

*Landscapes of Care. Public housing across multiple  
geographies: crossing theories and practices*



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## **The right distance: Photographing the neighbourhoods built under the Carnation Revolution**

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### **Abstract**

In the preface to his book *Why people photograph*, Robert Adams mentions a recurring idea in his writings: "the effort we all make, photographers and nonphotographers, to affirm life without lying about it". This was the challenge for visiting today the neighbourhoods built under SAAL, a housing program implemented during the Portuguese revolutionary period that sought to improve the housing conditions of the poorest classes based on a collective effort and the aspiration for a more equitable life for all.

Photographing the neighbourhoods built under the Carnation Revolution required the openness to understand the life and the different fates that each neighbourhood has had, 50 years on since the 25th of April, in an effort to escape an outdated and nostalgic/melancholic gaze linked to the moment of its conception. Besides trying to understand the characteristics of the neighbourhoods in terms of its integrity, community life, conservation and ownership, this work also required a willingness to establish a link to affections, contributing to the multiplication of hypotheses in the construction of an imaginary, where ideas of time, restriction and freedom fit in. The construction of a dialog is fundamental for promoting an encounter, a negotiated proximity between the photographer and the depicted objects, similar to what John Berger suggests about the act of painting. Perhaps this negotiation, or the search for the right distance, can be an approach to the affirmation of life.

Keywords: SAAL; housing; documentary photography; architecture and photography; reality.

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In the preface to his book *Why people photograph*, Robert Adams mentions a recurring idea in his writings: “the effort we all make, photographers and nonphotographers, to affirm life without lying about it”<sup>1</sup>. John Berger also reflects on the false opposition between the real and the imaginary, and how reality, far from being something stable and taken for granted, must be continually sought out, maintained and rescued<sup>2</sup>. Finding coherence between everything that surrounds us – the set of events that we commonly call reality – is always, in essence, the construction of an imaginary.

Reality goes beyond the mere accumulation of facts or the stabilization of culturally produced ideas. Capturing reality or affirming life through photography is therefore an exercise that lies in an uncertain territory between non-fiction and fiction<sup>3</sup>, where any misstep can upset a desired balance. With that in mind, we set out the goal of visiting the SAAL neighbourhoods built during the Carnation Revolution today.

The SAAL (Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local – Mobile Service for Local Support) was a housing programme aimed to support the most disadvantaged classes in transforming their neighbourhoods, advocating the appropriation of marginally occupied sites and self-management in the various stages of this process<sup>4</sup>. To this end, although coordinated at regional and national level, SAAL was a decentralised programme, involving the mobilisation of technical staff to provide local support to residents’ organisations formalised as associations or cooperatives and collaboration with local authorities. The state was responsible for providing technical and financial support, land, infrastructure and assistance in the construction and social management of the neighbourhoods. Residents were responsible for taking the initiative and being involved and making decisions at every stage, from diagnosis to dynamisation, design, construction and management. However, the urgency of implementation and the limited funds allocated to this programme meant that only part of the costs were borne by the state, and the programme provided for the residents to bear the rest of the costs through their own resources, either by self-construction or by taking out loans collectively, differing in this respect from conventional public housing programmes. With a considerable experimental character in terms of the methods adopted, the legal uncertainty supporting the programme itself and the adaptation to the fluctuations arising from a period of constant change, SAAL was above all aligned with popular demands, assuming, in some way, a mobilising role<sup>5</sup>.

1 Robert Adams, *Why People Photograph: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Aperture, 1994), 9

2 John Berger, “The Production of the World,” in *Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 66–75.

3 Gregory Halpern, *Documentary Sur/Realism*, Magnum online course, 2022, <https://www.magnumphotos.com/learn/course/gregory-halpern-documentary-sur-realism/>.

4 José António Bandeirinha, *O Processo SAAL e a Arquitectura no 25 de Abril* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2007);

5 Phil Mailer, *Portugal: A Revolução Impossível?* (Lisboa: Antígona, 2018 [1976]), 189

Despite the short implementation period (between August 1974 and October 1976), 75 SAAL neighbourhoods were built throughout the country, resulting of the commitment and persistence of the communities who live there, the technical teams who collaborated on their design and the various people and movements who organized themselves and fought to defend the right to a decent home, neighbourhood and city for all<sup>6</sup>. But they also bear witness to the different fates that each one of them has had, 50 years on since the 25th of April and immersed in a capitalist system that is increasingly controlled by global finance. The heterogeneity in terms of integrity, community life, conservation and ownership of the various neighbourhoods reveals the weight and pressure – and resistance – to which they, like other urban spaces, are subject.

The difficulty was, therefore, trying to escape an outdated gaze and what Fernández- Savater identifies as the old revolutionary "zombie-images", stuck in the past, which no longer stimulate desire and have become reactive and nostalgic/melancholic<sup>7</sup>.

Photographing these neighbourhoods requires the openness to establish a link to affections, contributing to the multiplication of hypotheses in the construction of that imaginary, where ideas of time, restriction and freedom fit in. Approaching the life of each of these neighbourhoods through photography is not the result of observation, but of an encounter, of a negotiated proximity between the photographer and the depicted objects, similar to what Berger suggests about the act of painting<sup>8</sup>. There is a sharing, a collaboration, a tense and restless relationship in the discovery, at each moment, of the right distance that allows us to go beyond the surface, making the photograph come alive. The construction of this dialog generates *another* moment, which simultaneously integrates and detaches itself from that place. Perhaps this negotiation can be an approach to the affirmation of life.

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6 An Archaeology of Utopia, "About". accessed March 10, 2024, <https://anarchaeologyofutopia.com/en/about>.

7 Amador Fernández-Savater, *Habitar y Gobernar: Inspiraciones para una nueva concepción política* (Barcelona: Ned Ediciones, 2020), 49–51.

8 John Berger, "Steps towards a Small Theory of the Visible," in *Steps towards a Small Theory of the Visible* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 76–89

## Captions

[Fig. 1]

Cruz de Pau, Matosinhos, SAAL neighbourhood, 2022.

[Fig. 2]

Contumil, Porto, SAAL neighbourhood, 2022.

[Fig. 3]

Cortegaça, Ovar, SAAL neighbourhood, 2022.

[Fig. 4]

Fonsecas-Calçada, Lisbon, SAAL neighbourhood, 2023.

[Fig. 5]

Fonsecas-Calçada, Lisbon, SAAL neighbourhood, 2023.

[Fig. 6]

Curraleira-Embrechados, Lisbon, SAAL neighbourhood, 2023.

[Fig. 7]

Meia Praia-Apeadeiro, Lagos, SAAL neighbourhood, 2020.

[Fig. 8]

Cabanas, Tavira, SAAL neighbourhood, 2022.



















