Assembling an alternative: pushing the development of a new housing programme in Porto

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Abstract

Through an analysis of the process that enabled the implementation of a programme developed as a reaction to the housing problem in Porto, this paper seeks to understand how academic actors can participate more directly in society. This process draws on the theoretical work of several authors who have studied how to create a political and operational space for innovative actions to take place, and it is presented here as an example of how those theories can be put into practice. The text is divided into three parts: 1) description of the set in which this action takes place; 2) review of this process in more detail from the smaller actor's point-of-view; 3) some conclusions that point out the path for the future development of this (or other similar) process(es).

Keywords: Institutional innovation, actor-network, public value, affordable housing.

1. Introduction

The lack of affordable housing is a growing problem in many European countries, which has become a major topic in academic forums. Although there is some consensus on the roots of the problem – liberalisation of the housing market and new economic dynamics– it is hard to find a common position to respond to this crisis. One possible approach is social re-assembly, which aims to gather and reorganize all available actors and resources in order to counterbalance hegemonic dynamics. Cases that manage to move from theory to practice provide valuable information in order to analyse the pros and cons of these approaches.

This paper aims to contribute to this discussion by presenting one of those cases where both authors are directly involved. This particular action seeks a broader impact by moving from collective practice to public policy. The paper does not focus on the outcome - the results are not clear yet - but on the process – context, practices and networks – aiming to discuss how to promote institutional innovation and what the role of small actors and academic institutions in that process can be. The process will be presented focusing on three main questions:

- How to recombine different actors with opposing interests in order to create a new transformative collective actor?
- Is it possible to build a satisfactory public response to the housing problems and, if so, which kind of relation is needed concerning public administration?
- How to choose the right equilibrium between a) following each actor's established protocols that grant coherence of speech but lack operational ability, and b) accepting compromise with other actors, gaining transformative capacity, but risking coherence, critical distance and acceptance of peers?

2. Reacting to the housing crisis

2.1. Housing problem as a matter of public policies

In Portugal, the aftermath of the recent economic crisis aggravated existing housing problems. In urban centres, housing rents increased 49% (Lisbon) and 33% (Porto) in a 30 month period. This situation can be understood by acknowledging the key role of public policies. During the crisis, the government tried to reanimate the stagnant economy by boosting emergent dynamics (changes in financial markets and tourist trends), through the liberalization of the housing market and investment incentives, thus creating a major housing problem. Recently, reacting to the rise in broad public awareness, the leftist coalition who took office in 2015 presented a New Generation Housing Policies (NGHP) aiming to promote affordable housing based on urban renewal and to regulate the sector.

Graph 1: Housing rents and evolution of household income. Source: Nuno Travasso

rents in Porto ···· *rents in Lisbon* ▮ *householding's annual income*
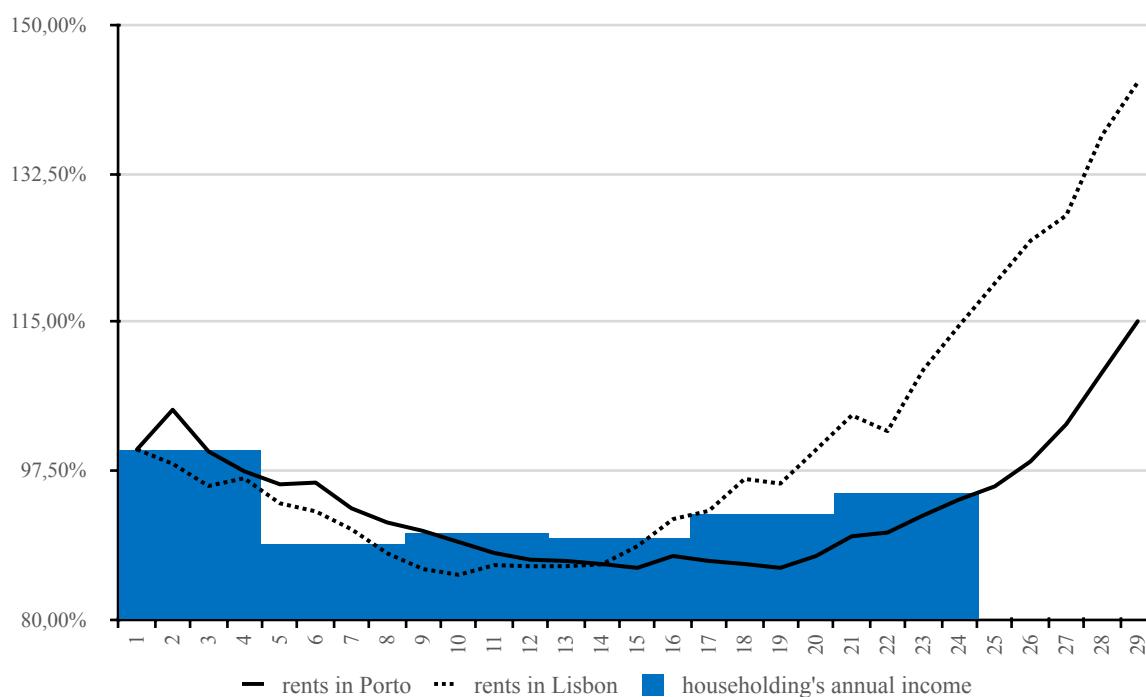
2.2. *Two actors*

