

HEALTH: THE DESIGN, PLANNING AND POLITICS OF HOW AND WHERE WE LIVE

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**IN PURSUIT OF A HEALTHY CITY:
BOUÇA HOUSING COMPLEX BY ÁLVARO SIZA (1977),
A LESSON TO RETAIN.**

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INTRODUCTION

Being interested in improving the physical and mental well-being of an urban society means, above all, being concerned about the state of health of people and their cities. If we believe that health results mainly from the influence of the physical and social environments, which promotes a certain lifestyle, then the role of the city in generating health is extremely relevant. However, we are also aware that a healthy city requires more than just good health care services, decent houses and safe surroundings. It also has to provide people a variety of experiences and resources, safety and accessibilities.

If a community is a social unit with something in common, such as values or identity, a location-based community (also called community of place) – which implies being situated in a given geographical place, like a neighbourhood, i.e., living in close proximity – enables important social ties through sharing a sense of place. As it is known, the word community comes from the Latin “*communitas*” meaning “public-spirit”, and also from “*communis*”, which means “shared in common”. Daniel Kemmis, in *Community and the Politics of Place*¹, argues that the loss of capacity for public life (which inhibits our ability to solve crucial issues) is related to the loss of a sense of place. He claims the urgent need of a renewed sense of inhabitation, of community rooted in “a place” and of people dwelling in “that place”, which can shape politics into a more cooperative and more humanly-satisfying enterprise, forming better people, better communities, and better places. Somehow, a sense of community offers many appealing features of a broader social relationship: safety, familiarity, support and loyalties. So, concerning a healthy city, isn't community also a relevant criteria?

In the Social Sciences, the field of analysis about the city and the urban is vast and discusses invariably the need to comprehend urbanization as a social construct. If the city is the stage of collective life, the appropriation of its public spaces reveals, somehow, the reflection of social interactions, networks of power and domination, and reflect its social tensions. Consequently, the configuration of space has a determining role in the way its inhabitants appropriate it. Space practices exist in the domain of sensation, i.e., in the way people perceive space individually, hence they are subjective. But, on the other hand, the space of representation of the inhabitants conforms the living space, representing the field of intervention and action. They result from an ideological production. So, “*it is pertinent the consideration of the existence of a dialectic relation between the spacial structure and the social structure and of the connection between spatial configurations and collective identities.*”²

The Bouça Housing Complex was designed by Álvaro Siza (1977) after the Portuguese Revolution of 1974, promoted by an organization called *Serviço de Apoio Ambulatorio Local* (SAAL) that was formed to seek state aid to reduce poor housing conditions in Portugal. This social housing program aimed to accommodate poor people, mostly country people that were living in slums. Nearby a commercial centre of Porto (Boavista), four parallel rows of four-story blocks (composed by two duplex-dwellings fixed in high) are interspersed with open-air terraces, forming four narrow courtyards. They are all attached to a perpendicular thick wall, which works as the gateway of the metro station, a kind of corridor of distribution, but also as a sound barrier against the metro (along the original tracks of the old railway train). To complete the ends of the rows, defining entrances to the landscaped courtyards between rows, there are four free-standing community buildings facing the streets, giving to this dwelling complex a more urban character.

The conception of the project was made through a long participation process, a “patient dialogue”. The future inhabitants became participants in the project act, dealing directly with the architect, who tried to integrate and fulfil their needs and desires, while bearing in mind the available budget for the operation. In these circumstances, Siza designed 130 individual houses (two-story apartments), which was a particularly contentious issue, seemingly incompatible with its economic limitations. Actually, the architect had the support of the original occupants, right from the beginning, managing a housing solution that’s still a success. After several stages of constructions and rehabilitations along four decades, it is also inhabited nowadays by middle class families and young people, living together among the old inhabitants, sharing a sense of place. So we wonder: what has its architecture got to do with it? What is the real meaning of neighbourliness, concerning urban health? How can housing achieve it? What are the available mechanisms, from the architectural point of view, to contribute to a healthy city?

In this paper, we state five main points that may help us to understand this particular case:

1. Centrality.

The place of the housing complex implantation, in that particular part of the city, has proved itself crucial. Being nearby a commercial centre with easy access to groceries, chemist's shop, restaurants, bars, cafes, shopping centres, schools, hospitals, cultural facilities, public utilities, administration services and all a city can supply, is absolutely relevant. The chance of building it close to city centre, instead of locating the housing complex in the surround of the city, eventually on a proper dwelling zone, come out essential. Probably, the most pertinent quality of that place is the fact that is located in heart of the city.

Here, by *centrality* we mean the easy relation with the city, fuelling urban life, enabling benefit from it in a useful and healthy way. It may not be a strictly architectural decision (it’s more related to political and economic issues), but it has, undoubtedly, huge repercussion on its architecture.

