

The different fate of the Siza's SAAL housing in Porto.

- **Abstract**

This paper will focus on the two works that Álvaro Siza designed in Porto in the context of the SAAL program. Conceived in two different situations, they share the same initial assumptions but their fate was diverse: in Bouça, the 2006 rehabilitation and expansion process allowed Siza to complete his vision for the site; otherwise, the Sra. das Dores block was affected by a recent intervention that exposed the decay problems that affects the building.

- **Keywords**

SAAL Process, School of Porto, Álvaro Siza, S. Victor, Bouça

- **Acknowledgments**

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- **Introduction**

The SAAL (Ambulatory Service of Local Support) was an ambitious housing program that occurred in Portugal, created by Nuno Portas (Secretary of State of Housing and Urban Development after the revolution) in June 1974 (Bandeirinha, 2007, p. 13); in October 1976 its coordination was handed over to the municipal authorities, causing the end of the development of SAAL projects in Porto, where the city council was very critical of the program (Bandeirinha, 2007, p. 177-218).

The different fate of the two SAAL operations that Álvaro Siza conducted in Porto is a perfect case study on the topic of reuse, mainly because of the confrontation between the original assumptions and the recent rehabilitation processes that affected them.

- **Bouça: the victory of the “proletarian Island”.**

The first project for the Bouça housing was designed in 1973, supported by the Portuguese Fund for the Promotion of Housing (FFH). The solution developed by Álvaro Siza presented four parallel bands, forming a non-orthogonal angle both with the train line (in the north) and the street of Boavista (in the south); the two outer bands were designed with six floors (three duplex houses overlapped) while the inner bands presented only four (corresponding to the superposition of two duplex houses).

After the revolution of 1974 the project was included in the SAAL program; the project that was partly built in 1977 was designed by a technical team headed by Álvaro Siza, which also included Anni Gunther Nonell, Maria José Castro, Sérgio Gamelas and Jorge Moreira (Bandeirinha, 2007, p. 416). The design was very similar to the 1973 plan, with the same four parallel bands in the same position; the main difference was that all the four bands presented four floors, with two duplex houses overlapped (image 1).

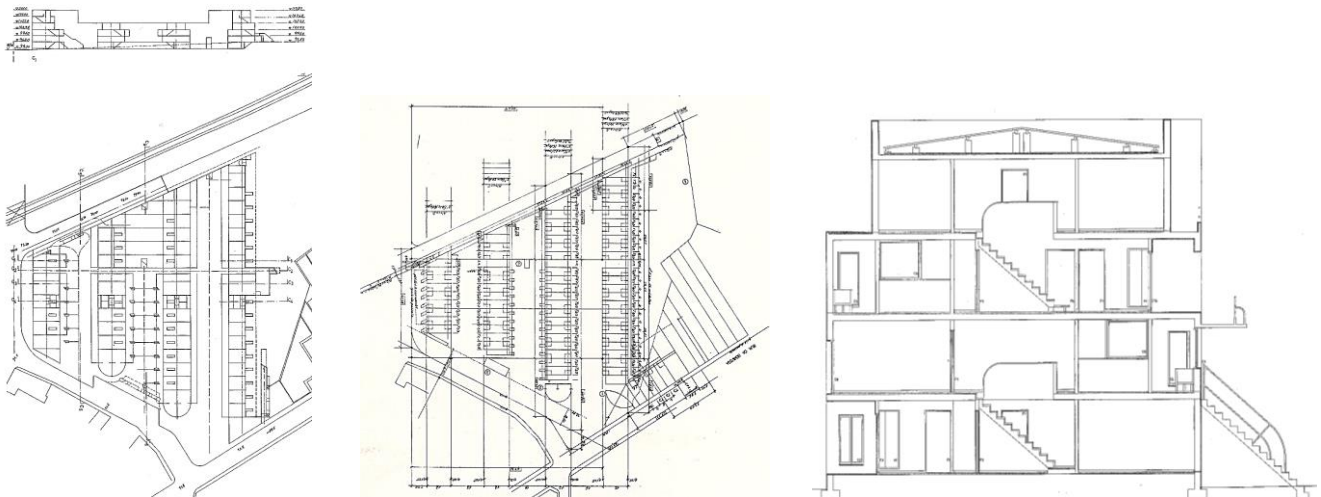


Image 1 – Plan and schematic section of Bouça housing, 1973; plan and section of Bouça SAAL housing, 1976 (drawings by Álvaro Siza).

