

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



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From intimacy to urban landscape: images of the transformations of the Rainha Dona Leonor social housing.

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Abstract

The present communication proposes an imagery study on the transformations of the social housing Rainha Dona Leonor, in Porto, rehabilitated between 2017 and 2019. Through an immersive ethnographic work, it was possible to closely follow the radical changes that took place, from the demolition of the five housing blocks to the construction of a single block.

In short, our methodology was guided by the following phases: 1) a series of exploratory visits to analyze the spatial morphology, the living conditions, the forms of occupation of shared spaces and the atmosphere of the neighborhood (receptivity, sense of security, accesses, flow of non-residents); 2) further research into the history, context, and contemporary setting of the site; and 3) the close observation and follow up of two families from old residents.

The idea of using photography as a resource for data collection and representation of the situation was due to its ability to convey the impact of the changes on the landscape, on the lives of the residents, and on their narratives before the demolition of their homes and after moving to their new homes. We registered details inside their old homes (their old lives), before being packed up, or discarded in the move to the new apartments. Furthermore, photography was taken as a tangible reminiscence for these people, remnant of their past life.

Keywords: urban landscapes; ethnographic documentation; social housing; urban rehabilitation.

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The context

Our case study, Dona Leonor, is part of the first generation of social housing in Porto, built in the 1950s.¹ The neighborhood has housed families from different parts of the city since then, homeless for several reasons: floods of the Douro river, landslides or poor housing conditions of old neighborhoods, financial and social issues, among others. Some of these people live there since its construction and were about to go through a major urban rehabilitation process at the time this imagery study was developed.

The rehabilitation was carried out based on the following agreement: the City Council granted part of the land, considered of high commercial value, to a private entity, which, in turn, was committed to build social homes for the 52 families already living there. The other part of the land would be luxury apartments for rent or sell.

Under this scenario, this is a work focused on the perspective of the old residents, drawn from the cultural studies of Edward T. Hall², Henri Lefebvre³, and Susan Sontag⁴. We sought to understand the history of the neighborhood through the life and memories of its inhabitants. Our aim was to identify and understand, through imagetic documentary, how the rehabilitation plans and the different changes in the city – social, political, architectural, economic – altered the landscape, the daily life and the expectations of this people.

According to testimonies of the residents themselves, the area where the social homes were built was, at the time, far from the city center, with poor accesses and resources. As the years went by, the city grew and reached the neighborhood, while the hillside of Douro river was becoming a very expensive land in the city of Porto. Nowadays, the area where Dona Leonor is located is coveted by the upper classes willing to pay speculative prices for luxury homes with great views over the river and the sea, now with improved accesses to downtown, prominent restaurants, etc. Rainha Dona Leonor was literally turned into an *island*.

A point of view: objectives and working methods

The rehabilitation process of the Rainha Dona Leonor social housing could, of course, be studied from different angles and disciplines. Our intention was not to document the architectural or structural aspects that were being extinguished and/or modified – although the photographs

1 Isabel Breda Vázquez and Paulo Conceição (coords.), *"Ilhas" do Porto: Levantamento e Caracterização* (Porto: Câmara Municipal do Porto, 2015).

2 Edward T. Hall, *A Dimensão Oculata*, trans. Miguel Serras Pereira (Lisboa: Relógio D'água, 1986 [1st ed.1966]).

3 Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*, 4 ed. (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 2000 [1st ed.1974]).

4 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2005 [1st ed.1977]).

had this added effect, as they captured part of the demolition and construction process of the new neighborhood —, but rather to observe this macro scenario from a very particular and specific ethnographic perspective, by following two families of residents.

We are therefore interested in looking at this context, as much as possible, from the perspective and experience of its inhabitants, by listening and portraying part of the story of these people while major changes were taking place in the neighborhood and, consequently, in their lives. It is not up to this study to judge between what is, or could be, good or bad for these people in this new order proposed and implemented by others — public and private initiatives. The very families chosen to participate in the project had quite distinct opinions and expectations about the rehabilitation process, as will be presented later on in this article.

It is a subjective cut of a certain reality, which implies an authorial commitment by those who propose and conduct a visual project of this nature. As an example, that legitimizes this kind of posture, we highlight the intense photographic work done on the Great Depression in the United States (late 1930s), commissioned by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which included photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Russel Lee. Susan Sontag points out this authorial aspect, in a project that aimed to look at severe social and economic issues of real people, as follows:

(they) would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film—the precise expression on the subject's face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation, and geometry. In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects.⁵

More specifically about Lange's work, historian Linda Gordon⁶ characterizes it through the photographer's repeated slogan: "a camera is a tool for learning how to see without a camera", Lange did this "by revealing less-noticed, often passed-over aspects of the world". We intend, precisely, to address these "little-noticed" aspects in situations like Dona Leonor's. It is usual, and natural, some excitement on the part of the media and the City Council itself in this kind of contexts, construction works long promised by the government and of great impact on the region.⁷ However, it is less common to address — and hear — how residents are going through the whole process of the requalification, leaving the old houses and preparing for the new ones — and all the new things this involves in their everyday lives.

