From Siza and Erskine to URBiNAT: participatory architectural design and the European social housing co–production

José António Bandeirinha

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE, CENTRE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRA, COIMBRA, PORTUGAL

Paulo Fonseca de Campos

ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM, COLLEGE OF SÃO PAULO UNIVERSITY, SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

Gonçalo Canto Moniz

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE, CENTRE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRA, COIMBRA, PORTUGAL

Luís Miguel Correia

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE, CENTER FOR 20TH CENTURY INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES – CEIS20, UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRA, COIMBRA, PORTUGAL

Vitório Leite

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE, UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRA, COIMBRA, PORTUGAL

Considering the post–1960s reforming context, this article intends to revisit the social housing projects of São Vítor (1975) in Porto, by Álvaro Siza, one of the projects carried out under the SAAL programme (Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local – SAAL), and of Byker Wall (1968) in Newcastle, by Ralph Erskine, to understand how the dialogue between technicians (architects and sociologists), the citizens (individuals and associations) and the intuitions that regulated the process was instituted and developed, minding the correlations between them, the debates and resolutions which were experimented and the impact they had on the evolution of both processes. From São Vítor to Byker Wall the text covers the main stages of these participatory practices and identifies the projects' *method* and recognize how politicians and civic society got involved in these urban scale housing programmes, addressing new forms of co–design and co–governing.
Finally, the text explores how URBiNAT H2020 project (Healthy corridors as drivers of social housing neighbourhoods for the co–creation of social, environmental and marketable NBS, 2018–23) is taking advantage of take the inspirational lessons of both case studies and, following the new UNESCO agenda for "Sustainable Cities and Communities", is co–developing urban regenerative processes on 7 European cities.

1. Introduction to participatory architecture

The ideological and counter–cultural revolution of the 1960s was a time in which the rationalist excesses of previous decades were rejected and reformed. A turning point had been reached, one which would be consolidated

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towards the end of the 1970s. In short, the *modern city* gave way to what we consider today to be the *contemporary city*.[1]

In different parts of the world, an interdisciplinary search was taking place to find ways of improving the *process*: the way of doing architecture. The "techniciens du logement"[2] of the 1960s undertook this search in subject areas and contexts that were less developed, usually those that were less visited. It is considering the post–1960s context, that we would like to revisit the social housing projects of São Vítor (1975) in Porto, by Álvaro Siza, and of Byker Wall (1968) in Newcastle, by Ralph Erskine.

From São Vítor to Byker Wall, we examined the main stages of the participation practices that were used, and we identified the *project method*. It is important to recognize and systematize the tools used in these projects, as well as the manner in which political and civil society, particularly citizens and local authorities, involved themselves in these housing programmes with an urban scale.

In the conclusion of this article, we observe that the URBiNAT project has appropriated the project method tried in São Vítor and Byker Wall, but in accordance with the UNESCO 2030 agenda: "To make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable."

2. Saal – São Vítor – Porto: a differente way of looking at participation...

The SAAL – *Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local* – was a technical support service created in Portugal immediately after the military coup that took place in April 1974, and which brought to an end the dictatorship that had lasted almost half a century. The purpose of this service was to provide technical and financial support to the hundreds of thousands of people who were living in extremely poor conditions, in dwellings that lacked washing facilities, privacy, comfort or access to the city. Although the service had been established with the bare minimum of regulations and by simple ministerial order, it set out a series of methodological principles to be followed. One of the most important was, without a doubt, the participation of future residents in the process of constructing housing that could be considered appropriate and dignified. Although not explicit, this step was made necessary by the need to engage the interested populations in "internal organisation" and to encourage the development of "self–directed solutions".[3]

Amongst the approximately 170 SAAL operations that took place throughout the country, the ones in Porto were known for being different in character. From the beginning, the team in charge of SAAL–North had the clear intention of involving the Architecture school (ESBAP – Escola Superior de Belas–Artes do Porto) in order to make use of the experience in the field that some of its students had acquired, as well as strengthening dialectically the process of

opening up the school to society. It was for this purpose that Alexandre Alves Costa had joined the team.