The set was clearly exceptional in the context of the SAAL Program in Porto, not only for its relative high density but also for its typological originality. Although it presents a scheme of parallel bands, similar to other interventions of smaller scale, it achieved a higher density without assuming the character of a collective housing block: the access to the front door of the dwellings located in the upper floors was arranged in a set of galleries that extended the public space, creating a sense of community in the neighbourhood.

The design shows evident influences of modern economic housing of the twenties and thirties, namely of the Alvar Aalto project for the Sunila Factory (Kotka, Finland, 1936-54) or the Bruno Taut “Horseshoe Estate” Siedlung (Berlin, 1925), famous for the meaningful use of the colour red.

However, Siza crosses these modern models with the memory of the ‘islands’ of Porto, creating, in this process of acculturation, an original typology.

The so called ‘islands’ are a particular kind of slums which were the main housing problem of the city at the time, well-known by teachers and students of the Architectural course of the Beaux-Arts School of Porto.

The eighteenth and nineteenth-century expansion of the city was structured in narrow and deep allotments, in which the house faced the street and left a considerable empty space in the back, initially used as a garden. With the growth of industrialization and the consequent need for low cost housing in the city, most of these interior spaces were occupied by rows of small houses (around sixteen square meters each, in a 4 by 4 meter plan), constructed side by side, opening to a narrow outdoor passage that organized the access to the dwellings and communicated with the public street.

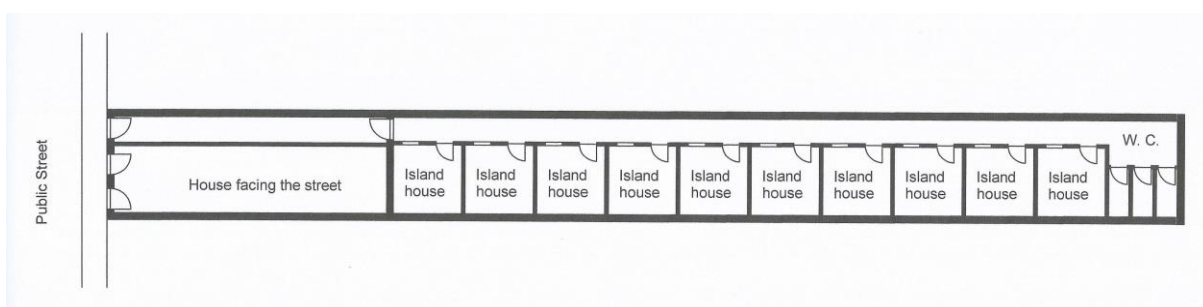


Image 2 – Schematic plan of a Porto ‘island’ (E. F.).

These 'islands' formed small neighborhoods where the dwellers could develop a good social atmosphere, but it lacked every aspect of basic sanitary conditions: it didn't have water distribution or public sewage, and the numerous families had to share small and insufficient common sanitary facilities (image 2).

It seems evident that the Bouça housing projects were based on the idea of considering the traditional 'island' a formal model, while improving it with new meaning, dignity and comfort. In Siza's plans, we find the consideration of the community qualities of this scheme, but also its typological structure: they present a linear development based on the simple aggregation of dwellings with a narrow front, using the rhythmic repetition of the doors and windows as a composition theme. The plan of the dwellings presents an aggregation of modules with approximately 4 by 4 meters (comparable to the ancient 'islands' – image 3). The public space created between the four bands, closed to the railway line and open to the city, conforms a succession of suitably dimensioned courtyards which enhances the interaction between the residents.

