

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



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Abandoned wash-houses. Archiving wash-women practices in Oporto modern urban space

Chloé Darmon

Abstract

This visual essay shows the relationship between urban analysis and the use of archival images. Firstly, the research process for the realization of this work will be explained, in which photography is an important tool to understand the urban morphology and help to complete and document the theoretical part of my master thesis *Inhabiting Water, Public Wash-houses of Oporto: an experience of women in modern city* (2020) – which is a theoretical-practical work. Secondly, the historical dimension of the public wash-houses construction will be discussed, showing the invisibility of women in urban and public space – and in the history of urbanism. This invisibility has motivated the search for areas related to the experience of women in the modern city (19th and 20th centuries), assuming that wash-houses are an observatory of urban hospitality (Perrot 1997, 160) and also of women's practices on the territory. We will see that, in the contemporary urban space, the wash-houses are abandoned and form a network of places in the city. These ruins are potential cultural facilities to be brought out of oblivion. The photographic work carried out during the master thesis took shape in an interactive map (<https://maphub.net/chldmn/lavoirstpublicsporto>) that shows a selection of photographs from 1940 – with women in red to identify their presence in the washhouses – and photographs taken during the summer of 2020. The integration of these wash-houses in the Oporto Water Heritage Park, protected by the UNESCO Global Network of Water Museums, is one of the outcomes of this research.

Keywords : *Ruins, Archives, Oporto, Wash-houses, Women*

Chloé Darmon (1997, Courcouronnes) is a french young architect and researcher from the suburbs of Paris with a bachelor from the National School of Architecture of Paris Belleville, France. After integrating an Erasmus experience in the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto, Portugal, she transferred her studies from France to Portugal. There she accomplished her master's degree in architecture, in december 2020, with the thesis 'Inhabiting Water, the public wash-houses of Oporto: an experience of women in the modern city.'" supervised by the architect Mário Mesquita. She integrates the investigation group Porto : Territories and Networks of Invisibility (Porto : Território e Redes da Invisibilidade) since 2018, coordinated by Mário Mesquita, where she is doing research in the area of architecture and urban planning with a strong interest in feminist studies and interdisciplinarity. She is now working in the Editorial Team of Lina Magazine : Feminist Perspectives in Architecture and Urbanism.

"I didn't know photography would take me to the places that it has taken me."

Carrie Mae Weems, photographer.

Showing the invisible

My research process consists of walking around the city to look for the abandoned spaces that are the public wash-houses, in order to make an inventory of these places and to bring them out of the oblivion in which they are gradually being immersed. Photography was an effective means of transmitting the urban and landscape atmosphere that emanated from them. Using photography has made it possible to create a systematization of representation of the wash-houses in order to make it possible to compare them with the archive images. A dialogue between the archive photographs and the actual photographs was then established through the study of framing and points of view.

In this work, photography is both a tool for the representation of reality and a support for the analysis of past social practices in the areas of public wash-houses. Two photographic references were essential. The imaginary photographic work of Dora Maar (Fig.1) reveals a relationship between women and water. She illustrates this link with her surrealist manipulation and fabrication of the image. Artur Pastor's photographic work of documenting Oporto in the 1950s-60s (Fig.2) was crucial in understanding and interpreting the archive photographs of the Heritage Information and Interpretation Unit (U2IP)¹ dating from the 1940s. His work also shows the quotidian in the city during the dictatorship of Salazar, confirming the abundant presence of working class women in the streets of the Ribeira carrying baskets of white sheets or selling merchandise, and on the riversides of the Douro River, washing their clothes.

Water Territories

In the City of Waters², public wash-houses are key elements of urban morphology. The streams and rivers of the rural areas were gradually transformed, the surrounding villages were merged with the old city, and the beginning of the 20th century marked a turning point in the dynamics of hygienisation and modernisation of the city. As shown by Doctor Lima's map (Fig.3), the presence of public wash-houses is prolific in the still rural areas. However, they were places of contagion and proliferation of epidemics, and the first ones to be affected were the women who used these spaces.

¹ Original : "Unidade de Informação e Interpretação do Património - Águas do Porto, E.M."

² Original : "A Cidade das Águas"



[Fig. 1]
Dora Maar, Untitled, 1935



[Fig. 2]
Artur Pastor, Ribeira of Oporto, decade of 1960.

[Fig. 3]
Doctor Lima, Map of the City of Porto, with the localization of the wash-houses, 1936. (U2IP - Águas do Porto, E.M.)