We are going to focus on the work developed in one of those operations, in a neighbourhood of the city of Porto, the Bairro de São Vítor, in the eastern part of the city, more precisely on a hillside over the Douro River. Near Porto architecture school (ESBAP – Escola de Belas–Artes do Porto) there was a plot of land which was familiar to the students as they had already looked at it as part of their studies. The architecture students already knew the site very well, when the SAAL opportunity arose, some of them also decided to propose an operation on the ground. These students included Eduardo Souto Moura and Guilherme Castro, as well as Adalberto Dias who worked in the studio of Álvaro Siza. They identified the housing needs, contacted the residents and decided to speak with Siza to ask him to coordinate the operation.[4]

Given the proximity and the knowledge of the place, the design project starts simultaneously with the intense and permanent discussion with the inhabitants. The relationship to the desires of the future residents is dialectical, their wishes interact with the plans, but the plans are not ruled by those wishes. In other words, there are not two moments, that of listening and that of responding. The project and the models that are being developed immediately motivate discussion. Participation is doubly dialectical – i.e. – it interacts with residents, but also interacts with the conditions of the city in which they live and with the proposals for its transformation, and that interaction needs to be balanced. That balance had to be struck on a scale that had blind followership at one end and technical arrogance at the other. In the case of São Vítor, concessions to populism, to the taste and aspirations of residents, were completely ruled out, however attractive such intentions might have been. This was a condition for the quality of the work, well expressed in the accompanying texts.[5]

Siza was well aware that, despite the condition of autonomy of the design activity, there is a territory of contact between political action and architectural practice. This territory is called the city and it was undoubtedly what he was primarily interested in focusing on. In this sense, the proposal already carried with it a device that struck a sharp blow at the heart of politics: it opened up the interior circulation spaces of the *ilhas*,[6] previously semi–private, to public space. It turned inside out the interiors of the bourgeois city blocks, previously hidden and marginal, and transformed them into protagonists of the urban project. This intention involved assuming an attitude that, for two essential reasons, had huge political implications. Firstly, because it was the architectural proposal itself, that is, it was architecture that revolved the sense of class of organised space. The organisation of space is fought with the organisation of space, the fight is in the same ground, it does not take refuge in the grounds of technology, science, ecology or sociology. Secondly, because it makes the city the fabric on which the aim is to reinforce or smooth out the folds that embody the political problem, inequalities, alienation, control and repression. The city emerges – or would emerge if the

Figure 1. Àlvaro Siza. First row houses built in São Vítor. © Credits Alexandre Alves Costa.

operation had gone ahead – renewed, not as a result of the need to renew the stocks of the real estate market, but rather as an architectural rescue of the political sphere.

If we take as circumstance the territories of reality, that is the most credible possibility that Architecture has of acting politically, to emerge from within and act. To act not on the city, but with the city and for the city.

3. The modernist dissent of Byker Wall

When talking about participation as part of a process within determined social and political contexts, connections can be made between projects such as Byker Wall (1969–1982) in Newcastle, England, and the experience of SAAL (1974–1976) in Portugal, as presented previously. This provides the opportunity to carry out an exploratory study about the role of the user in the planning design process.

Towards the end of the 1960s, Newcastle Council decided upon a policy of massive replacement of its old Victorian terraced houses, which led to plans for the construction of the participative project of the Byker Wall.[7] In 1968, the project for the reconstruction of the old area of working–class neighborhood was given to Ralph Erskine.

Erskine's idea was to hold consultations with the community in order to promote interventions that would humanize the housing itself and the

landscape around it. Erskine and his team purposefully set up their office at the site of the future housing estate, enabling immersion into the life of the community so as to maintain a connection between the future inhabitants of the new houses and the project itself.

The project was launched with the pilot scheme in Janet Square at the extreme south–east of the area, with residents being consulted at all stages of the initial process.

The main guidelines adopted by Erskine[8] and his team were:

– To maintain ties between neighbours in the old Byker community;
– To construct the buildings of the new estate in stages, gradually demolishing the old, terraced workers houses;
– A third guideline was defined in agreement with the community, which was to preserve some of the old buildings in the Byker neighbourhood, including a Victorian church. It was also decided that families with children would be housed in ground–floor dwellings with gardens.

Following on from Janet Square, construction began on what is to this day the symbol of the estate: the Wall, set into the northern perimeter of the estate on a stretch of unbuilt terrain.

