at the time Secretary of State for Housing and Urbanism – SAAL imposed itself not merely as a project, but as a process placing greater emphasis on the method than on the “final product”, the house. Specifically, multidisciplinary teams of architects, engineers, psychologists, and urbanists – known as Brigadas Técnicas – formed the backbone of SAAL. These teams worked closely with local administrations, the State, and the local communities to mobilize the organizational capacities, as well as financial and human resources, of the population in order to actively shape their urban realities<sup>3</sup>.

Eventually, we may say that SAAL emerged as a process aimed at formalizing a practice through which housing solutions could be developed while also fostering a civic and political sense of community. Therefore, a certain degree of political consciousness and organizational capacity on the part of local communities

<sup>1</sup> The origin of the housing problem in mid-twentieth-century Portugal is closely tied to the economic and administrative policies pursued by the authoritarian regime then in power. In line with a capitalist model of economy and society, the 1950s saw the promotion of foreign capital investment in the country, aimed at supporting a late industrialization process and fostering monopolistic economic operations controlled by narrow, elite social groups. These economic initiatives, beyond their social consequences, also affected urban development, which became marked by disorganized growth and a lack of basic services and infrastructure (Alexandre Alves Costa, “L’esperienza di Porto,” *Lotus International*, no. 18 (1978): 66–105). To this must be added the acceleration of the decolonization process in the territories controlled by Portugal in Africa and Asia, which followed the outbreak of the Portuguese Revolution in 1974. As a result, a massive exodus of Portuguese citizens residing in those territories occurred, and their return to the homeland triggered serious social challenges. See António Costa Pinto, *O fim do império português: a cena internacional, a guerra colonial e a descolonização, 1961–1975* (Lisbon: Livros Horizonte, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> SAAL was officially established on July 31, 1974, by a ministerial decree issued by the Ministério do Equipamento Social e do Ambiente and the Ministério da Administração Interna. See *Diário do Governo*, no. 182, August 6, 1974, Series SSC1.6: Hélder Tiago (June 1974–May 1975), Section SC1: Arquitectura/SAAL, José António Bandeirinha Collection, Centro de Documentação 25 de abril da Universidade de Coimbra (hereafter cited as CD25AUC).

<sup>3</sup> See Francesco Marconi and Paula de Oliveira, *Politica e progetto: un'esperienza di base in Portogallo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977), 63–81.

was required, due to the principle that interventions had to be directly requested by the communities themselves<sup>4</sup>. *Comissões de Moradores* and *Associações de Moradores* – political and administrative forms of organization established by residents of degraded urban areas after the 25th of April<sup>5</sup> – thus became key actors in the SAAL operations, enabling a proactive role for the population in the transformation of its own living conditions<sup>6</sup>.

Alongside these new forms of social participation, a new perspective on the architect role emerged. The architect was seen as a figure capable of interpreting the intentions and aspirations of the population throughout new skills and concepts, becoming a political and social key figure<sup>7</sup>.

### The SAAL Exhibition Tour in Italy

The Portuguese Revolution and the emergence of SAAL captured the attention of the Italian architectural community, whose context at the time was marked by a series of circumstances closely resembling the Portuguese situation.

During the 1970s, Italy was affected by political conflicts, youth protests, and social demands – many of which were centered around the issue of housing. The country was experiencing political unrest and social tension, and within this context, the Portuguese Revolution was seen as an example to follow, offering new perspectives and possibilities<sup>8</sup>.

This interest was first expressed through a series of editorial publications, among which we may cite *Casabella*, *Controspazio*, *Città Classe e Lotus International*<sup>9</sup>. More significantly, a particular event stood out as a manifestation of this interest and curiosity: the organization of the very first exhibition on SAAL, which was hosted across eight different Italian faculties, accompanied by a cycle of seminars led by key figures of the SAAL service – Nuno Portas, Alexandre Alves Costa, and Álvaro Siza. According to the organizers, the exhibition and lectures were conceived as a valuable opportunity to promote the SAAL experience within the Italian architectural context, representing a dynamic occasion for discussion that could directly engage both the architectural scene and the student body. [Fig. 1]

4 See Marconi and de Oliveira, *Politica e progetto*, 52–54.

5 On May 1, 1974, the first sign of urban mobilization took place in Porto, with a demonstration by the residents of the bairro camarário of S. João de Deus. Their *Caderno Reivindicativo* was the first to be drafted. See José António Bandeirinha, *O processo SAAL e a arquitectura no 25 de abril de 1974* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 2007), 110.