Within this context, MDT (an academic research group) and Habitar (a third sector association) joined efforts to promote an answer to the housing crisis. They have sought to actively participate in the society they are part of, and to test and produce knowledge. This collaboration relies on a common basis: the answer to the crisis should not be dependent on a structural change or on the addition of exogenous elements, but should come from the activation and recombination of already available actors and resources (Boeri, 2012; Portas et al, 2015), which implies a change in the planning culture of public institutions (Ferrão, 2011)

2.3. *The programme*

The two actors have reached an agreement with the municipality of Porto to create a programme that aims to democratize urban renewal through a new mediation structure that will connect all the actors involved (owners, residents, technicians, public entities) promoting simple, fast and transparent processes, granting existing public funding and enabling the accumulation of experience in order to optimize future operations (see Varea Oro, A., Vieira, P., 2018). In this way, owners who do not have the means (financial, technical) to enter the existing real estate market, gain a new choice, besides selling their property or leaving it to fall apart. Moreover, by solving owner's problems, the programme expects to answer the needs both of the people looking for affordable housing and the city itself, by promoting exemplar urban regeneration interventions.

Graph 2: Programme structure. Source: A. Varea and P. Vieira (2018)
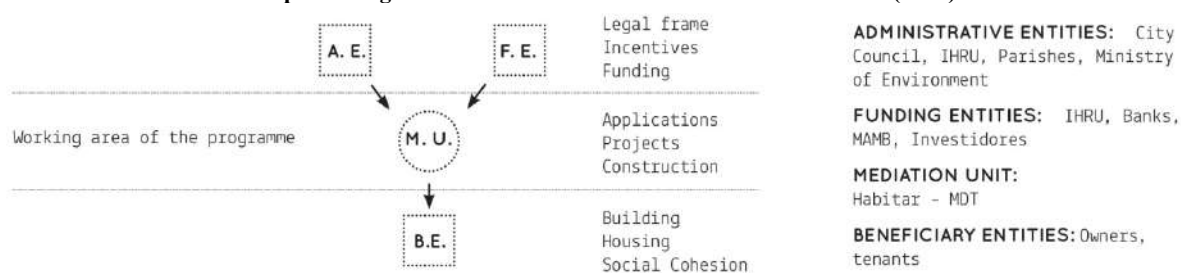
3. The strength of weak actors

In order to create the political and operational space to promote the intended action (Cels *et al,* 2011), creating the social awareness that the problem has a public, accessible and reasonable solution is as important as gaining authorization from institutions themselves. We will now introduce the theoretical basis and the methodological framework needed to understand the development of this action and the approach of the paper.

As Latour explains, (2005), in order to make a thing public (in all the senses of the word), one has to compose a *matter of concern*, gather an *assembly* around it, and establish a *common language* to discuss that. According to Bourdieu (2000), in the housing field, the State establishes the rules of the game, which every actor tries to change, in order to turn the features that distinguish him/her from the others into valuable capital.

This State – which, as Leilani Farha recalls (2017), is made up of all its administration levels and which has the responsibility to assure the implementation of human rights – is not well equipped for innovating actions (Cels *et al.*, 2011). However, it is permeable to exogenous forces, mainly to pressures from major actors but also to weak actors dwelling on the system's periphery.

