



REVIEW OF

***The SAAL Process.
Architecture and Participation
1974-1976, Serralves, Porto, 2015.***
(Exhibition catalogue, Montreal, Centre Canadian
d'Architecture, 12 may - 11 october 2015)

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<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/6732>

ISSN 2611-0075

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KEYWORDS

SAAL, housing, Portugal, participation

The exhibition, curated by Delfim Sardo held in Montreal in 2015, and organized by Fundação de Serralves – Contemporary Art Museum di Porto, with the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) documents a major chapter in Portugal's recent cultural and architectural history.

Launched in the aftermath of the regime's fall, at a time when the country's democratic arrangement was still struggling to take shape, the SAAL (Serviço de Apoio Ambulatorio Local) program was a plan of public residential intervention to provide a response to the strong pressures originating from the housing rights movements that had already arisen before the Carnation Revolution.

It was thus not a matter of dealing with phenomena of immigration from the colonies, or with the urbanization of the working classes towards major city centres affected by weak industrialization; it directly involved a population that, in many cases, already resided in highly degraded rural or urban areas, or that had been left without housing due to the speculative processes of urban growth that multiplied in the post-Salazar transition period.

Coming on top of demands for housing was the strong rootedness to a specific place, giving the construction the value of a foundation act.

But this is not the only aspect that set this operation apart from the numerous public housing construction programs that spread in America and in the rest of Europe.

The involvement of the movements themselves in the development process is one of the greatest aspects of novelty – when not of innovation – for the regulation of planning as well.

In fact, a transfer took place, towards the inhabitants, of a significant part of the competences held by state institutions in the matter of public residential building. Citizens groups chose the areas, constructed the path and the building phases from design to work site, monitored economic aspects and in part financed the works on their own, followed the assignment of housing, and intervened in the choice of designers, at times even refusing their support as if in a normal customer/designer dialectic.

From the decision establishing it on 06 August 1974 (slightly more than three months after the regime was deposed) to its dissolution in 1976 (after the coup of 25 November 1975), the SAAL program received 271 intervention requests, 174 of which found a response in a project, thus marking an important moment of critical reflection upon and verification of housing models and planning practises, carried by some of the major players in this affair since the 1950s, and well identified in the projects chosen by the exhibition.

The Lisbon/Porto dualism emerges – broadly highlighted by the literature on the architecture of Portugal – in addition to the extension

to such “peripheral” locations as: Setubal, Algarve, and Alentejo. Also, it is effectively represented how the SAAL program was a training ground for the designers, whether they were the leading players of the time, leading the technical brigades in support of the inhabitants (Fernando Tavora, Pedro Ramalho, Nuno Teótonio Pereira, and Nuno Portas, to name but a few), youths who were soon to become points of reference, like Alvaro Siza and Gonçalo Byrne, or students, like Eduardo Souto de Moura or Adalberto Dias.

Starting from the title, then, the show specifies how the architectural results do not have a weight greater than the determination of a process, in which «planning, design, and construction are the synthesis of a multidisciplinary activity of technicians and inhabitants».¹ It is in certain cases an empirical method, a “pragmatic utopia” (see the curator’s contribution to the catalogue) marked by a strong realism, but not an anarchic phenomenon, as has been emphasized by some of the operation’s opponents. The very possibility of conflict is contemplated, and is in fact manifested in certain cases, as it is brought within the process itself.

These considerations are fundamental for giving proper meaning to the term “participation”, which underlies any political and cultural setting in this moment in history.

It is not mere mutual listening between the parties, but an overturning of the established design process, as presented by Giancarlo De Carlo in the fundamental text republished in the catalogue, conducted also through the contribution of other disciplines, such as pedagogy and sociology.

It is also through this collective work that the common methodological foundations are laid, which to the contrary produce “home by home, neighbourhood by neighbourhood” solutions.

In addition to what was produced, an idea of “project” has been consolidated, and has persisted, while renewing itself, in many subsequent practises, becoming the foundation for a manner of conceiving architecture that makes it possible to attribute to the SAAL process a role of fundamental passage for Portuguese architecture, as *Inquerito sobre a arquitectura popular portuguesa* (1955-57) had years earlier.

Many of the personalities cited above are involved in both experiences and belong to the two generations of architects that were able to lead Portugal out of isolation, bringing it within the international context with an original proposal of reviewing modernity.

In the SAAL experience, as in the results of *Inquerito*, we read some distinctive traits of this vision of design and architecture: attention to the features of the vernacular as an occasion to renew language, the antiformalist thrust, the passage from functional schemes to forms of use of space, typological study and the concession to revolutionary spontaneity, the (non-regionalist) interpretation of context, to be dealt with

1. A. Alves Costa, *L'esperienza di Porto*, in “Lotus International”, No. 18, 1978, p. 66.

in the same spirit if conducted on rural areas, and the degraded peripheral areas of the city or historic centres, in Lisbon as in the *Ilhas* of Porto.

These traits breach the traditional disciplinary distinctions between planning, urban restoration and new construction, bringing everything within a single question of "architecture".

There are certainly factors of criticality in *a posteriori* analysis, highlighted for example by N. Portas himself², then minister of housing policies, such as the low innovation of the residential models that were developed, in the face of innovation of decision-making/institutional process, or the difficulty, manifested in certain projects, of decoupling the architect from his or her demiurgical role.

However, the scope of the SAAL process has not gone unnoticed abroad, particularly for its inclusion of both political and social factors. The most significant works have attracted attention in many countries. For example, the interest in Portugal shown by French or Italian architectural culture (as shown by the presence of Vittorio Gregotti's contribution to the volume accompanying the show) begins here – a critical fortune that, today, rightly appears as well-established as ever.

2. N. Portas, M. Mendes (eds.), *Portogallo*, Milano, Electa, 1991, p. 26.