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PARTICIPATORY METHODS: THE EXEMPLARY CASE OF THE BELA VISTA “ISLAND” IN PORTO (2013–2017)

Abstract. The authors summarize the origin and evolution of the urban “island” of Bela Vista in Porto, Portugal, since the 19th century. Despite local residents mobilizing in the wake of the revolution of April 25th 1974 in the context of the urban housing and design initiative (Local Ambulatory Support Service — Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local, SAAL), they were unable to renovate the crumbling neighbourhood. The Residents’ Association, resisting the onslaught of demolition strategies that were driven by real estate interests, eventually managed, with the support from a technical team of architects, social scientists and activists, to mobilize residents and ensure the political commitment of an independent parliamentary candidate in order to rehabilitate the “island” of Bela Vista. The project was also subsequently supported by the Councillors of Culture and Urbanism. Though various quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews, life stories) methods were applied in the study, the article highlights and expands on the action-research method opposite to positivist assumptions.

Keywords: Basic housing; participatory methods; neighbourhood; rehabilitation; Porto-Portugal.

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1. Introduction: The problem

The first observation to be made is that contrary to positivist assumptions the concept of participatory methodologies implies that there is no axiological neutrality in the action-research process, that also presupposes the creation of a basis of confidence, involvement and participation of each and every one of the subjects the participatory methodologies focus on. As noted by Villasante et al.: “*We have to be in trusting relationships to be able to build from the knowledge of each and every one. Only in this way can complexity be creative, and also be the reflexive alterity of building their path*” [Villasante et al., 2000: 35]. In other words, the process of objectification must be present in order to capture the various aspects of reality. At the same time, it cannot be separated from its material conditions. As Lefebvre states: “*Deepened objectivity links all the elements or aspects of knowledge, joining them with human activity as a whole. But this activity itself cannot be separated from the (objective, material) nature in which it is embedded, thereby penetrating it*” [Lefebvre, 1975: 11 ff]. Moreover, science cannot distance itself from the debates and theoretical currents, values and worldviews, linked in turn to the different and often conflicting interests of social classes and groups that accompany unequal development both in local-regional and international terms in a declining democracy (cf. [Silva, 2005; 2019]). In other words, whilst positivists assume the duality or separation between social facts and values beyond the alleged formal canons of technicist methodology, we here assume that, despite the effort of seeking to objectify the social reality on the ‘island’ and in the neighbourhoods under study, we can in no way be axiologically and politically neutral in the face of social injustice. For that matter, positivists are not neutral either, rather only claiming to be so, since they do not fail to inject their theoretical and ideological presuppositions, though often implicitly.

The “island” of Bela Vista is a neighbourhood with a strong identity located in the city centre with its origins dating back to the mid-nineteenth century and is owned by the Porto City Council. The Bela Vista residents have lease contracts and have always fiercely identified themselves with the neighbourhood since the very beginning, throughout the regime of *Estado Novo* (New State) and after the revolution of 25 April 1974¹. Some of these families are now into their third, fourth or even fifth generation. The Bela Vista community founded the Residents’ Association in the midst of revolutionary changes. With the failure of the urban housing and design initiative (SAAL²) operation in Bela Vista the Residents’ Association lost its spark and eventually came to nought. Later, the residents asserting their rights on the

¹ On the housing problems in the mid-twentieth century and the forms of occupation and self-construction under the *Estado Novo*, (*New State*), see: Rodrigues (2012), “The Housing Problem in the Mid-Twentieth Century. The national self-construction movement during the *Estado Novo*”, in Tripeiro, 7th grade, Year XXX, May 2012, No. 5, p. 139–141. On the formation of the “islands” and neighbourhoods since the 19th and 20th centuries, at national level and particularly in Lisbon, see: [Baptista, 1999; Antunes, 2020]; and in Porto cf. [Cruz, 1975; Coutinho, 1982; Rodrigues, Silva, 2015; Queirós, 2015].

² Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local (SAAL — Local Ambulatory Support Service).

basis of Decree-Law 594/74 of 7 November, re-established the Residents' Association with a new Deed and Statutes³. We have selected the Bela Vista "island" in Porto as an exemplary case not only of participatory methodologies, but also of action-research. Given the interest such an experience has for specialists and the general public, we will provide a brief presentation of the research path for this project.

Local governance of Porto led by the Municipal Council promoted, over decades and even at present, alleged programmes of urban regeneration and rehabilitation within and outside the city centre (the ARU's for the Historic Centre, Campanhã, Bonfim, Lapa and Aliados areas). Such programmes facilitate an increase in urban rents by the law of supply and demand but without economic justification, social justice or fiscal equity. The programmes have inflated the prices of the urban land, calling into question the city as a collective construction. In the case of the housing policy, it has been understood more as a business rather than a matter of public wellbeing. The neoliberal policies of the Porto city governing body, guided by the interest of immediate profit as well as by the concept of the citizen as *homo oeconomicus*, have transformed the life of the city in line with the speculative prices of the housing market and the financialization of the city's economic life. The political management of the city, hostage to the economic parameters of neoliberal ideology, takes us back to the elimination of what Arendt [Arendt, 2006] called "normal life" and what Marx and Engels [Marx, Engels, 1976 (1846)] called "life confined by necessity". The following question certainly arises: since this has not recurring practice in previous mandates from the 1980s to the present, how one can explain the success of the rehabilitation and renovation of the "island" of Bela Vista, 45 years after the first SAAL experience? What factors did contribute to this exceptional case, given the fact that the general panorama in the country and in the city ran contrary to the dominant policy of the Porto Municipal Council and, especially, of the public company *Domus Social*, entrusted with the management of social housing but intertwined with other covert interests?