In fact, these actors are the ones who are more capable of risking and innovating (Granovetter, 1973). The challenge, as underlined by Laclau (2005), is in the movement from *the politics* (the problem construct) towards *the policies* (the solution in a stable institutional frame), aiming to move practices from the periphery to the centre of the system, seeking to grant them stability by changing institutions themselves.

In order to show how these theories can take place, we will focus on the smallest actor in this process and analyse the dialogical relationship between: 1) the general context, 2) the practices developed by Habitar, and 3) the constant re-assembling of actors. These specific situations, choices and dilemmas will depict the contingent and (apparently) chaotic nature of these kinds of situations and allow us to systematize some of their structural variables.

Graph 3: Evolution of the conflict. Source: A. Varea and N. Travasso

3.1.The context: between centre and periphery

Figure 1: Institutional debate (on the top – Domus Social) and public protests
(on the bottom - AIN – Victor Sousa)

The presented timeline depicts the sequence of events that has determined the development of the process until this moment. However, what matters the most is the way those events reshaped the relations between different actors, some of which were previously unconnected.

It seems evident that the conflict is a social construct, where the impact housing cost had on the middle classes was essential to determine the mobilization of certain actors and discourses that determined the public agenda. The actors who took part in this construct can be divided into two groups:

Actors at the centre of institutions.

According to our theoretical framework, public power arises as the central element. It is neither homogeneous nor stable and, as powerful as it may be, it must always try to neutralise criticism and to naturalise its mandate. Public power is formed by institutions, which may accommodate different or even opposed interest themselves (Bourdieu, 2000).
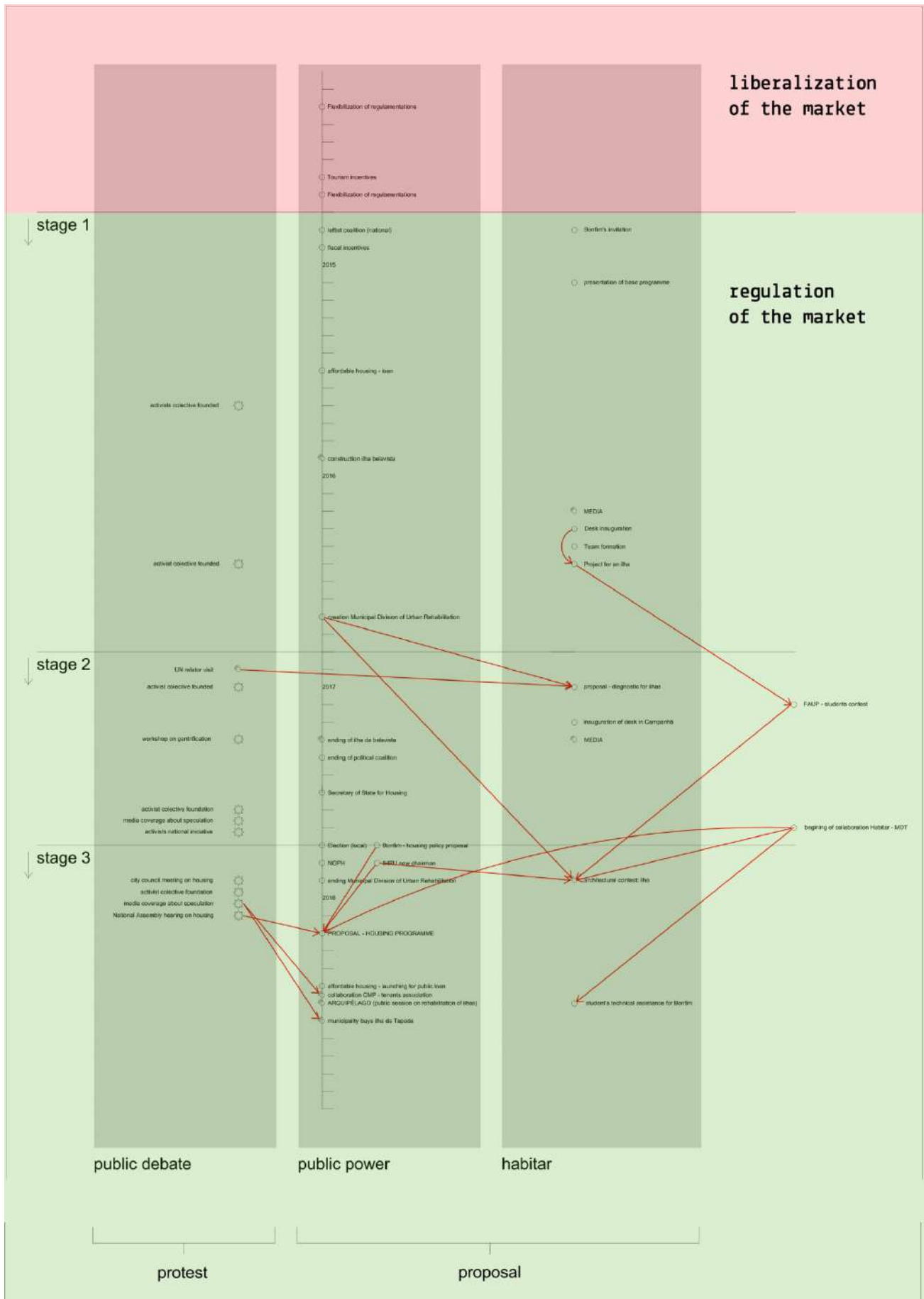
Amongst these institutions, we may find those which can function as an interface - they can assimilate part of