The Byker Wall is nothing more than a sequence of large blocks of buildings, contiguous and interlinked, varying in height from between three to eight floors and laid out in an organic and sinuous form which follows the conditions of the terrain and its surroundings. The interior façades of the Wall are south facing, with horizontal access decks leading to the flats. This orientation arose from the need to favour exposure to the sun and to reduce as much as possible the noise from the motorway to the north of the estate.

Apart from the flats in The Wall, the estate is made up of 1–to–4–bedroom houses, maisonettes, flats and a small number of bungalows. The two–storey houses are predominantly built using a system of load–bearing masonry with internal structures in wood, and make up 80% of the dwellings.

The team led by Erskine demonstrated that they were interested, above all, in developing a process in which the community would have the opportunity to express their needs, aspirations and feelings, as part of a user–focused designing approach.[9]

Despite this, myths relative to the participatory process of the Byker Wall project have arisen over time, which may have led to the idealized notion that this project represented a perfect collaboration between architects and residents. In an interview given in 2015, Roger Tillotson, one of the architects who worked full–time on the project between 1970 and 1985, stated that much of the information on the participatory process had been incorrectly interpreted: "What we did at Byker was not to ask the residents how the design should be, but to involve them in order to extract the experience of living in community in Newcastle".[10] Tillotson concluded by saying that

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perhaps the role of the architect, in that particular situation, was that of interpreting and incorporating the ideals of the residents into the housing plans.

Finally, to the extent that we are seeking to understand and to highlight the more relevant aspects of the participatory process of the Byker Wall project, the relationship between this process and the current situation must be noted, in which perceptible ties of neighbourliness and support have arisen among its residents, both old and new.

Figure 2. Children with Ralph Erskine in his office located in Byker, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, UK, 1977.

4. Citizen involvement in the urban regenaration of modern public space

The aim of the URBiNAT project is to involve communities in the process of co–creation of the public space in social housing neighbourhoods that were built on principles of modernist design. This action–research project aims to give continuity to the methodologies of the participated projects which were put into practice in the two references of city construction referred.

Both the team led by Álvaro Siza as well as the one led by Ralph Erskine took care to involve the local community in a permanent dialogue on project decisions, without abdicating from their responsibilities as architects: that of "interpreting and incorporating the ideals of the residents in the housing project", in the case of Byker Wall, and taking into account that "the relationship to the desires of the future residents is dialectical, their wishes

interact with the plans, but the plans do not submit to them", in the case of the SAAL São Vitor project.

The URBiNAT project takes inspiration from these innovative experiences to design a process of participation that involves a diverse range of local actors, namely the citizens who live, study and work in the territory, the municipality, institutions, associations and local businesses, and finally, academia, including researchers from different areas.

In this case, the community is involved in dealing with the urban space – a space which came about as a result of modern planning but which left those areas disconnected from the parts of the city where work, education, services and quality public spaces are easier to access. The intention is that the material and immaterial construction of the healthy corridors, made up of nature–based solutions (NBS), will act as a driving force in the resolution of the challenges identified on the areas of each seven European communities involved in the URBiNAT project.

A Living Lab was set up in each city to take the co–creation process to the community, providing the conditions needed to enable communities to co–lead the processes of transformation of their territories in accordance with their needs and aspirations. In this respect, URBiNAT co–creation methodologies are flexible and open so that they can be adapted to the local cultures of participation, planning and government.

This evolutive methodologies have permitted the participants to share their co–creation processes, thereby creating a community of practice. Common barriers have also been identified which will help with the review of the methodologies tried out so far: the difficulty in promoting a process of democratic decision–making; the difficulty in involving minority groups; the difficulty in involving citizens at all the stages; the slowness of planning procedures; the need to carry out concrete actions to motivate participation; the need to promote participation on a local scale as well as closer contacts with the communities.

From co–diagnostic to co–design, the three front runner cities have promoted a set of actions that combine architectural tools with those of the social sciences in order to engage citizens while also achieving design outputs. Given

Figure 3. **Physical model workshop, Porto, 2020; ideation workshop, Nantes, 2021; exhibition, Sofia, 2021.**
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that the context is the public space, the teams are using several actions to help citizens think about the territory they inhabit, through the design tools described in this table:

Porto	Sofia	Nantes
walkthroughs	walkthroughs	walkthroughs
collective mapping	collective mapping	online walkthrough
collective drawing	physical model	collective mapping
physical model	3D modelling	Superbarrio (online digital
3D modelling	exhibition with project	game)
PhotoVoice	discussion	
online collective collages		
proximity interviews		

Figure 4. Table describing the design tools used on the three front–runner cities.