In the article we aim to describe and analyse the process of rehabilitation, taking into account that the various participants and institutions that collaborated in this operation did not follow the strict patterns dictated from above, but rather, in a reflective and practical process, managed to

³ Cf. Decree-Law 594/74 of 7 November that recognises the right to free association, stating for the first time that the "right to free association is a basic guarantee of personal fulfilment of individuals in their life in society. The principle of the rule of law, which respects the individual, cannot impose limits on the freedom to form associations. <...> In the ongoing democratic process, the requirement for administrative authorisations that conditioned the free establishment of associations and their normal development must be abolished". See also the publication of the Statutes of the Residents' Association in the Official Gazette *Diário da República* (1 October 1975, No. 501, Series III).

involve the residents themselves, along with technicians, social scientists, politicians and managers, for the construction of solutions. The Bela Vista operation (2013–2017) was implemented by members of LAHB⁴, Imago and the Residents’ Association, later joined by researchers of CICS.Nova of University of Minho and the Housing Department of the Porto Municipal Council. It was based on a process of theoretical-practical approximation from an action-research experience in which the neighbours of the ‘island’ and the members of the multidisciplinary team (architects and social scientists namely sociologists and anthropologists)⁵ took part in the implementation of a programme of basic participatory architecture within the framework of a process of renovation and rehabilitation for a community that faced extreme housing vulnerability⁶.

2. An exemplary case: participative methodologies as part of a collective construction process

From the very beginning of rehabilitation process in Bela Vista in 2013 the specialists team recognised the importance of anthropological and ethnographic work based on a qualitative approach. It was particularly important to carry it out through participant observation inside and outside the “island”,

⁴ The Basic Housing Lab (LAHB), coordinated by anthropologist Fernando Matos Rodrigues and architects António Fontes and André Fontes and later also by sociologist Manuel Carlos Silva, was established at the Headquarters of the Residents’ Association of the “island” of Bela Vista during the period when the Bela Vista renovation operation took place between the end of 2013 and the end of 2017. In order to set up the LAHB it was necessary to demolish some interior walls and to introduce some basic infrastructural preconditions such as piped water, electricity and improvements to the roof. The work was carried out with the collaboration of residents and commitment of members of the management of the Residents’ Association, namely António Fontelas Lopes, Aloísio Pinto and Mário Pinto, young architects Fábio Filipe Rodrigues Azevedo and Catarina Pires, namely between 2014 and 2016 and several researchers of CICS.Nova from University of Minho. Imago was the office’s name of architects António Fontes and André Fontes. The names of residents and technicians are given with their informed consent, otherwise they are marked with letters that are not the initials of the names.

⁵ In this process of empowering the community took also place a project approved and funded by FCT within the framework of the Horizon 2020 Programme entitled *Ways of Life and Forms of Inhabiting; the ‘islands’ and popular neighbourhoods in Porto and Braga* (PTDC/IVC-SOC/4243/2014), under the academic coordination of Manuel Carlos Silva, of University of Minho.

⁶ In this regard, cf. theoretically [Faty, 1980; Baré, 1995; Tarsi, 2018; Rodrigues and Silva, 2015]. About the building of the basic participatory housing project, cf. the book-catalogue *A Cidade da Participação* (City of Participation), organised by Rodrigues et al. [Rodrigues et al., 2017] and published by LAHB/CICS.Nova_UMinho and the Publisher *Edições Afrontamento* with the cooperation of the photographer Susana Varela.

whilst staying within the framework of action-research, that requires the close possible collaboration between residents, specialists and researchers not only from a cognitive but also an affective point of view (cf. [Almeida, Pinto, 1990; Hannerz, 1993: 19; Signoreli, 1999; Caria, 2003: 37 ff; Silva, 2003; 2012: 198; Bright, 2020]). It was in this socio-spatial and urban context that the Bela Vista operation was developed as a participatory process, making use of action-research and participation methodologies (ARP), as generally designed by Villasante et al. [Villasante et al., 2000: 11–18; 35–37] and taking into account Arnstein's [Arnstein, 1969] typology⁷, that insists on the importance of participatory processes for the collective benefit, considering participation the guarantee of a spatial justice. Moreover, the principle of participation is included in Article 53 of the recently approved Housing Framework Law⁸.

Taking these principles into account, observation activities were established by the team with a certain regularity, bearing in mind a holistic approach to the community. This provided an understanding of the relationships and activities both inside and outside the community, of private and public interactions, of who lived on the “island” and who from outside maintained a relationship with residents. Kinship grids were constructed in order to understand the links between insiders and outsiders, that helped to eventually discover that there were very strong links between families living on and off the “island”.

⁷ Cf. for example, the Ladder of Citizen Participation, by the specialist Sherry R. Arnstein [Arnstein, 1969], who presents eight types of participation in her work, which are in turn categorised into three groups: (i) Citizen Power: Citizen Control, Delegated Power and Partnership; (ii) Tokenism: Placement, Consultation and Informing; (iii) Non-participation: Therapy and Manipulation. It defines “Citizen participation” as the redistribution of power that enables citizens who are excluded from political and economic processes to participate in shaping and managing them.