the protests and proposals in their periphery. Sometimes they do it to neutralise conflict, other times to solve it. Be that as may, these processes have the ability to move power from one place to the other.

Actors in the periphery of institutions.

This group ranges from third sector actors to individual property owners or tenants, including the academy and activists. They have more freedom of action than the public body (whose action is framed by strict rules) and can risk more. However, while institutions tend to remain in the field for longer, these actors are highly volatile

The analysis of the timeline shows how conflict growth, from 2017 on, enabled a greater number of events and debates both in academic and activist fields. This was a result of social pressure and the expectations created by the NGHP and encouraged greater permeability between practices, arguments and actors.

A complex assemblage

The relationship between social pressure and institutional interests and competences allowed Habitar to link agents from those two worlds. Institutions with significant technical knowledge, political power or symbolic capital became essential to support alternative proposals led by peripheral actors. As examples, we can point out:

- The Social Welfare Office of Bonfim Parish, which strongly supports the provision of affordable housing and provides both access to the political sphere and proximity to the field work being developed, essential to understanding the social problem.
- Porto's Municipal Department for Urbanism (MDU), interested in combining technical work with a closer relation with the territory. This actor was essential in understanding and overcoming the technical dimension of the problem.

Even though this whole context might seem favourable for the implementation of the programme, assembling all these different demands and actors is not an easy task. For instance, the NGHP is not without resistance, from not only property owners and developers, but also from inside the public body itself. Furthermore, combining different levels of public administration requires the ability to speak and understand different languages and interests, as well as accept their assessment and bureaucratic rules.

3.2.Shaping discourse

Once the rules of the game which shape the conflict have been underlined, we can show how can a weak counter-hegemonic actor can accept those rules and successfully bring together a group of disconnected actors, resources and interests, to have potential operative ability in the housing domain, using public power as a binding factor.

It is therefore important to point out some of the principles that shape the *discourse strategy* used to overcome those obstacles. By *discourse strategy* we mean the set of apparatuses (practices, arguments, symbolic interactions) used to build both a shared agenda and the means for interaction and implementation. Those principles are:

- Neither identities nor interests pre-exist the process; on the contrary, they are shaped with the development of the conflict.
- The conflict construct draws on the existing discontent of different actors, but it does so by giving a new and broader meaning to the reasons that justify such discontent.
- Exploring polysemy is decisive. Each actor and each practice have several possible interpretations, which amplifies the chances of combination and agreement between different actors.
- To combine and stabilize action groups, it is necessary:
  - to mobilize actors who are on the periphery of the matter under concern: they can express the conflict in different terms and increase the permeability between different actors;
  - to use broadly recognized practices and symbols, useful tools to disseminate, legitimate and enrich minority' points of view amongst broader social groups.

This abstract set of principles can be explained with three examples chosen from the three stages of the timeline.

From communitarian development project to a help desk: one step behind?