These three front runner cities are each following and developing along different tracks. In the case of Porto, participants decided to work together in the same intervention area, co–creating NBS related to public space and nature, education and environment, culture and sport, and social economy and solidarity practices. The urban plan for the healthy corridor became more of a park, with several corridors connecting three social housing neighbourhoods. The park is currently undergoing a tendering process, but citizens are already testing the immaterial NBS such as the solidarity market for local producers and craftsmen, the cultural and communication platform (Campanh'up), and the heritage routes and yoga classes. In the case of Sofia, it was decided to create a pathway that passes through four social housing neighbourhoods, and to develop four main locations, each with its own theme – Green Assembly, Aqua Vita, Healthy Energy, Co–Place. The four clusters include NBS such as an open–air amphitheatre and a thermal–water swimming pool. In Nantes, URBiNAT took part in Project *Globale*, a master plan for Nantes Nord developed within the framework of the citizen dialogue strategy. Among other NBS, the co–creation of the Green Loop – a circular pathway through several social housing estates – and green urban gardens aims to transform the quality of life and the use of the public space.[11]

While municipalities and private owners are dealing with the renovation of their modern housing, URBiNAT is focusing on the renovation of the public space. The task that the URBiNAT project has set itself is to continue rethinking modern values related to nature, mobility and functionality, complementing them with contemporary principles of inclusion and human rights, solidarity, circular economy, and health and well–being.

Notes

1   Nuno Portas and Nuno Grande. "Entre a crise e a critica da cidade moderna, a experiência portuguesa no contexto Internacional," in *Lisboscópio, representação portuguesa na 10ª exposição internacional de Arquitectura – Bienal de Veneza*, ed. Ricardo Jacinto and Amancio (Pancho) Guedes (Lisboa: *Instituto das Artes,* 2006), 65–77.

2   Paul Chombart de Lauwe and *le Groupe d'Ethnologie Sociale, Famille et habitation I, Sciences humaines et Conceptions, Deuxiéme Edition* (Paris: *Centre National de la Recherce Scientifique,* 1967)*,* 155.

3   *Ministérios da Administração Interna e do Equipamento Social e do Ambiente, Despacho: Diário do Governo*, nº.182, 1ª. *série,* (Lisboa*,* 6–8–1974).

4   José António Bandeirinha, (Statement by Eduardo Souto de Moura) "A debate on the future of a future–making process. Round table with Raúl Hestnes Ferreira, Eduardo Souto Moura and Álvaro Siza", in *74–14 SAAL and Architecture Proceedings International Colloquium 74–14 SAAL and Architecture – Symposium SAAL: Retrospective*, s/l, ed. José António Bandeirinha, Delfim Sardo, Gonçalo Canto Moniz (Coimbra: DARQ*, CES and Fundação de Serralves*, 2015), 28–29.

5   Álvaro Siza Vieira, "L'ísola proletaria come elemento base del tessuto urbano," *Lotus International,* 13, 1976, 80–93.

6   Dwellings inside city blocks, arising from the industrialization of the eastern part of Porto towards the end of the 19th century.

7   Paulo Fonseca de Campos, "Design Arquitectônico: Uma abordagem projetual com foco no usuário, como protagonista e agente de projecto, ou … Das cooperativas de habitação uruguaias ao dissenso modernista do Byker Wall" (*Livre–docência, Projecto,* FAAUUSP *– Faculdade de Arquitectura e Urbanismo da Universidade de* São Paulo, 2016).

8   Thomas Faulkner. *Newcastle and Gateshead: Architecture and Heritage, 2nd Revised edition* (Newcastle: Tyne Bridge Publishin, 2014)

9   Fonseca de Campos, "Design Arquitectônico (…)"

10 Fonseca de Campos, "Design Arquitectônico (…)"

11 Gonçalo Canto Moniz (ed.). *URBiNAT – D4.2. Healthy Corridor Concept.* (Coimbra: Centro de Estudos Sociais, 2021).

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