⁸ Cf. Housing Framework Law, Law No. 83/2019 of 3 September published in the Official Gazette *Diário da República*, 1st Series, No. 168, p. 11–33, approved thanks to the determination of the Environment, Spatial Planning, Decentralisation, Local Government and Housing Commission and under pressure from the Portuguese left-wing political parties the BE and the PCP/PEV, which were supported by the PS and its left wing independent Member of Parliament Helena Roseta, thereby placing, in the middle of the housing crisis, especially in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto, the problem of housing shortage as due to the political agenda, aggravated by ultra-liberal legislation, from the time of the PSD/CDS government. The aforementioned Article 53 forms part of Chapter VIII — Information, participation, associativism and protection of rights: Article 53 — Right to Participation. The first point states that “citizens have the right to participate in the drawing up and revision of public planning instruments for housing, at the national, regional and local level”. The second point states that the “State, the autonomous regions and local authorities shall promote the active participation of citizens and their organisations in the design, implementation and evaluation of public housing programmes”.

The process also had the methodological and theoretical support of the research work carried out at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Social Sciences (CICS.Nova) of the University of Minho. The approach was focused on action research, where residents are not seen as simple “objects” of study, thus denying them the status of subjects and protagonists in such processes in both rural and urban research contexts⁹. The coordinating team of the basic participatory housing project undertook the entire renovation process of the “island” of Bela Vista based on the methodologies applied and the practical experiences trialed over the years of programming and implementation. In short, it was assumed that the residents are citizens/stakeholders and protagonists in this construction process of the basic architectural project of the “island” of Bela Vista, in accordance with national and international regulations¹⁰.

The process of renovation in Bela Vista was based on the fieldwork undertaken not only in surveys but mainly in interviews and participant observation and several deeper conversations in order to learn about, understand and interpret the ways of living in this community, based on the construction of maps concerning the *habitat*, and the process of basic participatory architecture (cf. [Rodrigues et al., 2017]). The trust eventually built up made it possible to enter the houses of the residents, who were prepared to share their family history. The memories — both good and bad — came back to life with a certain encouragement. Family “tales” were remembered, journeys through life, lives long and full, others unfairly cut short. Archives of memories, family albums, secrets well kept by time and silence, the conversations summoning memories, in which the profound silence of one’s gaze inhabits this small world that reveals itself in such a poetic and heartfelt manner¹¹. Words provide meaning, organise and

⁹ Cf. [Silva, 1998; 2003; 2012; Ribeiro, 2010; 2017; Rodrigues and Silva, 2015]. See also the following fieldwork in other contexts: [Rabinow, 1992; Rahnama, 2012; Guber, 2004]. In the specific case of the process for the “island” of Bela Vista, the design also drew on the experience of theoretical and practical work carried out over a number of years by Rodrigues [Rodrigues, 2005; 2014; 2015; Rodrigues et al., 2015a; 2017].

¹⁰ Cf. the *World Charter on the Right to the City*, UNESCO. The approval of the *Housing Framework Law* enshrined the right to a place, to participation and to decent housing: cf. Law No. 83/2019 of 3 September, Official Gazette *Diário da República* (1st series, 3 September 2019, No. 168, p. 11–33). See also the *Carta do Porto. Para a Reabilitação das Ilhas da Cidade*, approved at a Seminar on 17 June 2017 and published by the Basic Housing Lab in the same year.

¹¹ On the relevance of memory in reconstructing the identity of families and the community (cf. [Candau, 2006]). In the specific case of the study about the community of the “island” of Bela Vista and, in particular, the memories of Sra. Rosa or, more affectionately, Rosinha, the discovery of her poetic writings — that later the team, namely Fernando Matos Rodrigues, undertook to publish — was possible thanks to the team members socialising with Sra. Rosa, who spent most of her time in the living room. She always sat in the same place, a place of

identify images which, in a flow of sharing and commitment, reveal their life stories and those of their families in the community they belong to.

Our mappings focused on the collective and the domestic space. The latter consisted of a small room, usually with a round or rectangular table in the centre, several chairs around it, a sofa, a piece of furniture with decorative plates, a refrigerator and a TV set¹².

It was in this context that we learned and decoded ways of thinking and the *modus operandi* of the inhabitants in their search for solutions, even if precarious in self-construction, for specific problems, such as the absence of sanitation, public lighting, construction problems, the lack of space inside, the absence of ventilation inside the dwellings, the absence of toilets, kitchens and heating in the houses¹³. The time spent together allowed us to understand the relational spaces between theirs and others, which helped to access the meaning of things, of objects in space, of their ways of dwelling and organising life. At the same time, the co-living on the “island” allowed us to get to know and interpret their identities, the relationship between the public space or ‘front region’ and the private one or ‘back region’, the appropriation of space itself, this being the starting point for getting to know the space of the others — absent or present (cf. [Goffman, 1973; Remy, 1973; Giddens, 1989]). Direct observation with moments of great interaction, conversation and sharing with the residents made it possible to collect information, in terms of quantity and quality, to be used in the project and address the housing shortage problems and the aspirations of the residents of this community-‘island’. We therefore took part in the implementation of action-research processes with a strong involvement and participation of the residents and, in particular, of their Association in defining

great emotional attachment for the elderly woman, as it was there that her husband had sat. It was in the living room that he ate his meals, read the newspaper and watched television. In this room Sra Rosa had photographs of her and her husband. There was also a picture of the Porto Football Club team in the year they became European champions and a picture of Our Lady of Fátima, her two affective and religious symbols.

