

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



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Models, Plans, Clusters & Pine Trees Vila Nova de Santo André 1971–2021

Paulo Catrica & Rui Mendes

Abstract

As an odd case of urbanism Vila Nova de Santo André is the only city built from scratch in Portugal in the XX century, without any urban pre-existence. Conceived by political decision and framed by an ambitious industrial project, the Port of Sines, Vila Nova is located in an area of extensive pine forests, between Sines and Lagoa de St. André. Created in 1971 the Office of the Area of Sines (GAS) was the administrative body responsible for planning and implementing the different components of the project. Endowed with enormous expertise knowledge and economic resources, the enterprise suffered a significant setback with the 1973 international oil crisis and thereafter with the 25th April, 1974 Revolution. Political hesitations, setbacks and abandonment marked the entire Sines project until the GAS extinction in 1986.

The main intention of this essay is to confront and reposition the negativeness of Santo André new town. Perceived as a failure and a lost opportunity, the lack of knowledge that supports this prejudice stems from the absence of a critical and reflective mass, whether in the form of academic research or artistic expression. The paper intends to confront and discuss archive historical photographs from different phases of construction of the city and its surrounding landscape, with recent photographs. This visual atlas, as an unfinished, inorganic and impure edifice, join and relates the photographs as fragments. It follows the line of reasoning of Walter Benjamin on the political potential of the outmoded as a subject matter.

Keywords : town planning + politics + architecture + history + landscape photography

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*I know that one time the allegorical art was considered quite charming... and its now intolerable. We feel that besides being intolerable, it is stupid and frivolous. Neither Dante, who tools the story of his passion in Vita nuova; nor Roman Boethius, writing his De consolatione in the tower of Pavia, in the shadow of his executioner's sword, would have understood our feeling. How can I explain that difference in outlook without simply appealing to the principle of changing tastes?*¹

Jorge Luis Borges

Located in an area of extensive pine forests in the north of Sines, the new town of Santo André has its origin in a political administrative decision framed by an ambitious governmental project, the large industrial Port of Sines. As an odd case of urbanism Santo André is the only city built from scratch in Portugal in the XX century, without any urban pre-existence. Projected for one hundred thousand inhabitants, after fifty years it has only fourteen thousand residents (Fig. 1, 2 and 3).

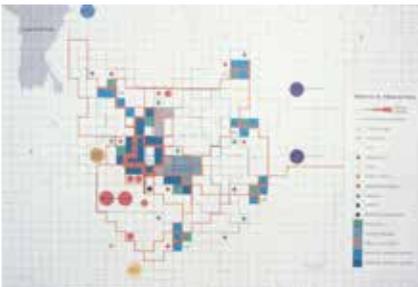
This essay results from the joint investigation, of Rui Mendes, a PhD candidate at the ISCTE Architecture Department, Lisbon, in dialogue with a long run visual study by Paulo Catrica, in the wake of his PhD research on the English New Towns.² Our main intent is to confront and reposition the negativeness of Santo André, repeatedly broadcast through the diverse mass media in the last forty years, as a failure and a lost opportunity. The lack of knowledge that supports this prejudice stems from the absence of a critical and reflective mass, whether in the form of academic research or artistic expression. Its a-historic condition is stressed with the scarce cultural media produced on Santo André, as fiction books, films or television programs³. The foundation of our argument follows the line of reasoning of Walter Benjamin on the political potential of the outmoded, as he referred to be "*the wish-symbols of last century*".⁴ Therefore the research proceeds from the *outmoded* condition of the subject matter, as a political prospective.

1 Jorge Luis Borges, "From Allegories to Novels," in *Other Inquisitions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 155–56; and quoted in Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism", in *Art after modernism: rethinking representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston: D.R. Godine, 1984), 203–235.

2 Paulo Catrica, "Subtopia: photography, architecture and the new towns programme" (PhD diss., School of Art and Media, University of Westminster, London, 2012).