In order to gain the support of Bonfim Parish (the level of administration closest to the territory and its inhabitants) Habitar abandoned the use of Participatory Research-Action methodologies (its first choice) and decided to interact with the population inside the frame of a technical, juridical and bureaucratic welfare office. This compromise brought a benefit and a challenge:

- The benefit was that this was a standard structure that was able to call up landowners, a group not so easy to captivate with phrases such as "right to the city", and which it would not have been possible to involve with the kind of practice initially desired by Habitar.

- The challenge was how to assemble a collective actor, made of individual parts, which did not interact with each other. This was important since endorsement from civil society (and not only from the owners or even other users of the help desk) was needed.

To do that, Habitar had to be presented as a symbol of shared interests binding separate (and often opposing) actors.

Figure 2: Negative discourse on tenants in the mainstream media (on the left – *O Diabo*) and Habitar's positive discourse on affordable housing loans (on the right - Publico)

Class is not the binding element: social demand is. "Housing at fair cost"

To answer to this challenge, the help desk gained a new function outside the protocol established with the parish: using the media to actively participate in the on-going housing debate, through presenting the problem in innovative terms. It was possible to overcome polarization with a positive discourse about opportunities (the programmes granting owners financial support for urban renewal) instead of a negative one about problems (the scarcity of affordable house, which, in fact, could be solved by using the programmes).

Since day one, Habitar has presented the same discourse: one owner without the resources to renew their property; one tenant who can not find a house at affordable cost; one architect or engineer who longs to work in a different way – these are not three problems, these are three expressions of the same problem, this problem being the difficulty to access the financial and bureaucratic sphere.

The individual stories presented in the help desk have enabled Habitar to construe a new actor: the owner who does not want to sell or abandon their property, and who wishes to renew their property through public funding and place it on the affordable rent market. Those landlords may not be supporters of symbolic social housing policies and programmes the academy normally advocates (namely SAAL), but they became the perfect protagonists of a new pragmatic narrative Habitar successfully presented in academic, administrative and activist forums.

Spaces where things can be explained and carried out in other ways

Seeking institutional innovation implies risking acting outside each actor's established protocols. Each actor needs to compromise in order to open space for the recombination of actors and the emergence of new practices. However, the larger the actor, the less they are able to compromise, which means smaller actors must adapt the most. When this adaptation is no longer possible, other creative solutions must be adopted.

Aiming to overpass the tensions the help desk was creating within public sector protocols, Habitar created a new operational space that provided a response to an owner's demand (an architectural project needed to apply

for funds), accomplishing the expectations of all involved actors and, simultaneously, avoiding their specific protocols. This space was materialised as an architecture competition – an established formal practice which:

- Enabled Habitar to produce and share knowledge, as it was necessary to explain and reframe all the regulations related to the licensing and access to financial support. This information was developed in partnership with the MDU and responded to the expectations that its technical officers had concerning Habitar's mission.

- Pushed for an open and transparent process, neutralising any unfair competition accusations. Simultaneously, it provided architects with a new way intervening, with evaluation criteria more attentive to how each project would serve existing social needs, aiming to disseminate and normalize good practices.

- Created a platform for a broad public debate on housing combining several actors (city council, parishes, central government, MDT, media, local citizens) that proved that acting differently was possible and that institutional support for the refurbishment of private properties could create public value (exemplary interventions).

Figure 3: Successful project in the competition (on the top - Merooficina) and parallel sessions – making public the problem (on the bottom – MIRA forum).

3.3.Networks of actors

Habitar's case shows how discourse can ascend via capillary action. Although the programme started at the parish level in April of 2016, in February of 2018 it had become part of the discussion at national level, as a

result of a hearing in the National Assembly, when the mayor of Porto endorsed Habitar's narrative, referring to it as a good practice.

At that point, Habitar's strategy was seen as legitimate regardless of observers' ideological positions. To call owners, tenants, technicians and different levels of the administration onto the same platform sounded like a reasonable idea. The formative dimension of the strategy, as shown in the competition (in alliance with MDT) suggested that the University should be the agent to boost the expansion of the strategy as an official programme.

The Habitar actions presented were only made possible by a broader recombination of actors, resources and interests, which is, at the same time, cause and consequence of the successive stages of the process. To better explain this point, we will analyse a set of maps of actors developed from 2015 to 2018. This analysis will be carried out considering two variables:

- the different sets of related actors;
- the level of internal organisation needed to respond to different contexts.