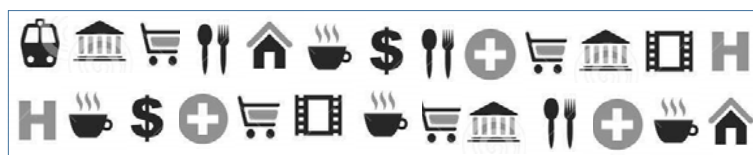


Figure 1. *Centrality [implantation]*

2. Fluidity

The relationship to the context is also very important regarding, not only transports accessibility, having easy access to all kinds of public transports and easy connection by car, being close to the main road network, but also promoting public crossings by foot, namely permitting shortcut for those who use the (Lapa) metro station.

Parallel to the metro line, Siza draw a thick concrete wall of distribution that frames the whole complex. There, several gates (in the both levels) link directly to the galleries and courtyards, simplifying the connections for its inhabitants, as well as streamlining the connections with the city, allowing a public crossings for those who just need to pass through the complex in a quick and efficient way.

Here, by *fluidity* we mean not being closed to itself, self-contained, avoiding the limitation of connections just to its own inhabitants. It means being open to the city, allowing public crossings and, consequently, a greater transparency, permeability, urbanity, giving to this housing complex a less “ghetto” character.

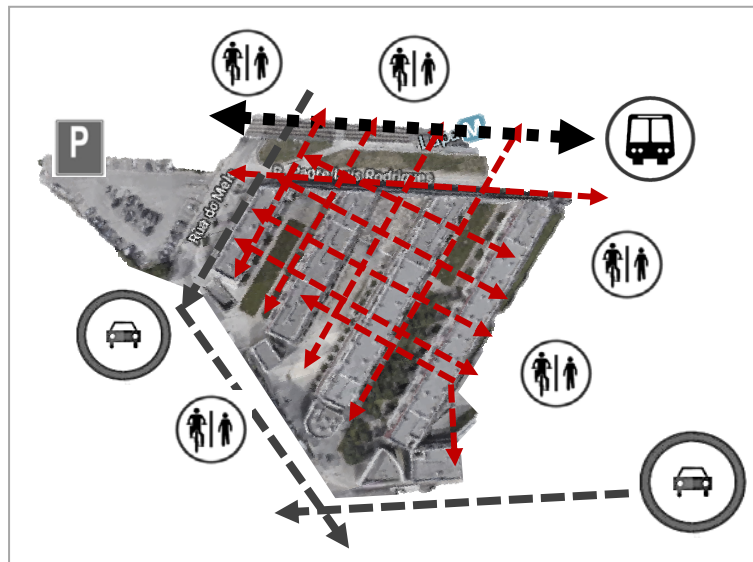


Figure 2. *Fluidity* [context]

3. Communicability

Regarding the built environment, this double duplex-apartments typology in a row shares the access of the upper houses through upper galleries (a sort of corridors of distribution). But, on the other hand, the houses based on the ground-floor has direct access from the courtyards, framed by landscaped spaces (kind of open patios) that are also common, social and public spaces. Being forced to share these spaces, the inhabitants can just pass through it, play around or communicate. But somehow, it increases a community spirit, being able to provide more mutual support, creating a renovated neighbourhood atmosphere.

Even more, the site circulation pattern brought about by the public passage through the courtyards to the metro station, formed a proper relationship between buildings and courtyards. In a way, all these access system works against isolation and individuality.

Here, by *communicability* we mean face-to-face practice of public life. Somehow, these Siza's project decisions decrease isolation, compelling interconnections and communications between its inhabitants, fostering the spirit of community.

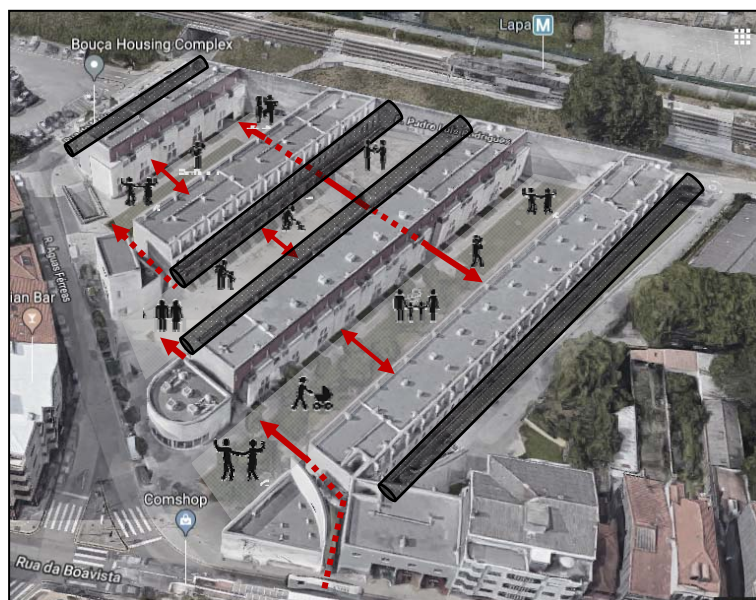


Figure 3. *Communicability* [typology]

4. Diversity

Concerning the inhabitants, it all begun with just one low social stratum (a poor and uneducated community), but on the latest stages of construction it was opened to other kinds of population. “*When all the work was concluded, the market reaction showed that the type of housing not only did not entirely correspond to the current trends in the demand for economic housing – for better or for worse – but also, on the other hand, they were attractive to other sectors of the population: students, young professionals, newly formed families – protagonists of the mobility characteristic of the contemporary city (...),*”³ wrote Siza on the 12th of September of 2006.