¹² For example, before the renewal of the “island”, another resident named Ritinha used to cook meals for her family (husband, daughter, sons and their grandchildren) and her neighbours. The small-sized kitchen was painted green, with a cooker, a table with a basin that functioned as a stall for washing dishes and preparing food. The washing machine was also located in this room. The house had no bathroom neither hot water.

¹³ Cf. [Rodrigues, 2014]. Each one went about solving the shortcomings of their dwelling according to their ability. Sr. MP had been carrying out works with the help of friends and family members who worked in the construction industry. Others did everything themselves. Few resorted to labour from outside the ‘island’. The sanitation and lighting of the alleys and corridors of the ‘island’ were undertaken with the labour of the residents and with the help of materials supplied by the Bonfim Parish Council at the end of the 20th century (cf. [Rodrigues et al., 2015a; 2015]).

the respective programmes and project design, from which it was possible to construct active-alternatives [Chambers, 2012: 157 ff]¹⁴.

On the one hand, the richness of the ethnographic experience and the co-presence in the community is extremely significant not only to understand and interpret the reality of a certain ‘island’ or popular neighbourhood, as mentioned by Bourdieu et al. [Bourdieu et al., 2002: 2], but also contributes to deconstructing aprioristic rhetoric or decontextualised narratives. On the other hand, as the same authors warn, the practical and empirical aspect cannot and should not be detached from epistemo-methodological questions and theoretical approaches, and a research practice centred on the construction of knowledge based precisely on theoretical problematisation and the search for methodological and technical rigour in empirical research are considered necessary. Thus, sociological practice and committed knowledge [Bourdieu et al., 2002] cannot give up “mediation and the theoretical and technical apparatus” and should not “devalue any of the conceptual or technical instruments that give rigour and strength to experimental verification”. In fact, the whole action-research process and participation in the “island” of Bela Vista always bore in mind this search and theoretical and conceptual foundation without ignoring not only empirical knowledge of the reality of the “island”, but also the participatory aspect¹⁵ of the community within a framework of commitment to it [Silva, 2003: 177–182].

¹⁴ Cf. [Chambers, 2012: 157 ff] and especially [Bright, 2020]. Regarding the defeat inflicted on the working class in the closing of the mines in England in 1984–1985 by Margareth Thatcher’s government, this last author emphasises the experiences of participatory research teams involving academics, artists, trade unionists, activists and residents as intergenerational communities of covert, disturbing and even traumatic memory, however, embodied and present in deindustrialised spaces of coal mines, resistant to reimagining and alternative forms of reconstruction of identity and collective action through art (theatre, drawing, poetry, music). This reconstruction has an open and affective, horizontal and intersectional basis (territory, class, gender), positively facing the future with hope. Cf. also the projects Working with Social Haunting, Unclosed Space and Song lines to Impact and Legacy on website <https://www.socialhaunting.com>

¹⁵ In the *Contemporary Dictionary of the Portuguese Language* (2001: 2762–2763), published by the Lisbon Academy of Sciences, the entry for the Portuguese word for Participation — *Participação* — states that it derives from the Latin *participatio*, that is, the action or result of intervening, of taking part in something, equal to intervention. But it is understood above all as the action or result of actively cooperating, of showing solidarity and associating with others to achieve something. The *participant* is the one who is present, who intervenes, who takes part. To *participate* means to take part, to be present and to intervene, to have participation. From this linguistic complexity, we can state that the whole participatory project requires a much greater involvement and commitment from people than other forms of work. In this sense, participatory projects have a catalytic effect in the way they strengthen the voice of the community in defending its rights. Participation is not limited to information and consultation, which, even though necessary in research, cannot be

This process cannot and should not ignore the resistance and struggle for the right to housing in the city of Porto, that, although incidental, fragmentary and not always coordinated and effective in their action, are certainly relevant¹⁶. In recent years it has been possible to follow several communities that have resisted in their fight for the right to a place and housing. We would highlight the cases of the African community of Riobom, the community of the “island” of Tapada, the Nicolau neighbourhood, the D. Leonor neighbourhood, the ‘occupy’ community of Gama, the Lomba neighbourhood, the Póvoa “islands” (cf. [Rodrigues, Fontes, 2018]). The communities that require rehabilitation/renovation plans for the houses that, given their low resources, can be carried out at low cost, with support from the central State and/or the Municipality itself, and meet the necessary conditions for decent housing. From this action for the right to a place and to housing, the Basic Housing Laboratory team had been building a path of commitment, trust

confused with participation or, when pretending to appear as such, results in ‘false participation’. For example, Lefebvre, on the problem of “false” participation “was very insistent on the idea that there can be an illusory participation: gathering two hundred people in a room and presenting them with a programme, claiming that this is the plan that has been drawn up. This is not even consultation, i.e. publicity, it is false participation” [Lefebvre, 1976: 4 ff]. Pinaud considers that “participation should be understood as governance, the latter understanding the way it redistributes power from the State to social bodies and, in some cases, as part of the process of social production of the *habitat*, linking self-management to bottom-up processes” [Pinaud, 2006: 2–3]. We are in full agreement with the author that also considers that participation can take place at different stages of the process: participation in diagnoses, objectives, programming and planning, designs, implementation, and also project operation, execution and management.