6 See Bandeirinha, *O processo SAAL e a arquitectura no 25 de abril de 1974*, 88, 149–50.

7 See Marconi and de Oliveira, *Politica e progetto*, 46.

8 At the time, the Italian context was marked by the strong presence of extra-parliamentary groups—Lotta Continua, Potere Operaio, and the Movimento Studentesco—actively engaged in the political mobilization of the masses through real struggles for social demands. For this reason, particular affinities and overlaps with the Portuguese experience could be identified, making Italy an ideal recipient for its lessons.

9 Cristina Ramos states in her “A divulgação internacional da arquitectura portuguesa, 1976–1988” (PhD diss., Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto, 2016) that the year 1966 marks an important shift in the geographical origin of publications aimed at disseminating the Portuguese architectural experience, signaling a handover from French to Italian and Spanish domains.



Through this work, we have sought to reconstruct the experience, bringing to light new elements and clarifying still uncertain aspects, offering suggestions and reflections that may provide a renewed perspective on the architectural scene of 1970s Italy and the subsequent international dissemination of the SAAL experience and Portuguese architecture.

### Key Figures and Collaborative Networks

Firstly, the study reveals the key role played by several important figures of the time who were involved in organizing the exhibition. Especially, two architects stood out as the main promoters of the event: Emilio Battisti and Francesco Marconi.

Emilio Battisti was at the time a professor at the Politecnico di Milano, and the director of an editorial series focused on the themes of housing and the city – *Casa Città Territorio* – published by Feltrinelli. The interest for the theme of social housing inspired Battisti to travel to Portugal in 1975, where he became acquainted with the Portuguese Brigadas and met Álvaro Siza in person<sup>10</sup>. The experience of that journey led Battisti to recognize the political, social, and cultural affinities between Portugal and Italy, as well as the distinct differences

Fig. 1  
Faculty of Architecture in Rome, Valle Giulia, April 1977 (CD25AUC, 119 Alves Costa collection)

that underscored the innovative character of SAAL. Battisti identified in SAAL a direct, pragmatic and effective translation of the same social demands that were also animating the Italian context, where these claims were often filtered through a more theoretical and ideological lens, and rarely translated into concrete architectural practice<sup>11</sup>.

At the time, Battisti was in contact with Franco Purini, whom he had met during their professional collaboration at Vittorio Gregotti's studio. Meanwhile, Purini had established a connection with Francesco Marconi at the University of Architecture of Rome, where the former was working as a tutor and the latter was a student<sup>12</sup>. Marconi is remembered as the first – and only – Italian architect directly involved in SAAL, having moved to Portugal and joined a Brigada Tecnica when the Revolution broke out. For this reason, in 1976, Purini encouraged him to “historicize” his experience within the Portuguese SAAL, first introducing him to the editorial board of *Casabella* (where Marconi published the article “Portogallo: Operação SAAL”<sup>13</sup>) and later to Battisti<sup>14</sup>, who at the time was directing the Feltrinelli series.

### Conceiving an Idea: From Book to Exhibition

The encounter between Battisti and Marconi led to the publication of *Politica e Progetto: Un'Esperienza di Base in Portogallo*, a book released by Feltrinelli in 1977. Although the book has not yet been fully acknowledged by critics, *Politica e Progetto* stands out as a fundamental resource for shedding light on new aspects and details of the SAAL experience, as well as for understanding how SAAL was communicated abroad. Moreover, the book appears to have served as the main foundation upon which the exhibition was structured, synthesizing and collecting the materials produced by the Brigadas during their activities, and eventually becoming the exhibition's own catalogue. In fact, it was during the preparation of *Politica e Progetto* that Battisti and Marconi decided to translate the content of the book into a more engaging and dynamic form. Thus, they conceived the idea of the exhibition, aiming to bring the Portuguese experiment into the academic sphere<sup>15</sup>. [Fig. 2]

To further stimulate a vivid debate around the questions raised by SAAL, Battisti also invited the key figures of the process to participate in a series of seminars, offering their own experience and testimonies. Eventually, Nuno Portas, Alexandre Alves Costa, and Álvaro Siza were involved by Battisti<sup>16</sup>: the

11 This assumption is clearly expressed in a letter from Emilio Battisti to Francesco Marconi, November 24, 1975, Emilio Battisti Collection, Archivio del Moderno (hereafter cited as AdM).