In fact, these economical typologies are well dimensioned, having flexible spaces, also proper for a home-office but, above all, they have the privilege of being a two-level dwelling, which is ideal for the new generations. Actually, the original residents kept their apartments, but now there are the old poor tenants and new middle-class residents; old couples mixed with new couple with children; or just single people living alone or with partners, but with more levels of education (architects, designers, artists, university students), living in the same neighbourhood, having a more comprehensive kind of population, eluding any type of discrimination, inducing to a more reasonable and balanced social structure.

The change in the economic and demographic nature of the new occupants suggest a more healthy relation between the inhabitants and the housing complex (people vs building), making it easier to camouflage people's social background, allowing them to adopt another lifestyle characteristic, reducing their poverty stigma, regardless of their social background or education levels.

Here, by *diversity* we mean the mix-stratification of the inhabitants, living all together, as an important factor of the maintenance of a balanced housing complex. From the architectural point of view, the quality of its typologies are relevant to attract all kinds of residents.



Figure 4. Diversity [inhabitant]

5. Identity

What had been an example of emergency housing for poor residents is now seen as a model for residential development in the city. The fact that the project has the signature of Álvaro Siza, a famous architect (an icon of the Portuguese architecture), gives it more attractiveness. Siza's reputation had grown when he won the Pritzker Prize in 1992. Since then, his buildings gained a new status, and Bouça was no exception. Consequently, more people (namely young architects) who recognize and identify the architectural qualities of the author, longed to live there too. And it happened, indeed!

Nowadays, this housing complex has character and some landmarks, which creates a sense of place and identity. Somehow it had acquired a community atmosphere, consolidating the concept of neighbourhood. A good example is the Saint John' night (the patron saint of the city). On that night, all the inhabitants get together on the courtyards to organise this gathering. They drink, eat, dance, and play around all night long, all together like a real community. And this is an amazing event that happens every years, which is really uncommon in any contemporary urban society.

Here, by *identity* we mean the feeling of “belonging”, achieved by the relation between the people and the built environment, its architecture and place. When the notion of neighbourhood gains a new meaning as a space-symbol, involving several social qualities that powers the concept of a healthy city.



Figure 5. Identity [neighbourhood]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is probably easy to find several problems and flaws in this project, especially if we have in mind that it has existed for forty years now and that it was made under substantial controlled costs. For instance, the stairs are the main solution for communication between levels, there is no ramps or any elevator

system, but that was considered normal at the time and now the new inhabitants are pretty aware of this lack when they choose this houses to live in. Nonetheless, one thing we know for fact: the Bouça Housing Complex wisely passed the test of time, surviving almost intact, aside from some inevitable repairs needed after all these years of intensive use. Nowadays it is a renovated neighbourhood with character and identity. On the 12th of September of 2006, Siza wrote: “*It is not a perfect work. But is that the main thing?*”⁴

So, after analysing each point, what are the lessons to retain?

Through *centrality* [implantation], an easy relation with the city is guaranteed, encouraging urban life, enabling people to benefit from it in a useful and healthy way. Promoting *fluidity* [context] avoids being closed to itself, self-contained, dodging the limitation of connections just between its own inhabitants. It means being open to the city, allowing public crossings, and greater transparency, permeability, urbanity, giving to the housing complex a less “ghetto” character. Evoking *communicability* [typology] it encourages face-to-face practice of public life, inducing to a less isolation, promoting natural interactions among people, compelling interconnections and communications. Endorsing *diversity* [inhabitants] implies a mix-stratification of its inhabitants, living side by side, guaranteeing a greater socio-economic stability that can be reflected namely in the conservation of the common spaces of the housing complex. Nourishing *identity* [neighbourhood] it helps to gain a sense of safety, familiarity and support between the inhabitants.

Probably, blending it all together, having all these factors in consideration was the best solution, or at least, we believe it contributed for the success of this Housing Complex, after all these years. Now it belongs to the city and plays a role in a pro-active way. So, as a stage of social life, it underwrites a healthy city solution. And probably this is as far as a housing project can go, concerning the architectural practice.

To sum up, we believe that all of this induces the concept of neighbourhood, the feeling of identity, the sense of community, leading to less isolation, so to a healthy solution. In this paper we intended to reflect about the main decisions of this example, by Álvaro Siza, to enhance the importance of the relationship between the physical and the social environment, promoting connectedness and neighbourliness as parameters that embody a likely solution to ease some problems associated with health and the built environment, seeking a better understanding of the interconnectedness and potential of it, gauging the role of architecture in our contemporary society.

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