In 1936, after a struggle by the women of *São Roque de Lameira de Cima* in the eastern part of Oporto, almost 10 years after the creation of the SMAS (Municipal Water and Sanitation Services)³, they organised as citizens a Women's Commission to denounce in a petition the unhealthy conditions of the public wash-house. From this popular demand, a new modern "hygienic" typology of public wash-houses was designed, but, paradoxically, they also became areas of control over women's bodies and their community practices. In fact, "the industrial city gave priority to productivist criteria in its configuration, but women of all kinds actively intervened in the demand for better sanitary and hygienic conditions in the cities, confronting or collaborating with the municipal authorities".⁴

The fact that wash-houses belong to civil and vernacular architecture is an important aspect of this study. Indeed, as Eugène Viollet-le-Duc wrote in the preface of *Architecture Communale*, by the french architect Félix Narjoux :

3 Original : "Serviços Municipalizados de Águas e Saneamento"

4 Collectiu Punt 6, *Urbanismo Feminista : por una transformación de los espacios de vida* (Virus Editorial, 2019), 76. Free Translation. Original : "la ciudad industrial antepuso los criterios productivistas en su configuración, pero mujeres de todo tipo intervinieron activamente en la demanda de mejores condiciones de salubridad e higiene en las urbes enfrentándose o colaborando con las autoridades municipales."

"There is often more art in a small village fountain, in a wash-house showing to all the sincere and judicious realisation of a programme than in certain sumptuous buildings whose most real merit is to make everyone say: this must have cost a lot of money".⁵

These public equipments are an integral part of the culture and memory of the city, and are testimony to an era of great public works in European cities such as Paris and London, with the aim of stopping the spread of disease, with a certain ambivalence, as hygiene and cleanliness were imposed in a forced manner, like a new religion and mostly for women.

Everyday Life

The 1940s archival images from the U2IP show the daily life of the wash-houses during the period of their rehabilitation by the SMAS (Fig.4 and 5). The wash-houses are key spots to understand the presence of women in the city in the 20th century, in fact, they are spaces of socialisation, where women of the working classes, servants of the great bourgeois families, and housewives spent a large part of their time, carrying out the work of care, which was very poorly paid. Indeed, as Amann Alcocer says:

"it seems that we have to look for possible spaces for traditional women's socialisation in environments very close to the household, both physically and conceptually, such as wash-houses, water fountains and later rooftops and courtyards where clothes are hung out".⁶

These spaces of socialisation are very important, especially as areas exclusively reserved for women. It is also one of the only public facilities in the city designed for women, and this is why:

"the wash-house appears to be an ambivalent place. It is the centre of a real female solidarity - material, emotional, cultural. The wash-house is also a means of educating the space-time of the housewife, which the [hygienist] urban planners consider excessively fragmented, fluid and irrational".⁷

5 Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, (1885), in *La France des Lavoirs*, ed. Christophe Lefebvre, (Editions Privat, 1995).

Free Translation. Original: "Il y a souvent plus d'art dans une petite fontaine de village, dans un lavoir montrant à tous la réalisation sincère et judicieuse d'un programme que dans certains édifices somptueux dont le mérite le plus réel est de faire dire à chacun : cela a dû coûter bien cher."

6 Atxu Amann Alcocer, *El espacio doméstico : la mujer y la casa* (Nobuko, 2011), 48.

Free Translation. Original: "Parece que hay que buscar los posibles espacios de socialización de la mujer tradicional, en ámbitos muy cercanos al hogar tanto física como conceptualmente, tales como los lavaderos, las fuentes de agua y posteriormente las azoteas y los patios de manzana donde se tiende ropa."

7 Michelle Perrot, "Le genre de la ville," in *Communications*, no 65 (1997): 159.

Free Translation. Original: "Le lavoir apparaît comme un lieu ambivalent. Centre d'une réelle solidarité féminine - matérielle, affective, culturelle. Le lavoir est aussi un moyen d'éducation de l'espace temps de la ménagère que les organisateurs [hygiénistes] estiment excessivement morcelé, fluide, irrationnel."



[Fig. 4]
Chloé Darmon, Wash-house of Arca d'Água, 1940.



[Fig. 5]
Chloé Darmon, Wash-house of Contumil, 1940.



[Fig. 6]
Chloé Darmon, Wash-house of Arca de Água, 2020.