12 Franco Purini, interview by author, Rome, August 4, 2023. In a particularly turbulent climate—marked by the crisis following the economic boom, the disillusionment of '68, and the Anni di Piombo—the Italian university environment was itself permeated by intense political and cultural ferment.

13 Francesco Marconi, “Portogallo: operação SAAL,” *Casabella*, no. 419 (1976): 2–21.

14 Francesco Marconi, interview by author, Coimbra, May 31, 2023.

15 Francesco Marconi, interview by author, Coimbra, May 31, 2023.

16 Letter from Emilio Battisti to Álvaro [Siza], November 1, 1975, Emilio Battisti Collection, AdM.



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former for his role as the founder of SAAL; Alves Costa as director of the most efficient and active branch of SAAL (the SAAL Norte); and the latter as the most representative Portuguese architect of the time. In fact, thanks to the efforts of Vittorio Gregotti – who had promoted Siza's work in Italian architectural journals since the early 1970s<sup>17</sup> – Siza was already well known in Italy, and likely throughout Europe<sup>18</sup>.

### Organizing the Tour

While Battisti coordinated the initiative from Italy through direct contact with Portas, Alves Costa, and Siza, Marconi managed the organizational efforts from Portugal<sup>19</sup>. Thanks to his role, he managed relationships and communication among the various Portuguese actors and, with the support of Álvaro Siza<sup>20</sup>, curated the materials produced by the different Brigadas featured in the exhibition, in order to present their work to the Italian public. Initially, only the Brigadas

17 In 1972, Vittorio Gregotti published his first article dedicated to the work of Álvaro Siza: Vittorio Gregotti, “Architetture recenti di Álvaro Siza,” *Controspazio*, no. 9 (1972): 22–24.

18 Alexandre Alves Costa, interview by author, Porto, April 11, 2023.

19 “Exposição Italia/SAAL” by Francesco Marconi, Subseries Exposição Italia/SAAL 1976, Series SSC1.16: *Apetrechamento dos serviços*, Section SC1: *Arquitetura/SAAL*, José António Bandeirinha Collection, CD25AUC.

20 Letter to Emilio Battisti (“Caro Emilio Battisti, Comprendi bem o teu italiano”), Emilio Battisti Collection, AdM.

Fig. 2

Faculty of Architecture, Libera Università Abruzzese “G. D’Annunzio”, Pescara, April 1977 (CD25AUC, 119 Alves Costa collection)