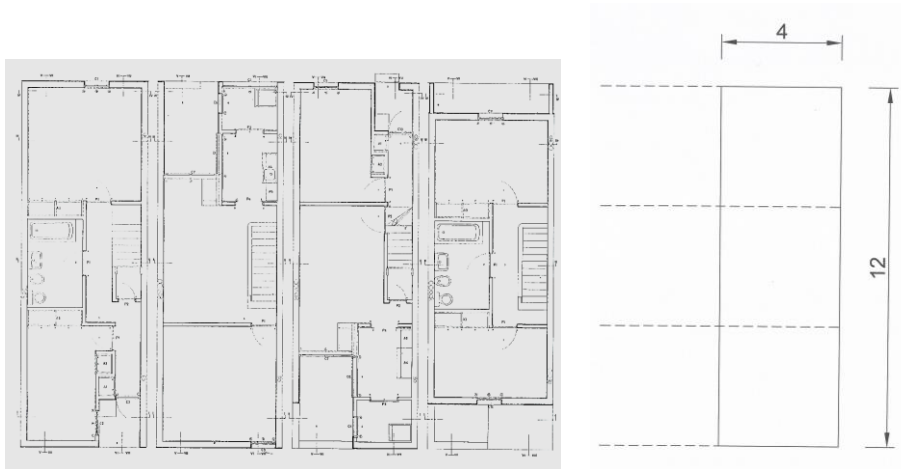


Image 3 – Plan of the dwellings of Bouça SAAL housing, 1976 (drawings by Álvaro Siza; composition scheme E. F.).

Even though only the two central blocks were actually built in the seventies, it is clear that the scale of the Bouça housing implied a social and political message intentionally proposed before the revolution and reinforced by the new political context. The 'new island' assumes proudly the strong impact of its image and disrupts the urban fabric, showing itself to the city, proclaiming a new urban order that simultaneously rejects the traditional morphology of the urban space and the 'Athens Charter' doctrine (Fernandes, 2015, p. 137).

The set remained incomplete until the end of the century; then, after almost thirty years, the construction was completed according to a new version of the initial project. This recent rehabilitation process (2001-06) allowed Siza to complete his vision for the site, with slight upgrades, namely the introduction of a covered car parking.



Image 4 – Bouça SAAL housing, after the 2006 renewal operation (E. F., 2006).

Destined primarily to be inhabited by the former members of the Bouça committee of residents, the houses had little demand by this group. However, they were "attractive to other sectors of the population: students, young professionals, newly formed families" (Siza, 2006, p. 362); hence, some critics have mentioned that the houses were bought, very cheaply, by people without any economic problems (Nadais, 2009). Nevertheless, the result is that today we find different classes living side by side with the first residents or their descendants, in the same type of houses. So, this neighbourhood has a true inter-class community spirit and is perhaps the closest approach built in Porto to an idea that Siza has always advocated in his writings on the SAAL Program: «a physical world created for and by a society that wants to be classless» (Siza, 1976, p. 87).

- **The fate of S. Victor.**

Unfortunately, the fate of S. Victor, the second intervention of Siza in the SAAL Process, was very different. The operation began in November 1974, instigated by the mobilization of a group of students (Eduardo Souto Moura, Adalberto Dias, Graça Nieto, Manuel Sambade and Paula Cabral) impressed by the precarious social situation of the area, which they had studied on previous schoolwork; they invited Siza to lead the technical team, which also included Domingos Tavares and Francisco Guedes. The construction of phase one started in 1975 and the Sra. das Dores block (image 5), the best known intervention of Álvaro Siza in St. Victor, was completed in 1977 (Bandeirinha, 2015, p. 28-29).

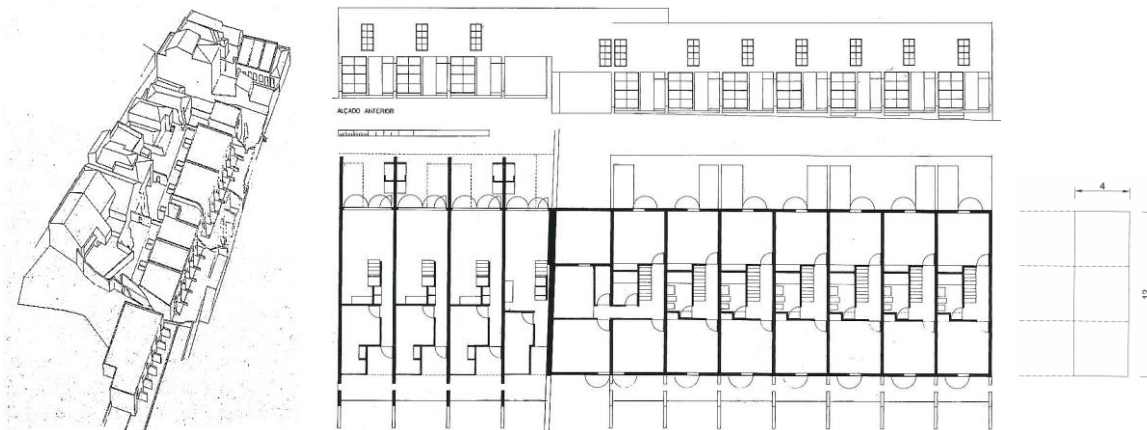


Image 5 – Sra. das Dores block, SAAL housing, 1976 (drawings by Álvaro Siza; composition squeme E. F.).