Stage 1: Trying to assemble a collective actor

In the first map, we can see how both the academy and public administration – two types of institutions that pursue public interest – see the other one as an actor with different interests. The Academy argues it has transformative knowledge, the administration reclaims executive knowledge for itself. These two points of view are presented as contradictory.

Habitar is seen as an "activist", interacting with a set of third sector actors pursuing social justice, who were related to Bonfim Parish. However, once again, two kinds of actors that share the same purpose were not able to build a common action, as their practices were too distant. While Habitar aimed to act in the domain of trans-sectorial public policies, the others were acting in the realm of social entrepreneurship with sectorial goals.
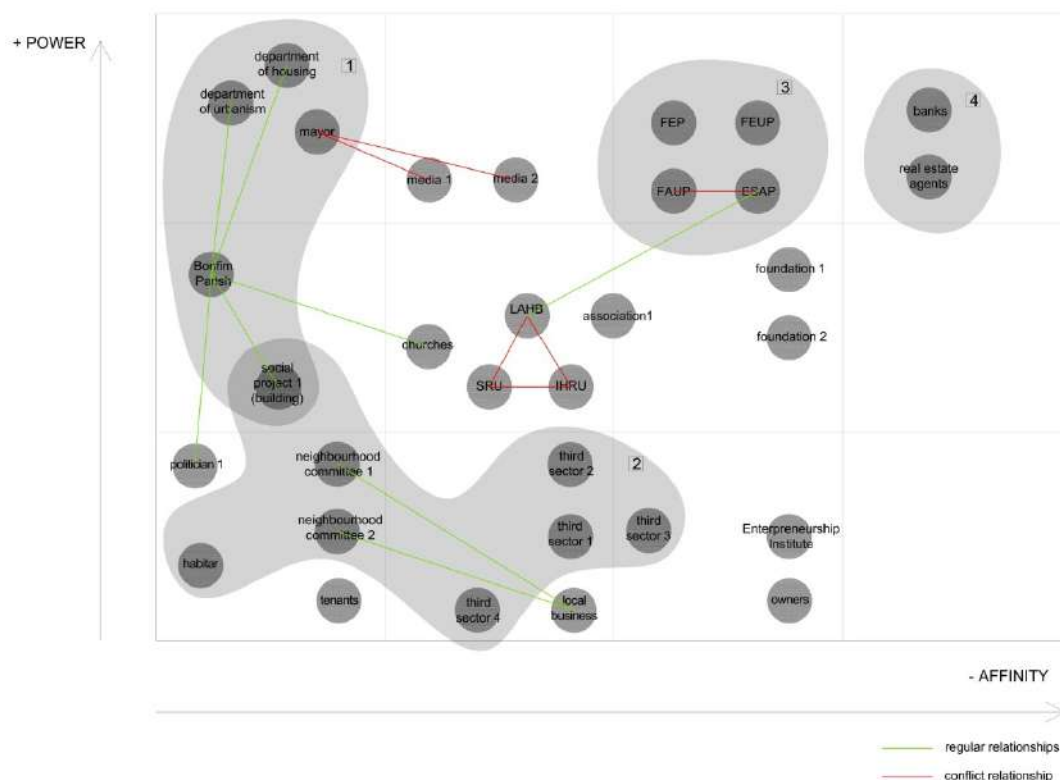

Graph 4: Actor map (2015). Group 1: Administration. Group 2: Third sector. Group 3: Academy. Group 4: Market. Source: A. Varea

Stage 2. Exploring and multiplying alliances

Here, we can confirm that public administration contains many contradictory interests, creating gaps that may be filled in. Parishes led by different political parties or Municipal divisions led by specific individuals are opportunities to discuss problems from different points of view and to amplify the number of accepted practices that, once tested, can gain acceptance.