¹⁶ On the new urban movements struggling for the Right to Housing we would highlight the gathering on 7 April 2018, at 3 pm in Praça da Batalha under the slogan “More Housing, Less Speculation!” and the march in the city of Porto on 22 September 2018 under the slogan “For Our Lives. For ourselves. We fight.” It is also worth mentioning the gathering in the Largo de São Pedro de Miragaia of the residents of the historic centre of Porto who were being evicted from their homes, from their neighbourhoods through the application of the Cristas Law (also known as the “Snail” Law) and the pressure for Local Housing. Fernando Matos Rodrigues, an anthropologist and activist, exposed these struggles in some ‘islands’ and social neighbourhoods, in articles published in newspapers, especially about the “island” of Bela Vista, such as: “For an anthropology of inhabiting. The islands of Porto”. In *O Tripeiro*, 7th grade, Year XXX, November 2011, No. 11, p. 326–327; “In defense of the right to housing in Bairro Nicolau do Porto”, in *O Público*, 2 August 2013; “The rehabilitation of Bela Vista Island. New paradigm in housing policies for the city of Porto”, in *O Tripeiro*, 7^a Série, Year XXXIV, January 2015, No. 1, p. 8–9; “About the rehabilitation of Bela Vista. The importance of the Bela Vista Islands” in *O Tripeiro*, 7th grade, Year XXXIV, February 2015, No. 2, p. 46–51; “New Life for the Port Islands. Regarding the rehabilitation of Bela Vista in the parish of Bonfim”, in *O Tripeiro*, 7th grade, Year XXXIV, March 2015, No. 3, p. 86–87. Cf. still [Rodrigues et al., 2017].

and solidarity for and with communities that were in situations of significant social and housing vulnerability in the city of Porto¹⁷.

In short, it was not only the application of the usual methods and techniques in the social sciences, but also action research, participant observation and the use of participatory methods with community members, as stakeholders, that allowed us to get to know the ‘island’ and its residents in a holistic and wide-ranging manner.

3. Action-research in the process of rehabilitation and renovation of the “island” of Bela Vista

In previous years, particularly since the precedents of the eviction of residents of the ‘islands’ and social housing neighbourhoods by the Mayor Rui Rio, various forms of resistance to evictions had emerged, especially in the final part of his last mandate. New forms of struggle for the right to the city had reappeared, translated into slogans such as, “*O Porto não se vende*” (Porto cannot be sold), in a clear delineation and contestation of the spatial and economic expansion of national and international financial capital, expressed in the processes of gentrification and the prior speculation of urban land. It was in this context that, in the run-up to the 2013 local elections, citizens, whether or not from the ‘islands’ and working-class neighbourhoods, including Bela Vista, gave their support to the independent candidate Rui Moreira on the condition of his commitment to the rehabilitation and renovation of the neighbourhood. They assumed that this would only be possible if sound economic policies were implemented, addressing city sprawl and planning and designing the city on the basis of the territory, its topological idiosyncrasies and above all with the involvement of its residents as co-constructors of the city and its rehabilitation projects for the ‘islands’ and working-class neighbourhoods (cf. [Rodrigues et al., 2017] and, in general, [Salat, 2017: 31 ff; Bourdic, Kamiya, 2017: 69 ff]).

In this part we will describe how the residents of the Bela Vista ‘island’ were re-approached in attempt to identify the constraints the residents might had felt about the previous SAAL process with the outcome that lead to a significant frustration. It was both important to overcome the negative memory (about the lack of the result, not about the participation process) and to learn and start from realities and idiosyncrasies of the residents in the construction and design of solutions.

When summarising in writing the process of creating a basic housing plan, we realised that the work of design and rehabilitation was diverse and complex, but also demanding not only for us as technicians and social scientists, but even

¹⁷ The Laboratory team participated in the 11th Environment, Spatial Planning, Decentralisation, Local Government and Housing Commission at the Portuguese Parliament on 8 February 2018, at 2 pm a Hearing with representatives of the residents of the ‘islands’, particularly the Pro-Federation of Islands and Popular Neighbourhoods of Porto. Fernando Matos Rodrigues, Manuel Carlos Silva, António Cerejeira Fontes were present from the Laboratory along with members of the “island” of Tapada Residents’ Association. Rui Moreira, Mayor of Porto, also attended the hearing.

more so for the residents, for whom participating in the project of 1975–1976 did not bring any positive result. Therefore, a meticulous and committed reflection on the case was required. At the same time it was crucial to protect the residents from a new failure that would have affected even deeper the community in a situation of social and psychological vulnerability. It is worth narrating one of the first interviews with the resident Mário Pinto, a member of the Board of the Residents' Association, in which he, at the age of 82, recalling the frustration of the SAAL in 1975–1976, describes the community's enormous disappointment at the failure of the project to be implemented by the architect A.F.:

“It was a discredit to everybody, a great frustration. The Association began to disintegrate, we lost almost everything... There was always that mark of doubt in any promise of renovation... and it would come soon, it would happen like the other times. No one has ever come here to explain anything or why the process has been stuck. The Architect F.A. made a lot of noise, argued a lot with the residents, but never explained anything. After four years, since the Architect A.F. appeared on the ‘island’, the inhabitants wanted to ‘kill’ him. He explained the whole process, saying that they (the architects F.A. and A.F. from the Fund for the Development of Housing — *Fundo de Fomento da Habitação*) did not like the project and the matter was resolved. While the Bela Vista process was going on, the architect B.D. often came here to talk to the team of architects. But he never came back. People gave up and moved to the neighbourhoods. The Municipality came here, whoever wanted to go could go. The only one who did something for us was Dr T.M. Of course now we tend to believe that it will be the same this time”.