However, this construction was a small part of Siza's vision for the S. Victor area, which was composed of two sectors: the Sra. das Dores quarter and the S. Victor quarter.

In the Sra. das Dores block the organization of each single house seems to be the rule that generates the global form, by a simple process of repetition. Unlike what happens in the Bouça housing, the 'new island' appears in its traditional place, the interior of the block, invisible from the city; however, in terms of composition, we find here a similar approach, especially in the organization of the dwellings: equally narrow and long (approximately 4 x 12 meters), with the central staircase organized in the longitudinal direction of the lot and a similar internal distribution of spaces. Although it is located in a precarious urban situation, the Sra. das Dores block shows a concern in relating to everything that surrounds it; the new building was organised in a perpendicular alignment which crosses the ruins of the old organizational structure of the neighbourhood, leaving the remains of the ancient walls as a memory. This urban gesture is also a political statment, marking the domination of the new reality over the traces of the past.



Image 6 – Senhora das Dores block after the reordering of the interior of the quarter (E. F. 2006).

Unfortunately, this opposition between the new housing and the pre-existing walls is no longer possible to perceive today. Over the years, the site was profoundly altered by a series of interventions which demolished the ancient walls; in the end of the nineties, the building was already “in an outrageous state of dilapidation, while the completion of the scheme was not only ignored but mutilated” (Barata, 1997, p. 186). Between 1996 and 2007, along with the construction of new social housing within this block (“Conjunto de Habitação Social nas Fontainhas”, by Helder Casal Ribeiro and Ana Sousa da Costa), a reordering of the area was conducted, which gave the Sra. das Dores building a visibility that contradicts the initial intentions of Álvaro Siza: nowadays, the housing bands face a large free area and are almost monumentalized, which makes the bad conditions of its present state even more evident.



Image 7 – Houses recovered by Siza in the SAAL operation of S. Victor, present state (E. F., 2018).

Nevertheless, the sad story of Senhora das Dores does not end in this block. The projected intervention comprised four types of work: “a) on completely free land inside the courtyards; b) on outlying land never built on previously; c) reconstruction, exploiting foundations and walls of semi-destroyed buildings around the courtyards; d) recovery and adaptation of outlying buildings already uninhabited.” (Siza, 1976, p. 89).

According to this strategy, Siza designed the reconstruction of several houses in the same quarter. Some were never built, in this first phase, and those that were actually constructed were never inhabited: some were later demolished and the others are in ruins, today (image 7).

In a second phase, the SAAL team of S. Victor considered the “possibility of recovering the island as a basic element in the urban fabric” (Siza, 1976, p. 87; Costa, 2002). This project was abandoned at an early stage; however, the approaches presented in Siza’s sketches can be a relevant subject for the contemporary debate on the intervention

in the 'islands' in Porto, because this is still a problem in the city, today: according to a recent survey there are still 957 remaining, where more than 10.000 people live, often in very poor conditions (Vázquez; Conceição, 2015, p. 27).

However, today, 'islands' are not seen only as a problem; in a city that is under great tourist pressure, which increases the prices of housing in the center, they represent an opportunity to find alternative housing spaces at low cost, outside the usual logics of the real estate market (Lage, 2016, p. 109).