At this point, Habitar was already seen as a "best practice", and it formalised itself as a third sector association. This was mandatory for it to be able to create protocols with other actors (increasingly institutional), and to act independently, outside not only market rules but also grants, foundation prizes or patronage criteria. The broad scope of action of Habitar makes it a transversal and interesting actor, able to bind actor's practices.
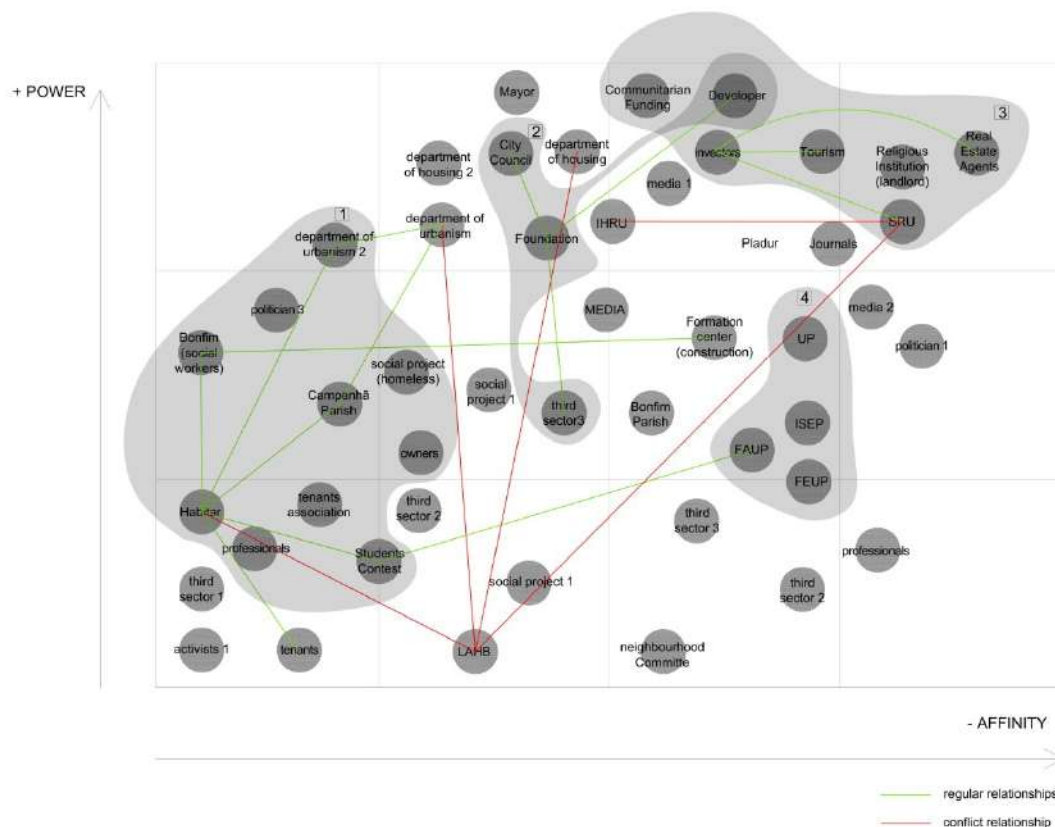

Graph 5: Actor map actor (2017). Group 1: Assembly of Administration and Civil Society; Group 2: Assembly of Administration, philanthropic agents and third sector; Group 3: Market; Group 4: Academy. Source: A. Varea (Students contest = student contest formation centre = training centre (??))

Stage 3. Consolidation of part of the practices

In this stage, the action group combining Habitar, the academy (MDT) and local administration (city council and parishes) has been assembled. These actors are bound by practice – the expectation of the new programme they are designing. However, they are simultaneously becoming disconnected from a set of actors with influence on inhabitants, social movements and architects.