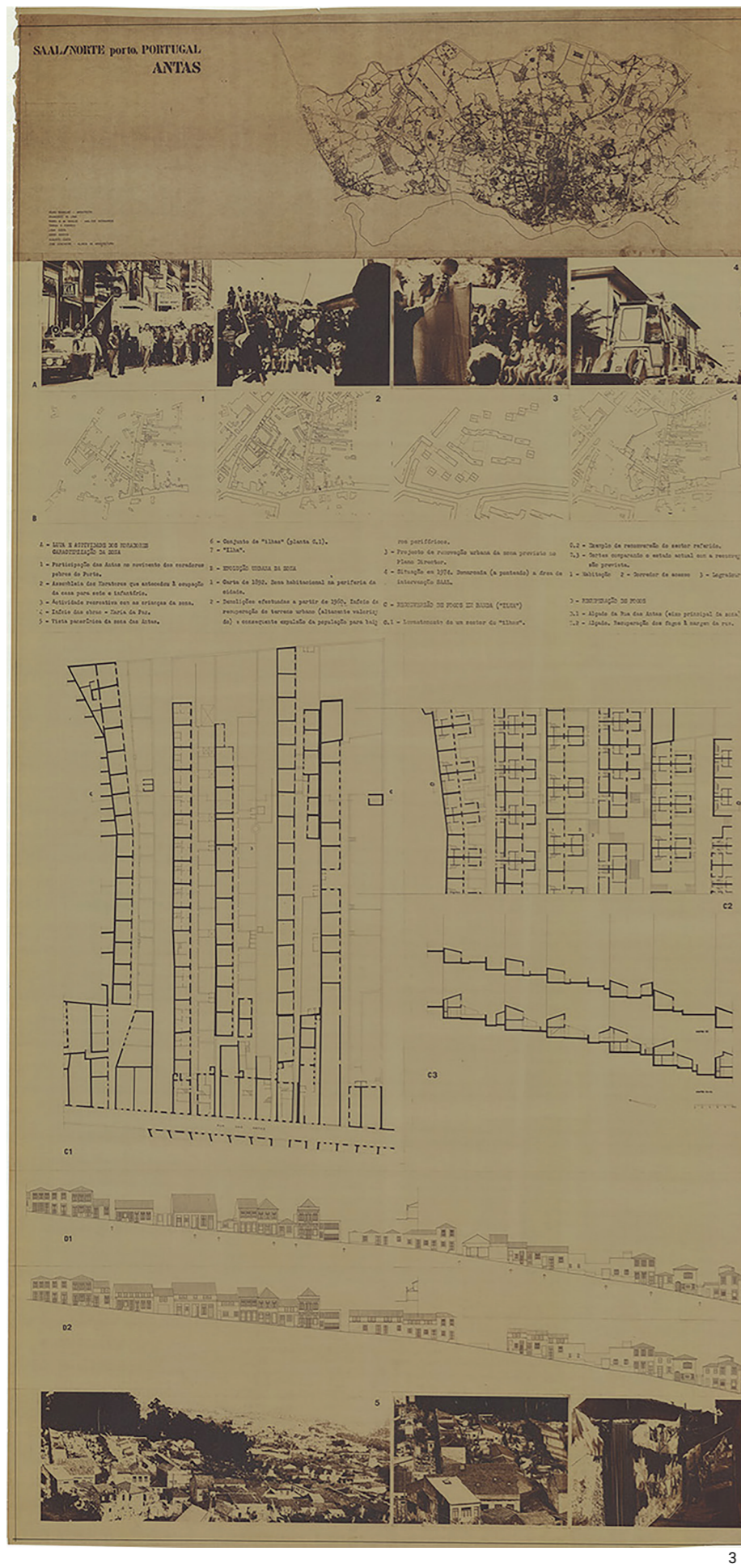


Fig. 3  
 One of the panels displayed during the exhibition, heliographic print, 1x2 m (Casa da Arquitectura, Pedro Ramalho collection, section Projectos de Arquitectura, series 0.24 SAAL: Antas)