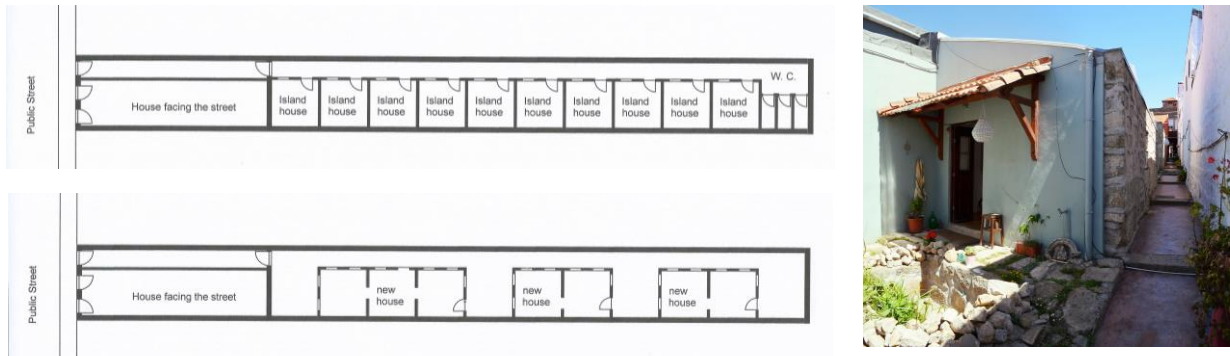


Image 8 – Scheme of the usual processes of recovery of the islands (E. F.), similar to the one used by Bernardo Amaral in S. Victor street (photo by E. F., 2018).

During the second half of the twentieth century, some island rehabilitation experiments were carried out, based on the obvious idea of the demolition of some units and the assemblage of the remaining ones in groups of two or three, allowing to double or triple the initial area. It is still possible to duplicate the area obtained, adding a second floor, if the conditions of the site allow. With this method it is possible to obtain houses with acceptable areas and the possibility of opening windows on three facades (image 8).

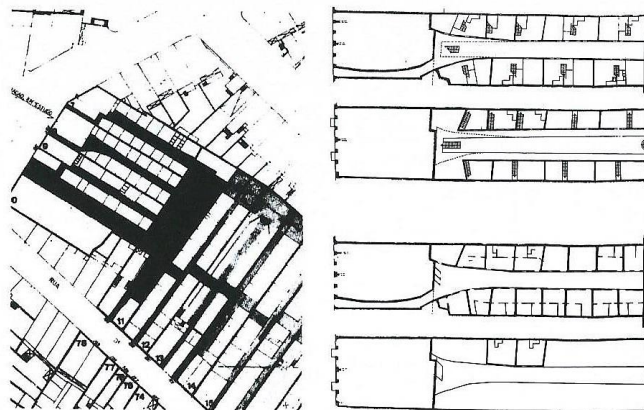


Image 9 – S. Victor SAAL housing, squetches of the proposal for the second phase (drawings by Álvaro Siza).

In the last years, a new wave of recovery of islands has appeared, that followed these principles; for example, see the renewal plan for an island located in S. Victor street 113 (Bernardo Amaral, 2015 – image 8). But all these rehabilitation experiences consider the island individually, regardless of the potential relationships that exists within a block.

Siza's idea for S. Victor was different. Not only because he proposed a more dense organization of the dwellings, maintaining the typology of the ancient "island", with a single facade, but also because he considered the block in its whole, interconnecting the semipublic space of the different islands in order to create an internal spatial articulation. Usually, the external space of the traditional "island" is a blind alley, a dead end, a path that does not contribute to the accessibility dynamics of the city. However, in areas like S. Victor, where the block has a large number of 'islands',

it is possible to think of connecting these spaces, creating an internal structure of pedestrian circulation that crosses the block. A semiprivate circulation structure, alternative to the traditional street and open to public use, which would allow the concept of 'islands' to gain a new identity; no longer a ghetto, it could become part of a new urban structure (Siza, 1976; Costa, 2002; Pereira, 2019; Laje, 2016).

• Conclusion

After the conclusion of Sra. das Dores block, in 1977, it could be seen as a perfect symbol of the initial intentions of the SAAL program in Porto. The black and white photographs showing the contrast between the dark ruined walls of the ancient islands and the shining white facades of the new dwellings appeared all over the world, in the pages of the most famous architectural journals (Siza, 1976).

On the other hand, the two incomplete and isolated blocks build in Bouça, constructed in the same year, transmitted a very different message, symbolizing the partial unsuccessfulness of the SAAL process in Porto.

Today, this two-sided coin maintains the two contrasting faces, but they have changed places.

In Bouça, the story had a happy ending: the housing was rehabilitated and completed by the architect that initially projected it, with the concern of preserving the integrity of the original project while updating the program. And the result is a masterpiece of architecture and urban design. Otherwise, looking at Sra. das Dores block, one can't help to feel the defeat of Siza's intentions.

However, it is still possible to realize the full potential of the unbuilt plan began in the second phase of the S. Victor operation. At a time when the 'islands' are beginning to be seen as a contribution to minimize the lack of affordable housing in the city, the ideas presented in Siza's sketches can be very useful to coordinate the current dynamics of rehabilitation in those areas.

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