3 The Office of the Area of Sines (Gabinete da Área de Sines – GAS) commissioned a book to Luis Stau Monteiro, *Um Areal de Esperança*; Madalena Miranda, directed a short film, *Naquele Bairro* (2002) at Santo André and more recently João Vieira, published a novel *A cidade Maquete* (2020) by Viva a Preguiça Editores.

4 Walter Benjamin, "The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Selected writings, 1935–1938*, eds. M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith. Cambridge (Mass. ; London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 101–133.



[Fig. 1, 2 & 3]
Vila Nova de Santo André, Arquivo Distrital de Setúbal, n.d

1. The New Town of Santo André and the Sines Project

The administrative body responsible for planning and executing the different phases of Santo André construction was the Office of the Area of Sines (Gabinete da Área de Sines - GAS) established in 1971. As a government initiative the office endowed with vast economic resources, it was responsible for the larger expropriation of private land for public purposes in Portugal. At the time of its closure, in 1989, it maintained around one thousand workers in its staff. The April 25, 1974 revolution impacted severely on the Sines industrial project, along with the political and social fragility of the young democracy, hesitations and setbacks postponed or hold up part of the project. Regarding the new city some plans never materialized, the three different construction cycles from 1971 to 1989, most of what was built corresponds only to the first establishment.

Today, fifty years later, for the detailed observation in the ongoing investigation⁵, it is still possible to observe the housing developments highlighted and connected by the native green structure, which remains in the intricacies of the Plan's reticule. This set of spaces and enclosures, which print distance and gaps in the urban design, remain unusually intact. This apparent unusual shape is the matrix of a rational plan, that aimed to preserve the soil, to control the winds, due to the pollution eventual threat of the industrial port, and to secure the natural elements, the lagoon and the dune system.

Due to the imprint of the first plan, the materiality experienced in Santo André appears as a vast linear system of Clusters and Pine trees. It was this conceptual framework that allows us to read, in the planning principles, the decision on where to build. The natural resources, as voids, are an essential factor of the experimental planning of the city.

2. The photographs: document, collective memory and expectations

All the construction phases of the work were documented in photographs, its estate, a considerable mass of negatives and photographic evidence, is held at deposit on the District Archive of Setúbal. Without being classified and identified, this collection includes aerial photographs, "photographic reports" of the phases of the countless works, the place before, the city under construction, and after being built. GAS kept a photographer on staff permanently, and regularly ordered work from other photographers. In Lisbon, in its headquarters building, it had a darkroom camera equipped to process film and photographic prints. The confront of archive historical photographs with contemporary photographs open up a discursive hypothesis, as the photographs allow to relate subject and space in different historical times. An index will trail and relate subject, image and historical, urban and architectural research.

⁵ Rui Mendes, *Modernidade Dilatada no Espaço e no Tempo : o desenho do "Projecto de Sines" (1971-1986)*, Ph D research project, ISCTE-IUL.



[Fig. 4 & 5]

Bairro Azul, Vila Nova de Santo André, Arquivo Distrital de Setúbal, n.d.

Vila Nova de Santo André, 1971 to 1986: drawing based on the interviews with its three directors. rm@2020



[Fig. 6.]
Bairro do Pôr do Sol, Vila Nova de Santo André, Arquivo Distrital de Setúbal, n.d.

[Fig. 7 & 8]
Bairro do Pôr do Sol, Vila Nova de Santo André
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[Fig. 9 & 10]
Vila Nova de Santo André, Arquivo Distrital de Setúbal, n.d.

[Fig. 11, 12 & 13]
Bairro Azul, Vila Nova de Santo André
© Paulo Catrica, 1999.

3. The assembly: an atlas and an index

This hypothetical rewriting of the historical significance of Vila Nova de Santo André as an experimental urban venture, attempts to discuss the ideological matrix of the landscape. The assembly of a visual atlas that combines historical and contemporary photographs, maps, models and plans, with a descriptive index, allow to enunciate the history of the place and its construction. This montage aims stimulate a critical knowledge on the subject therefore to contribute to the collective memory of the city, bearing in mind its a-historic condition.