The first contacts with the community made it clear that there was no room for failure in the new attempt to relaunch the participatory basic housing project in Bela Vista, otherwise the community would be totally disillusioned. That led Mário Pinto to say: “*We can't go back to being the laughing stock on the street*”. In conversations and meetings with the residents, one could sense this climate of drama, fear and insecurity given the possibility that the basic participatory housing project might not materialise. For example, C.P. was always afraid that the island of Bela Vista would not be rehabilitated. Many times she criticised António Fontelas, the current President of the Association, accusing him of “*being wrong*”, that this was “*all a lie*”. It was only when the Basic Housing Laboratory set up in House 42 on the ‘island’, and above all after the visit of the Mayor Rui Moreira with his commitment to the residents that things calmed down. It was late September 2013 when the meeting between Rui Moreira, members of the Laboratory and the residents took place in the square at the entrance to the “island”. We were in the middle of a local election campaign. And one of the LAHB members made it a condition of electoral support for the independent candidate Rui Moreira and probable winner of the electoral campaign for the Mayor that he would promise rehabilitation of the ‘island’ of Bela Vista with the contribution of other stakeholders. However, this required

a close work of various participants operating outside and within the institutional space of the City Council, particularly after the victory of Rui Moreira. It took several assemblies and meetings between the Residents’ Association, the LAHB team and researchers from CICS.Nova in order to reach an agreement between Rui Moreira’s movement, which would later be supported in a post-election coalition by the Socialist Party (PS). Beside Manuel Pizarro’s openness, as Councillor for Housing, to the extent that the City Hall would provide support for the assessment of the situation of the families, two other Councillors were particularly committed to the process, namely: Paulo Cunha e Silva, Councillor for Culture and Manuel Correia Fernandes, Councillor for Urbanism. Despite the pressure from *Domus Social*, the intervention of these two councillors and several media reports involving the Councillor for Culture and the team made the definite approval of the project irreversible with the seal of the Mayor.

The most pressing questions that concerned the members of the Residents’ Association were homelessness and the cost of rent after the renovation of the houses. In previous decades the “island” had been victim to forced evictions by the municipal company *Domus Social*, that created great mistrust towards the municipal housing authorities.

Beside institutional and other pressures, residents had to face the presence of the LAHB team all the time, that brought advantages and disadvantages, risks and opportunities for the implementation of a participatory programme. It was not always easy to finish a job, to get on with a more technical or bureaucratic aspect, but what was gained in terms of knowledge, involvement and commitment was much stronger and decisive for the progress of this process than what could have been “lost” in terms of efficiency. This situation of permanent negotiation with the residents and, in particular, with the participation of the Board of Association Directors turned out to be the greatest strength of this operation. In addition to the participation of the residents themselves and, in particular, the motivation and commitment of the Residents’ Association, two other factors were crucial for establishing the basic preconditions of the success of the collective action of the community: the participation of technicians and social scientists capable of guaranteeing the presentation of the proposal and the political commitment of the successive political stakeholders who ended up holding the instruments of power essential to approve and implement the project.

The Bela Vista operation was preceded by a diverse set of events, such as seminars, lectures, debates, meetings, assemblies, meetings between the community, members of the LAHB, researchers from CICS.Nova, local politicians and union leaders from the city, with the presence of national researchers and international experts debating these participatory housing themes¹⁸.

¹⁸ These seminars and meetings with the participation of residents and local political representatives namely the mentioned Councillors for Housing, Urbanism and Culture were attended by national and foreign specialists from various organisations and university institutions, such as Sílvia Ferreira, Manuel Carlos Silva, Fernando Bessa Ribeiro, Elena Tarsi, Marco Kamiya, Javier Poyatos Sebastián, Graeme Bristol, Tais Sousa, among others.

On the “island” of Bela Vista it was possible to put into action a full set of participatory solutions, from the moment the LAHB was set up in early 2014 at the headquarters of the Bela Vista Residents’ Association at the invitation of its president António Lopes Fontelas, thereby permitting greater proximity to the residents and learning about their problems and their way of life. With the moving of the LAHB team to the ‘island’ it was possible to increase the rate of involvement and the presence and interaction coefficient, mutual knowledge and sharing to such an extent that the residents and the social entities of the association actively participated in creating the physical conditions for the LAHB to be installed there. The works ranged from cleaning and storage, to the adaptation of the space to the new uses, organisation of the laboratory to ensure its efficiency and the installation of technology and furniture. The participation of the residents and, in particular, the members of the Association was not limited to manual tasks. They were also willing, often at their own initiative, to get involved in the discussion and design of new proposals and new solutions, particularly in solving certain construction flaws, as well as deficiencies in the *habitat* and residing on the “island”. The residents, especially the members of the Association, not only discussed ideas and options in a warm, lively, open and critical manner, but sometimes scrawled their ideas on paper. We were dealing with a very unique context and a space with open doors, where everyone could knock and enter.