Choosing the public wash-house as an object of study allows us to understand not only the morphological transformations, but also the evolution of the urban space's practices. These equipments inform us about the path of women in the city, and the wash-house is a trace, a mark left as a testimony of the presence of working class women in the streets of the industrial city of Oporto. As archaeologists of modernity, we observe these urban facilities as areas of great richness, which allow us to understand the ways of life and sociability of a bygone era, but of which a large part of the users are still alive, they are places which still belong to the living memory. To conclude, "the wash-house, a place of sociability for women, which became the means of their socialisation, constitutes a privileged observatory of the modes of urban hospitality".⁸

Transforming Old Stones

Today, these public facilities are ruins scattered throughout the urban spaces and landscapes and remain invisible (Fig.s 6 and 7). Due to the automation of domestic work in the 1950s and the gentrification of the last decade, the wash-houses are still in a process of abandonment and tend to be forgotten. They form a network of abandoned facilities in the city. As Rebecca Solnit wrote in the text "Abandonment", in *A Field Guide To Getting Lost* :

"Ruins become the unconscious of a city, its memory, its unknown, its darkness, its lost lands, and in this way make it truly come alive. [...] An urban ruin is a place that has fallen outside the economic life of the city, and it is in a way an ideal home for art that also falls outside the ordinary production and consumption of the city".⁹

Deactivated wash-houses and their surroundings, represent potentially useful territories, they can be sublimated as ruins, insofar as, no longer having an economic function for the majority, they can still host cultural and artistic events.

⁸ Perrot, "Le genre de la ville", 160.

Free Translation. Original: "Le lavoir, lieu de sociabilité des femmes, devenu le moyen de leur socialisation, constitue un observatoire privilégié des modes de l'hospitalité urbaine."

⁹ Rebecca Solnit, "Abandonment," in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Canongate Books, 2017), 89–90.



[Fig. 7]
Chloé Darmon, Wash-house of Azenha do Vilar, 2020.



Countering Oblivion

Archiving these places in a new interactive map¹⁰ (Fig. 8, 9, 10 and 11) made it possible to understand various urban transformations, analysing their urban surroundings and perceiving the transition between the rural and the urban contexts during the 19th and 20th centuries. These are areas with various layers of data which allow us to catch the permanences and ruptures in the city's environmental transformations. The archival photographs tell us the history of the city from another point of view – the industrial development of Oporto through domestic work and care. Furthermore, it raises the issue of water in urban territories and how it was used as a component of city design by urban planners.

It is then possible to understand the construction of the city through the social practices related to water. The recent classification of the Oporto Water Heritage Park in the Global Network of Water Museums¹¹, gives a new perspective of these spaces, their state of ruin and abandonment could radically change. In fact, the identification work has made it possible to launch a project:

¹⁰ accessed July 29, 2021, <https://maphub.net/chldmn/lavoirspublicsporto>.

¹¹ accessed July 30, 2021, <https://www.watermuseums.net/>.

[Fig. 8]

Interactive Map of the present deactivated wash-houses of Oporto, 2021.



[Fig. 9 & 10]

Chloé Darmon, Wash-house of Fontainhas, Before-After, 1940 - 2020. Modern Typology of Wash-house.

Chloé Darmon, Wash-house of Bonjôia, Before- After, 1908 - 2020. Infrastructure overlay.



"within the scope of the Water Heritage Park, which involves the recovery of around 50 public wash-houses that exist in the city and are deactivated. Mário Mesquita says that those equipment have already been signaled and that, until the end of 2022, they will be revitalized as spaces of socialisation, as they have always been, and for artistic creation".¹²

In conclusion, his practical work aims to show the importance of public archives, and how they can be used to understand the transformation of the urban landscapes. Also, emphasizes the use of these public archives in architectural and urban studies, and the photographic work as a useful tool to understand past narratives of the city, making visible the invisible urban territories.

¹² Jorge Pinto, "Parque das Águas na rede da UNESCO." *O Tripeiro* 7, no. 6 (July 2021): 166.

Free Translation. Original: "no âmbito do Parque Patrimonial das Águas, que passa pela recuperação dos cerca de 50 lavadouros públicos existentes na cidade e que estão desativados. Mário Mesquita avança que os equipamentos estão já sinalizados e que, até ao fim de 2022, irão ser revitalizados como espaços de sociabilização, como sempre foram, e de criação artística."

[Fig. 11]

Chloé Darmon, Wash-house of Travessa, Before-After, 1940-2020. Rural to urban.

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