Henceforth as a living place, used, seen and perceived today, how the grasp of the modern technological utopia, a city built as part of an industrial complex, where the possibility of full employment responds to the urban and the architectural plan. The origin of this plan has its foundations in the garden citiesmodel, more specifically in the New Towns of the United Kingdom, where the housing clusters relate to the pre-existent natural resources. The decision of Santo André location relates to the natural reserve and the vicinity of the Lagoon, the city is protected by the northern winds from the potential threat from the pollution of Sines industrial complex. Although only a part of the planwere realized and even built, it is necessary to review a double void, that of knowledge on the subject and to disclose the flaws, hesitations and setbacks of the urban project.

Historical archival photographs allow an operational montage, following different hypothesis, by chronology, by visual typologies, by neighbourhoods, by subjects within the subject, etc. This assembly responds to the different construction phases and transformations of / in the landscape, in comparison with the present. Indeed the condition of "low modernity" in Vila Nova de Santo André emerges as a paradox when confronted with the quality of its architecture and its urban space, which is unquestionable. Architects such as Guilherme Câncio Martins, Luis Vassalo Rosa, Silva Dias, Soares de Oliveira, Braúla dos Reis, Tomás Taveira, Rui Atoughia, among many others contributed to the design of the city.

This visual atlas as an unfinished, inorganic and impure edifice, join and relates the set of fragments in the form of an ellipse. This structure implicates Walter Benjamin's concept of revolutionary pessimism, as a method of critical thinking.⁶

It does not derive or implies any intention of fatalistic resignation. The concept of the "organization of pessimism" that Benjamin borrowed from Pierre Naville, was defined by the former as a possibility "to escape the nullities and misfortunes of a time of compromise".⁷

6 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism" (1929), in *One-way street, and other writings*. (London: Verso, 1997), 225-239.

7 Pierre Naville, "La révolution et les intellectuels" (1926), as quoted in *Utopias: Ensaaios sobre Política, História e Religião*, ed. Michael Löwy (Lisboa: Ler Devagar / edições unipop, 2016), 47.



[Fig. 14 to 20]

Vila Nova de Santo André, Arquivo Distrital de Setúbal s/data, n.d.



[Fig. 9 to 15]

Vila Nova de Santo André, Arquivo Distrital de Setúbal, n.d.

Vila Nova de Santo André

© Paulo Catrica, 1999.



[Fig. 16 to 20]

Bairro dos Serrotes, Vila Nova de Santo André, Arquivo Distrital de Setúbal, n.d.

Bairro dos Serrotes, Vila Nova de Santo André

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In our understanding this "reorganization of pessimism" is revealed, materialize and discussed through themontage of text, photographs, plans as well with other materials. It aims toinvestigate knowledge and reflective critical capacity on the subject, preventing it from weakening or even falling in oblivion.

As a subject matter of interest, the new town of Santo André bears an outmoded burden, therefore the investigation of this suburban peripheral territory, is concerns the commonness of the place. In the attempt to rescue the subject matter from oblivion, it reclaims an allegorical condition, the photographs as palimpsests, could traced other layers beneath the surface. Owens remarks that in the *allegorical* structure "one text is read through another", though their relation could be discontinuous.⁸ Allegorically, this desire to implicate the banal and the ephemeral, as Craig Owens acknowledges, could "become the subject of the images". In the opening of its seminal article on the *allegorical* Owens quotes Jorge Luis Borges, referring the allegorical as outmoded and as an "exhausted device": "(...) *Allegories appear in fact to represent for him the distance between the present and an irrecoverable past*"⁹.

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⁸ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism", in *Art after modernism: rethinking representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston : D.R. Godine, 1984), 203-235. ⁹ idem, p.72