Thus began the participatory work between the LAHB members and the residents. The involvement between community and experts provided for the construction of a space for sharing knowledge and skills and a strong commitment, essential for the implementation of the renovation operation of Bela Vista. Each resident collaborated according to their possibilities and their skills and competences. The laboratory was thus an open, pluralistic space, serving the residents and enabling the LAHB team to develop its activity for the benefit of the residents of Bela Vista. The spaces were shared by the community, the Residents’ Association and LAHB members. There were no closed doors or spaces of exclusion. The LAHB was, by nature and function, an extension of the community it interacted and identified with, in short, as a work space but also and essentially a place for meeting, discussion and sharing, where everyone placed their hopes for success.

Once a basis of trust had been built, this allowed the researchers to enter the homes of the residents in order to talk about their lives, their problems and their aspirations. After a period of time, people started sharing old photographs of their family, of the ‘island’, of parties, of weddings, the names of parents, of children, of absent relatives. They gave us access to the correspondence of family and friends, diaries, poems, even personal documents. From this strong and intense relationship it was possible, for example, to recover and collect a set of poems by D. Aninhas, one of the Bela Vista residents, that, with her permission, were later published in a book by the Publisher *Editora Afrontamento* in

partnership with the Cultural Department of Porto City Hall and the LAHB¹⁹. Through this practical ethnography we were entering into the memories of the Bela Vista residents, establishing dialogues between the past and the present, “excavating” a little their past, but walking together in the present. Indeed, housing, exercising several functions, is a shelter, a leisure space, a space for security and privacy, a space for possession and appropriation of a territory, a space for the organisation of individual, family and social life, but it is also a structuring factor in the definition of one’s social position and family identity. In short, housing is the space where a person is allowed to establish neighbourhood and social relations [Giddens, 1989; Silva, 2012], a space, in the surrounding urban context of strong socio-spatial inequality, in which one can in a way realise the right to place and the right to the city and the sense of spatial justice (cf. respectively, [Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 1992; 2018; Soja, 2010; Tarsi, 2018]).

The participation and presence of the residents, particularly the Residents’ Association, was crucial not only in preparing, participation and mobilising people at the beginning of the process but also during the rehousing works in the successive renovation phases to ensure the safety, stability and comfort of the residents, without ignoring the specific problems of mobility, dependency and fragility of the elderly and the sick. Technicians, researchers and residents did not accept the relocation and displacement of the residents during the undertaking of the work. An attempt was made to minimise the problems inherent to the construction process by studying possible solutions jointly and at each moment. Fortunately, there was not a single accident or any problems involving residents, workers or machinery²⁰.

A “Programme for the Allocation of Houses following Construction”²¹ was drawn up in two phases. The first phase started on 1 June 2016, with an

¹⁹ Cf. [Ana Ribeiro, 2015]. In the preface written by Fernando Matos Rodrigues we can read: “*With the publication of this poetic work by one of the oldest residents of Bela Vista we intend to give value to such creative territories, those symbolic imaginaries of those who were born and have lived for 86 years in this island, with a very strong sense of belonging and community, reflecting and thinking over her life, her island and her community through use of strong poetic and sentimental language*”.

²⁰ It is important to highlight the excellent collaboration of the construction supervisors Sidónio Oliveira, Ilda Duarte and Rosa Costa from COTEFIS, in the way they monitored the works in the re-housing homes and during the two construction phases, as well as the excellent relationship with the LAHB/Imago team, the Residents’ Association and the community in general.

²¹ This programme was designed with the participation of all the residents, the LAHB members and then discussed with the *Domus Social* representative, the Engineer J.P. The construction of this “Rehousing Programme” in the heart of the ‘island’ involved considerable negotiation with the residents and with the representatives of the Association. At the end of a process that lasted more than three months, it was possible to reach a compromise between the parties and to construct a programme that would respond to all the doubts raised in the work meetings, in the assemblies with all the residents and which would guarantee all material and immaterial assets and, above all, would protect the residents from any type of risk.

expected duration of 7 months. The second phase started on 1 January 2017 with an expected duration of 12 months. Initially, some of the residents who lived in the second line of the “island” were relocated during the construction period, i.e. during the transition phase. Six dwellings were required to re-house the residents and their families, with four one-bedroom, one two-bedroom and one three-bedroom dwellings being allocated. With the participation of the residents and the LAHB team, a survey was carried out on the furniture to be taken to the temporary accommodation. The intention was that the residents would take only the furniture essential for their daily lives, with the rest being stored in a container provided by the City Council. The temporarily accommodation was much smaller than original houses and would not allow to store all the furniture, some of which was passed down through generation and had a considerable emotional value. Hence the preparation meetings with the residents were essential. This was undoubtedly one of the most critical and complex phases, because it implied leaving the house where one was born and lived for decades for another, albeit temporary, very small place.

According to the relocation plan drawn in a meeting between the LAHB team, the residents and political representatives, the residents would return to their original homes after the rehabilitation/renovation works, exactly as they wished. From the beginning of the operation, the residents, in general, did not want to change their house or place on the “island”. However, a few expressed a wish to exchange their three bedroom house for a place with only one bedroom on the ground floor. Two cases were identified for splitting a family unit. In both cases the family environment was very tense, with not enough space to live in with privacy and dignity.

After the completion of the works in the first phase, the residents were able to return to their renovated dwellings. In fact, as it happened with the residents of the lower corridor, the residents of the first corridor also had to temporarily change their houses, thus moving to the temporary dwellings of the second corridor, where the houses had already been renovated.

