

O'NFM_1



Bouça



**O'Neil Ford Monograph 1:
Bouça Residents Association Housing**

Porto 1972-77, 2005-06

Álvaro Siza

The O'Neil Ford Monograph Series, Volume 1
Bouça Residents Association Housing
The University of Texas at Austin
Center for American Architecture and Design
O'Neil Ford Chair in Architecture

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Wilfried Wang

Essays

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Brigitte Fleck
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Bouça Residents Association Housing

Wilfried Wang

In the history of architecture, for a building to be some three or four decades in the making is not such an unusual occurrence. From religious edifices to airports, from elements of infrastructure to entire landscapes, many public schemes have required patience to be completed, and to be completed in a manner that sustains its relevance not just for the world of architectural criticism, but also for its users.

All the same, the Bouça Residents Association Housing in Porto by Álvaro Siza in association with António Madureira spans thirty-four years from start to finish, a period that covers more than half the professional life of an average architect. The length of its gestation may be superficially explained by the radical swings in local and central government, from the late Salazarist state, to the euphoria of the months after the peaceful April revolution of 1974, to the counter-reaction in early 1976 and the subsequent normalization of changing left and right wing administrations. Álvaro Siza, whose oeuvre shows him to be one of the world's most

profound architects, has been subject to these external vicissitudes.

In the 1970s, Alvaro Siza was known in Portugal and admired by a few Iberian colleagues. By the 1990s, Siza's international reputation was unquestioned. After a long period without a commission in Porto itself, Siza's authority in Porto was restored with the completion of the Fundação Serralves (1991-99). The awarding of the Pritzker Prize in 1992, the construction of the Portuguese Pavilion at Lisbon's EXPO 98, the steady restoration of the conflagrated Chiado district in Lisbon throughout the '90s, all served to raise his national stature.

Thus even the municipal authorities could no longer ignore the embarrassment that was the fragmented and run-down first phase of the Bouça Housing scheme, especially at the time of Porto's role as European Cultural Capital 2001. The embarrassment was compounded by the fact that, even though a number of architectural projects were pursued to celebrate the event of the Cultural Capital, none were completed during that year. This lacuna, noted by the international media, doubled the embarrassment felt at the still incomplete Bouça Housing, particularly as the site of the new concert hall is a few hundred meters away from Bouça.

Whichever reason finally persuaded the municipality of Porto to seek completion for Bouça, the wrong that was done to the Bouça Housing has finally been righted.

The intention of the O'Neil Ford Monograph Series is to document outstanding examples of contemporary architecture throughout the world for the benefit of those interested in learning from a detailed exposure of a single work. Each monograph will address the project's history, its design development, its realization and an appraisal. Wherever possible, the voices of those directly involved will be heard.

The O'Neil Ford Monograph Series begins with Bouça, thereby raising the question as to the relevance not just of Bouça itself, but that of urban public housing for low-income residents. By definition, such form of housing is a dense form of occupying ground that provides particular responses to the sense of architectural and social unity as much as to privacy needs. Bouça's completion therefore also marks the subtle shift in the concept of housing from one with a strong social commitment to one in which a demographic mixture is sought. Given the latter as the underlying aim of Bouça, its architecture has shown its resilience over the course of the three decades.

The Bouça Housing Stock

Álvaro Siza

Finishing the Bouça came almost as a surprise to me. I never totally lost hope of seeing it happen one day, especially thanks to the unremitting labor of the residents living in the unfinished houses of the first phase.

After 30 years of disruption, the commitment of the Cooperative Housing Federation proved decisive in the Porto Town Hall and the INH's resolution to complete the project. Besides building the second phase of the project, the intention was also to refurbish the existing houses (about 1/3 of the total). It was not an easy task to convince the residents to renounce some of the improvised interventions that had in the meantime been carried through. There was a pervasive reluctance to accept the interruption of the "magnificent isolation" in which they were living, right in the city centre, although under degraded conditions; there was also the fear of an eventual rent rise.

It took a patient dialogue with the residents, which resulted in a clear realization that the initial

project had to be maintained almost untouched, with very few exceptions; it was so determined with the purpose of preserving the existing and occupied houses, part of a unified project. In the course of that dialogue, there was some giving in to the residents' points and agreeing to bring in a few innovations, even if not of major relevance.

I, myself, was struggling with doubts and difficulties. The revision of the project forced me to have in mind the profound evolution of the resident population, compared to the context prior to the 1974 Revolution (back then, the need for garages was unthinkable, or the concern in demarcating private and public spaces; it was impossible to predict the level of demand in today's regulations).

The Bouça scheme was designed to be a radically economical project; in 1974 it could not – and should not – be any other thing. The discussion of the project revealed, years later, the wish (and the possibility, even if faint) for random improvements in quality and comfort. It was necessary to respond to the manifested demands, some of them stemmed from the preconceptions that walk side by side with objective improvements in quality of life. For that reason, once again, it was a participation project, especially concerning resident families.

Once the work was finished, the market reaction showed that the type of houses not only did not fully correspond to the present day's trends in the search for economical habitation – in all its positive and negative aspects – but also, on the other hand, proved attractive for other segments of the population: students, young professionals, new families – those who account for the mobility which is characteristic to the contemporary city.

To some extent, the integrity of the first design was lost in the revision that came to be. But there is now a metro stop only a few steps away that connects it to the rest of the city; a flow of people crosses the area every day; urban facilities open to the surrounding streets; there is a communal garden, cars, like in any other housing stock.

It is not the perfect project. But was that really the most important issue?

Sketches & Plans of the Inception