Habitar is now institutionalised, not only due to the kind of actors it relates to, but also as a result of the type of work it is developing. Fieldwork is now reduced and follows the protocols of a socio-spatial inquiry commissioned by the city council. The remaining work is technical and bureaucratic, destined to ease landowners' and designers' actions, aiming to materialise the renewal projects supported by the help desk.
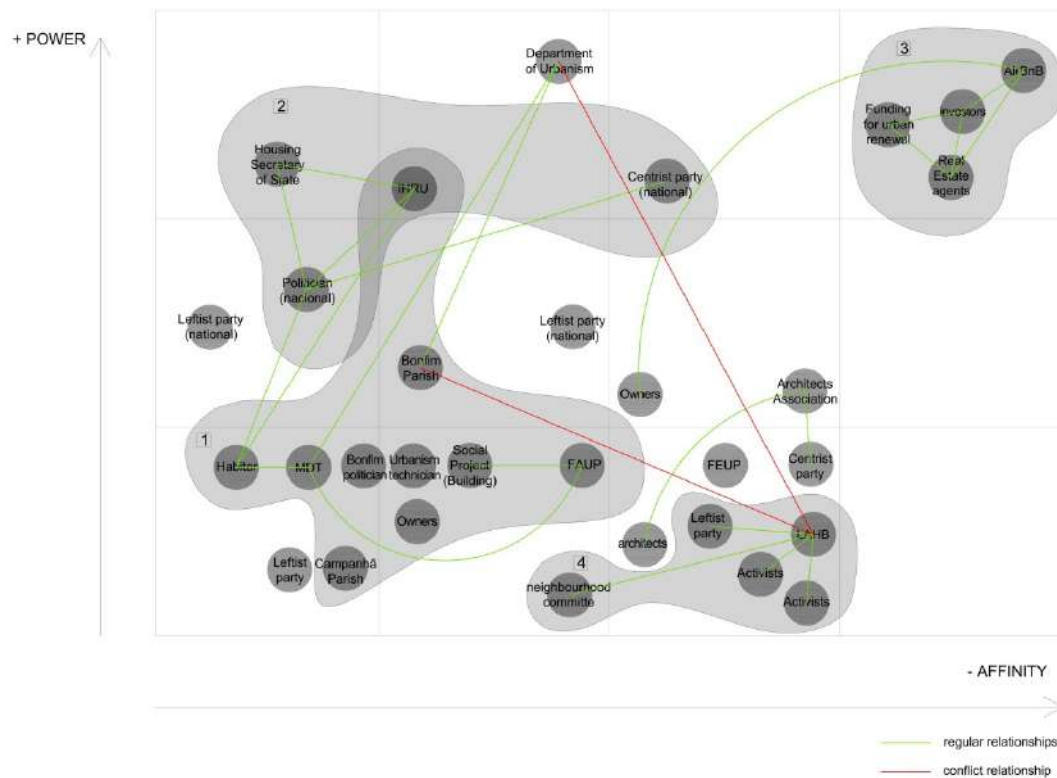
Graph 6: Actor map (2018). Group 1: Academy, Administration and civil society. Group 2: Top levels of administration; Group 3: Market; Group 4: Activists and third sector Source: A. Varea (nacional = national, Urbanism technician = Urbanism technical officer conflict relationship = conflict relationships)

4. Making housing public

In this paper we described how a small actor, in connection with allies linked to academia and a public body, can contribute to differently frame the terms of public discussion resulting in the consolidation and improvement of a set of weak practices. The output of this struggle is a programme, fostered by the academy, that aims to:

- Build a number of affordable housing units, improving deprived areas;
- Produce and share knowledge amongst architects, engineers and other agents;
- Create guarantees in institutions in order to simplify and expedite bureaucratic procedures.

Figure 4: "Ilhas", the housing typology that the programme will be focused on (source: A. Varea)

It is clear that the new programme will consolidate the collective platform described and make the product of action accessible to all in equitable and transparent terms. Furthermore, it will grant more resources and stability, as well as a clear set of rights and obligations, which enables commitment. However, moving from collective to public practices is a choice that brings some challenges.

- Although Habitar defended this approach for all typologies and users, the programme will focus only on deprived areas, since it was only possible to gather enough consensus around this point.

- The level of institutionalisation will be directly proportional to the amount of available resources, and inversely proportional to the level of freedom of action (which is what enabled Habitar to create the described space).

- The programme will simplify the implementation of urban regulations, not the regulations themselves. This might cause problems since there are situations that meet real life demands but not urban regulations.

- The programme will call upon mainly local actors. The involvement of the central government is also expected, which should imply changes in its internal practices; however, this is not guaranteed by the programme.

- This new programme will challenge the way some actors are already working and the role that other institutions have, which may create conflicts with agents that have important corporative weight.

- The goal is to boost social development, and many problems such as employment, mobility, health or education may be related to the programme. However, they will not be solved by the actors called upon in this union.

- The Academy will have the responsibility to suitably frame the programme, so that public discussion around it is useful to build the common good, not breeding individual or corporativist interests.

- It is not expected that the new programme will have enough margins to improvise inside the established rules or correct its negative externalities. Being conscious of this is essential to call upon peripherical actors.

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