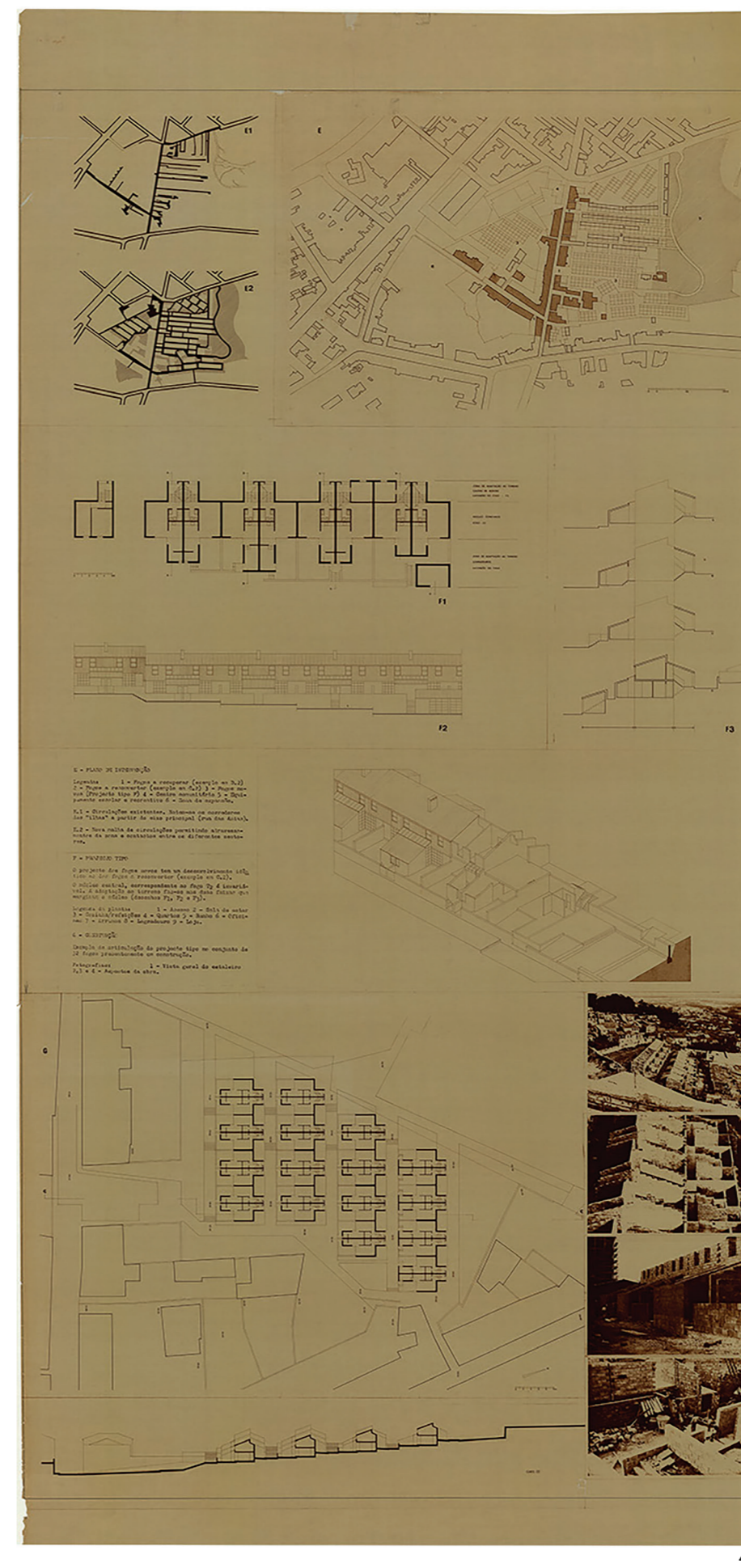


Fig. 4  
 One of the panels displayed during the exhibition, heliographic print, 1x2 m (Casa da Arquitectura, Pedro Ramalho collection, section Projectos de Arquitectura, series 0.24 SAAL: Antas)

of SAAL-Norte were invited to participate in the event. Eventually, however, the invitation was extended to any Brigada willing to take part<sup>21</sup>, reflecting a genuine curiosity and enthusiasm for the Italian exhibition<sup>22</sup>. Each Brigada was asked to produce its own material to represent its activities, including architectural drawings, schemes, photos, and a written text, with a focus on the early design phases (those most explicitly marked by political ideology)<sup>23</sup>.

In total, a series of nearly thirty panels (1m by 2m) was produced, involving ten different SAAL interventions<sup>24</sup>. The organization of such diverse materials proved to be particularly challenging, revealing one of the essential features of the SAAL process: its intrinsic heterogeneity. SAAL was, by nature, highly variable, differing from area to area, operation to operation, and Brigada to Brigada. It is important to underline that the panels created by the SAAL-Norte Brigadas proved to be the most expressive, coherent, and well-organized. This characteristic reflects the particular effectiveness of the SAAL-Norte teams in narrating their ideas, processes, and activities, thereby conveying a strong and unified identity. Given this evidence, it becomes clear why their materials and panels are the only ones that have been well preserved in the archives, and consequently the only ones presented in this study. [Figg. 3–4]

Simultaneously, Battisti contacted the representatives of all architecture faculties active at the time in Italy and invited them to take part in the event. The faculties of Torino, Milano, Venezia, Firenze, Pescara, Roma, Napoli, Reggio Calabria, and Palermo were initially contacted and informed about the logistical arrangements<sup>25</sup>. Subsequently, the number was reduced to eight, and the final itinerary of the exhibition, and of Portas, Alves Costa, and Siza, was as follows: Torino, Milano, Venezia, Pescara, Roma, Cosenza, Reggio Calabria, and Palermo<sup>26</sup>. Travelling by car along the peninsula [Fig. 5], the three architects conducted a two-week tour – from April 17 to 29, 1977 – ensuring that the exhibition opened at least one week before the seminars they held at each faculty<sup>27</sup>.

Typically, the first part of the day was dedicated to lectures by Portas, Alves Costa, and Siza, while the afternoons were reserved for open debates with students<sup>28</sup>. Each of the three architects presented a lecture focused on their specific

21 Letter from Pedro Ramalho to the secretary of M. Santos Coelho, June 11, 1976, Subseries Expediente, Series SSC1.22: SAAL/Norte, Section SC1: Arquitectura/SAAL, José António Bandeirinha Collection, CD25AUC.

22 This enthusiasm is clearly expressed in an official communication issued by the secretary of SAAL-Norte: Communication from M. Margarida Santos Coelho, June 28, 1976, Subseries 12: Exposição à Itália, Series SR2: Coordenadoria Correspondência, Subsection SSC2: Comissão Coordenadora, Section SC1: Arquitectura/SAAL, Alexandre Alves Costa Collection, CD25AUC.