Initially, the old residents in Bela Vista were integrated into housing suitable for their needs in accordance with the established programme. A relocation programme for the inclusion of new residents was also discussed and drawn up. The programme presented five criteria to be taken into consideration: (i) that the Residents’ Association should play an active role in the selection of new tenants; (ii) that priority should be given to former residents who, for whatever reason, had left the island; (iii) that intervention and follow-up actions should be implemented concerning the preparation and training of residents regarding the use and maintenance of the housing, as well as the communal and exterior spaces; (iv) that access to new houses should be diversified, promoting diversity and social cohesion; (v) that, in addition to the participation of residents, the management and self-organisation of the “island” should be carried out by the Residents’ Association throughout the whole process, from the preparation of rehousing, the distribution of dwell-

ings, to the management and conservation of the “island” (cf. [Rodrigues et al., 2015a]).

Faced with real estate speculation and the commodification of the city, it is crucial to give value to the processes of resistance expressed in claims such as these that were also expressed by the residents of Bela Vista: “*We don’t want to change our neighbourhood*”; “*Nobody will take us away from here*”. Only with true organised participation and technical and political support can the dynamics of induced deterioration be avoided as well as displacement to the periphery for residents, who, as in Bela Vista, demand to be able to live with quality in city centres.

4. Conclusion

The article describes the neglect and abandonment by the State and the City Councils of the “islands” and social housing neighbourhoods, particularly in Porto, where authorities pandered to the real estate developers. The “island” of Bela Vista is an exceptional case, demonstrating the possibility to successfully rehabilitate and renovate due to a combination of several factors: the collective action of the residents led by their Association, a team of technical experts and researchers and above all the political commitment of an individual running for the Mayor, who would eventually win, although this was more the fulfilment of a specific promise than a generalised housing policy at the municipal level by the City Council and its Mayor.

Ideas of participatory methodologies took into account the negative experience of a previous regeneration attempt designed in the post-revolutionary period within the SAAL framework, the failure of which led to a certain disbelief and demotivation among the residents. The resistance of the residents, despite the initial scepticism of some, combined with the persistence of the Residents’ Association which, faced with threats of eviction as a result of city policies, welcomed the collaboration of technicians and researchers, created certain initial conditions to commit the candidate and future Mayor to fulfil his electoral promise of renovating the “island”. The description and analysis of the process was then made, with the protagonists being the residents, the LAHB team and the researchers and, last but not least, the figures of the councillors and, in particular, the Mayor.

It became evident that thinking about housing for the city implies strengthening the instruments of participatory democracy. In other words, it is not possible to think and plan for the city without integrating everyone within the process of creating and implementing the strategic documents that draw up the map, the image and the vision of the future of the city. In the specific case of the “island”, this reality enabled the use of participatory methods and ethnographic and anthropological techniques in the construction of “maps” of the “island” and its residential patterns, where the design process and the implementation of the renovation process managed to combine several quite successful internal and external factors.

Whilst faced with threats of eviction resulting from the policies of the City Council, the residents managed, with the cooperation of technicians and researchers, to commit the political power to fulfilling the electoral promise to renovate the “island”. The operation on the “island” of Bela Vista (2013–2017) enabled a set of experiences that went beyond the simple production of architectural recipes, enabling the use of interdisciplinary methodologies on participatory and collaborative practices focused on a particular social aspect.

ACRONYMS

ARU = Área de regeneração urbana (Urban regeneration area)

BE = Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc)

CDS = Centro Democrático e Social (Democratic and Social Center)

CEAM = Centro de Estudos Avançados Multidisciplinares (Center of Advanced and Multidisciplinary Studies)

CICS.Nova = Centro Interdisciplinar de Ciências Sociais (Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences)

COTEFIS/Gestão de Projetos = Management of Projects (name of company)

LAHB = Laboratório de Habitação Básica (Basic Housing Laboratory)

PCP = Partido Comunista Português (Portuguese Communist Party)

PEV = Partido Ecologista Os Verdes (Ecologist Party The Green)

PREC = Revolutionary Período in Course

PS = Partido Socialista (Socialist Party)

PSD = Partido Social Democrata (Social Democratic Party)

SAAL = Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local (Local Ambulatory Support Service)

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**МЕТОДЫ ГРАЖДАНСКОГО УЧАСТИЯ:
ПОКАЗАТЕЛЬНЫЙ СЛУЧАЙ «ОСТРОВА» БЕЛА ВИСТА
В ПОРТО (2013–2017)**

Аннотация. Авторы коротко описывают появление, а также историю городского «острова» Бела Виста в португальском Порто начиная с XIX века. Несмотря на

повышенную активность местных жителей после революции 25 апреля 1974 года, в рамках инициативы по городскому жилью и благоустройству (под эгидой Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local, SAAL), им не удалось восстановить этот запустевший район города. Ассоциации местных жителей, которой приходилось отбиваться от застройщиков, постоянно предлагающих планы по его сносу, в конце концов — при помощи инициативной группы, в которую входили архитекторы, социологи и активисты — удалось мобилизовать население и заручиться помощью независимого кандидата в парламент на политическом фронте с целью все-таки реабилитировать «остров» Бела Виста. В дальнейшем проект также поддержал Совет по культуре и урбанизму. Несмотря на то что в исследовании применялись различные количественные (опрос) и качественные (глубинное интервью) методы, особый упор в статье делается на метод исследования действием в противовес предположениям позитивистов.

Ключевые слова: основное жилье; методы гражданского участия; район; реабилитация; Порто-Португалия.

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