

pedagogy
of the
streets

Poetry 1977

BRINGING UTOPIAS INTO PLAY

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The photographic record of the activities and games that Elvira Leite organised with the children of Largo de Pena Ventosa in the historic centre of the city of Porto in the late 1970s continues to generate a certain sense of nostalgia. Such nostalgia is related to our feeling the loss of public space as a physical space for debate and for sharing that was installed (and idealised) with the democratic revolution of April 1974.

Although it was moderate (but not consensual) in nature, the Revolution brought an end to almost five decades of fascist dictatorship that had plunged Portugal into terrible poverty and led to its international isolation due to the war in the colonies (Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique). The revolution restored fundamental rights and freedoms, initiated the process of decolonisation, nationalised the land and many large businesses thus giving a voice to the working class, and built homes for families in need, but, above all, it installed democracy and brought the first free elections that would lead to the first constitutional

government and to the country's application, in 1977, for membership of the European Community.

It took eight years of negotiations to gain access to the Europe of the Twelve in 1985 and then a similar period of time to successfully combat the illiteracy rate, which stood at around 25% at the end of the dictatorship. With its entry into the European Community, a country whose population had been driven to emigrate in order to guarantee the survival of families or to seek political exile would be transformed into a country of consumers with access to easy credit. Unquestionably, Portugal is today much better than it was, even taking into account the "crisis" that has been transformed into a perpetual national condition.

To understand some of the nostalgia that we associate with the public space as it is portrayed in Elvira Leite's images, we must first of all contextualise her activities under the scope of three projects that were central to the work being developed in Porto School of Fine Arts

at that time: *Inquérito à Arquitetura Popular em Portugal* (Survey on Popular Architecture in Portugal, 1961); *Serviço Ambulatório de Apoio Local* (SAAL — Local Ambulatory Support Service 1974—1976); and *Organização Insurrecional do Espaço* (Insurrectional Organisation of Space, 1975).

The *Survey on Popular Architecture in Portugal* began by showing how modern architects were drawing closer to popular architecture, searching for the functional meaning of its form in its roots, its programme and its context. Comparable in its aims to the exhibition *Architecture Without Architects* organised by Bernard Rudofsky at MOMA in 1964, the Survey in Portugal was sponsored by the State, with Salazar's dictatorial regime using the rural world to construct a nationalist identity reduced, through simplicity, to the idealisation of a "Portuguese house".

However, despite the regime's agenda, the "Survey on Popular Architecture in Portugal" could not help but reveal the precariousness of people's ways of life, the lack of basic conditions (the absence of electricity, water and sanitation) witnessed in the many houses that the modern architects visited. Some of these architects, who were teachers at the Porto School of Fine Arts, gave their students the task of surveying the poor neighbourhoods in the centre of Porto, to be drawn on a scale of 1:20, with remarkable detail. This enabled them to identify the constructive systems, the building materials that were used, the furniture, and even personal objects. This type of exercise (undertaken as part of the subject of "Analytical Architecture" taught by Lixa Filgueiras) once again revealed the precariousness and the overcrowding of the houses built of granite (just like the streets).



This proximity between the students of the Fine Arts School and the populations of the poorer neighbourhoods in the late 1960s and early 1970s built a certain degree of trust and frequently ties of affection that proved to be essential when the Revolution established a programme for the construction of social housing known as the *Serviço Ambulatório de Apoio Local* (SAAL — Local Ambulatory Support Service). Launched by the first Provisional Government, in 1974, this housing programme in the city of Porto had the School of Fine Arts as its epicentre for the discussion of projects with the underprivileged populations. Led by architects adopting a participatory methodology, SAAL was inspired by Henri Lefebvre's «right to the city» and sought to build houses in the city centre, running counter to the European tendency to shift the least favoured population to the periphery of the large cities.