23 "Proposta per una mostra sull'intervento SAAL da divulgare nelle facoltà italiane," November 1, 1975, Emilio Battisti Collection, AdM, "Exposição Italia/SAAL" by Francesco Marconi, Subseries Exposição Italia/SAAL 1976, Series SSC1.16: Apetrechamento dos serviços, Section SC1: Arquitectura/SAAL, José António Bandeirinha Collection, CD25AUC.

24 Letter from Emilio Battisti to Piero Derossi, April 26, 1976, Emilio Battisti Collection, AdM.

25 Letter from Emilio Battisti to Alexandre [Alves Costa], January 7, 1977, and letter from Emilio Battisti to Francesco [Marconi], March 10, 1976, Emilio Battisti Collection, AdM.

26 According to the list sent to the Bonomi Pagani Travel Agency on March 9, 1977: Letter to Bonomi Pagani Travel Agency, March 9, 1977, Emilio Battisti Collection, AdM.

27 AdM, Emilio Battisti collection, [Prof. Cesare Roda, Milano, 5/3/1977].

28 Letter to "Cari amici," April 5, 1977, Emilio Battisti Collection, AdM.



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area of involvement in the SAAL operations: Portas spoke about SAAL and its general features; Alves Costa focused on the SAAL-Norte; and Siza offered a presentation more closely related to his design process<sup>29</sup>. [Fig. 6]

### Impact and Legacy

The event was warmly welcomed by all the faculties – particularly by the professors – and a genuine interest and enthusiasm were expressed toward the SAAL experience. Nevertheless, the exhibition offered the first opportunity for Portuguese architecture to go abroad and disseminate its ideas. For the first time, Portuguese architects were compelled to construct a narrative around the events that had shaped their recent history, prompting deep reflection and a renewed sense of awareness about what had taken place. Moreover, the event provided an ideal setting for the formation of a long-lasting network of professional and personal connections between the two countries. In fact, following this experience, the international dissemination of SAAL – and of the Portuguese architecture – grew significantly, along with the increasing presence of Álvaro Siza in Italy<sup>30</sup>.

29 Alves Costa, interview by author, Porto, April 11, 2023; and Álvaro Siza, interview by author, Porto, June 2, 2023.

30 The presence of Álvaro Siza in Italy has been thoroughly reconstructed in Roberto Cremascoli and Francesco Moschini, *Álvaro Siza in Italia: il Grand Tour 1976–2016* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, 2016).

Fig. 5

Siza and Portas on the Via Appia, between Rome and Sabaudia, April 1977 (CD25AUC, 119 Alves Costa collection)



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Among the most notable instances of encounter and collaboration, we may recall the participation of Siza in the 1976 Biennale di Venezia, invited by Gregotti, who was also curated the event. Although this Biennale took place a year before the SAAL exhibition, it was entirely part of the same context of internationalization and growing interest in the works of Siza. Another key milestone in this trajectory was the 1979 first international retrospective dedicated to Siza's work – *Álvaro Siza architetto 1954–1979* – organized at the PAC in Milan by Gregotti and Italo Rota.

It is also impossible not to mention the many professional and design collaborations that followed, in which Siza took part in Italy from the late 1970's to the present day. One of these was the Belice '80 "laboratory" in Sicily, in which Siza participated thanks to Pierluigi Nicolin, whom he had met in Palermo during the exhibition tour of 1977.<sup>31</sup> This design experience did not end with Belice '80, but continued throughout Italy, with the project for *Campo di Marte* on Giudecca Island in 1985; his residential projects in the Veneto countryside during the 1990s; and public commissions in Naples in the early 2000s, to name just a few.

Within a layered, complex, and at times winding trajectory – where every moment, every phase represents a meaningful step, full of potential – the SAAL travelling exhibition must be credited as the first to have truly recognized these

possibilities and this richness. It played a fundamental role in the dissemination of the SAAL experience, as well as in the internationalization of Portuguese architecture. We may conclude that this exhibition contributed, in an unprecedented way, to the development of further experiences that enriched the collaboration and deepened the relationship between Portuguese and Italian architecture.

Fig. 6

Nicolin and Siza during a seminar on SAAL, Faculty of Architecture, University of Palermo, April 1977 (CD25AUC, 119 Alves Costa collection)

31 Pierluigi Nicolin, interview by author, Milan, December 4, 2023.

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