Under tremendous political pressure of a reactionary nature and practically without any funding, the SAAL programme did not last more than two years, leaving many projects unfinished. The little that was built in Porto increased the sense of community with the creation of well-structured public and collective spaces to compensate for the tiny areas of the domestic space that was built. Contrasting with the

density of the collective housing built in other countries in the postwar period, the SAAL homes (such as the Bairro de São Victor, designed by Siza Vieira with students) were based on the idea of the collective at the scale of the small community, without underestimating the importance of the house as an expression of privacy and family autonomy.

The exercises based on the experience of the Survey and the practice of the SAAL programme demonstrate the social activism that was felt in the academic context. But the intensely partisan atmosphere of the Porto School of Fine Arts did not allow room for other proposals less compromised with *realistic socialism*. An example of this is the project developed in 1975 by two students, Mário Ramos and Fernando Barroso, who, under the influence of Guy Debord and the situationists, proposed a project entitled "Insurreccional Organisation of the Space" for the most central avenue in the city of Porto.

The avenue in question (Avenida dos Aliados) is the place where the City Hall is located, together with the banks, insurance companies and newspaper headquarters. Critics of architecture as an exclusive representation of the established powers, proposed a disruptive

project that consisted of half-burying the avenue, creating a dysfunctional topography that would be incompatible with the circulation of traffic. The manifesto for the "Insurreccional Organisation of the Space" project started out as a criticism of modern and functional urbanism, laying claim to the public space as a place of sharing, a place for playing, simultaneously demanding an alternative way of life to the idea of production and progress that underpins capitalist society. As Debord used to say, "ne travaillez jamais!".

It was, in a certain way, under the influence of the prevailing atmosphere at the Porto School of Fine Arts in the 1960s and 1970s that Elvira Leite went out into the streets of one of the city's most deprived neighbourhoods to provide an educational service of an artistic nature, open to participation, trusting the children and their creativity, and adopting a critical but also hopeful outlook towards the world. The stage of this theatre could only be the street because, more than the school, it was accessible to everyone, stimulating the acknowledgement of, and greater proximity to, the other. The appropriation of the street as a public space, necessarily implied a negotiation, promoting a greater awareness of democratic responsibility.



But this generation of children grew together with the country and gained their own economic power. They filled the streets with cars, bought houses with garages on the periphery of the city. Between 1980 and 2000, Porto lost more than 60,000 inhabitants. The precarious and aged population that remained is now becoming the target of gentrification, further exacerbated by the pressures from tourism. The streets are filled with people, but not with inhabitants. The sense of community is fast disappearing. Now no-one seems to let their children play in the public space, interact with strangers, or allow themselves to be photographed. The fear of the street originated at home, on the television, and ironically children have exchanged the perceived insecurity of the streets for the seductions of the social media and virtual games.

In her methodology based on greater proximity to the neighbourhood life, Elvira Leite began by photographing and offering the images that she took to the people that she photographed. Awakening the trust engendered by this inaugural attitude seemed to be a way of restoring an image of the community and giving it back to them. But photography was also the pretext for Elvira Leite to make herself known to the community and to involve children and adults in the construction of her participatory projects.

In terms of human relationships, the restoration of the public space (in the sense of its being a space for debate) that she produced with the children of Largo de Pena Ventosa still makes sense at this time of transition that we are living today, because of the opportunity that it provides for taking a critical look at our place both in the physical and virtual world. Each person's inventive capacity, fed by their past and present reality must allow for the conception of, and participation in stimulating projects that offer a glimpse of the future. Today, the revolution will consist in our being able to summon up all of our senses with the aim of bringing utopias into play in everyday life.

Images

Ana Maria Gama, *Exercise of Analytic Architecture*,

1968. Centro de Documentação FAUP

Ilda Maria Duque, *Exercise of Analytic Architecture*,

1968. Centro de Documentação FAUP

Alexandre Alves Costa, *Meeting of residents at the Fine*

Art School of Porto, 25 de Janeiro 1975. Centro

de Documentação 25 Abril

Fernando Barroso and Mário Ramos, *Insurreccional*

Organisation of the Space, 1975

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