5 Sontag, *On Photography*, 4.

6 Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

7 "Novo bairro Rainha Dona Leonor vai ser o melhor do país sem custos para a Autarquia (2017)", Portoponto, accessed March, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3loY0rqAH0>.

We are interested, thus, in space not only physical, but as a “social production of meaning”⁸ influencing and influenced by those who live in it, from a strong sense of appropriation and social authority by them. That is, the space of the housing blocks and the neighborhood streets are a contextualization, an integral part of the story and way of life of the people portrayed. As emphasized by Hall, “man too has created material territorial extensions as well as a set of visible and invisible territorial signs”.⁹

In the first two phases of the project we aimed to study and get to know the neighborhood – through old and current news in the media; accessible posts by the residents on their social networks; and documents provided by local government agencies (e.g. Porto Municipal Archive) – and to record the atmosphere of the place, the daily dynamics and the changes that were already underway. We were then able to witness the transformation, the demolition (fig. 1), and the contrast of the loud sound of the construction machinery with a familiar and silent environment. The resulting images from this period show almost no people. They were made through a discreet presence of the researcher, guided drifts in and around the neighborhood. Quite soon we realized that we would be perceived as an *outsider*: since there were no public transportation, commerce or restaurants inside the neighborhood, most of the people who went through there were the residents themselves.

After the exploratory visits, the preliminary research and the contextualization of the area, the next phase had a very distinct tone. The images got more intimate, by looking inside the homes of the two families that participated in the project. In these images, we see the faces, the expressions, the houses, and the belongings of three women. This is when the photos become, in a more intense way, the “captured experience”, when we put ourselves “into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge”.¹⁰

The subjects in the study

The key figures for the development of this work were Celeste, her granddaughter Catarina, and Alda¹¹. They all lived in the same house for decades and faced the rehabilitation process in very different ways.

Alda, an elderly woman, moved to the neighborhood when she was young, after being rehoused due to the landslide of the neighborhood where she lived in the historic center of Porto, now she lived with her daughter. During the many years she had been in Dona Leonor she had gone through different experiences: she lived in more than one house and had to share the same

8 Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*.

9 Hall, *A Dimensão Oculta*, 121.

10 Sontag, *On Photography*, 2.

11 In order to protect personal data, the participants' last names will not be mentioned.



apartment with other families; she married "a boy from the 5th street", in the neighborhood; lived in the block that had now been demolished; and was waiting to move to the new house. Alda's trajectory is an example of how the socio-economic vulnerability of populations living in social housing can force them to undergo changes that come from external forces either than from their own initiative or will. As pointed out by Hall, "this complex network of interactions between man and his environment makes the problem of urban renewal and the integration of minorities into the dominant culture much more arduous than is usually thought".¹²

Alda was part of the residents who went to temporary housing, in the same neighborhood but in another block, since the building in which she lived was the first to be demolished. She had carried out a series of renovations to the old house over the years, some major interventions, others occasional. She believed that this house was just as she wanted, it was in "her own way" and was suffering from the rehousing process after all the investments she had made.

¹² Hall, *A Dimensão Oculta*, 15.

[Fig. 1]

Mailboxes of the old blocks during the demolition process.

The temporary housing did not suit her, even though her demands had been attended by those responsible for the construction work. She felt that the process was “affecting her head”, becoming more “forgetful” and insecure. However, this sense of nostalgia for the old house has given way, in part, to the anxiety to get to know the new one. She was in a hurry to leave the temporary house (fig. 4 and 5) and to organize her furniture and belongings, which did not fit the place.

On the other hand, Celeste and Catarina, grandmother and granddaughter, remained in the same house (fig. 2 and 3) until the day of the final move, as their block would be one of the last to be demolished. Celeste went to Dona Leonor because of the damage caused by the flooding of the Douro river in her previous house. She was part of the first residents of the neighborhood. She always lived in the same house, where her granddaughter was born, who was 26 years old at the time they were waiting for the phone call telling them to move to the new one.

Their old apartment was on the fourth floor, with no elevator or ramp, which was a daily problem for Celeste, who was 86 years old at the time. The bathroom was also a complicated and daily issue. Catarina needed to climb on the toilet bowl in order to be able to bathe her grandmother, as the space was tiny and there was no other way to do it. Another inconvenience was that they could not be in some rooms of the house at the same time, as there was no space. The new house would have no stairs, it would be more spacious, the bathroom would be more comfortable. Catarina said she “looked like a child” and couldn’t wait to live in better conditions with her grandmother. Celeste was waiting patiently, but she needed to “realize” that she would not be able to take all her belongings from the old house to the new one, according to her granddaughter.

These two families represent distinct expectations and anxieties within the same process, the same context. For this reason, and for recognizing the complexity of the moment lived by them, they were chosen to represent this study about Dona Leonor social housing. Thus, it would be possible to follow the process with greater proximity and make the fieldwork more flexible and adapted to the nuances of both cases.

Image and sound

The proximity with the *other* – the object of study – is a fundamental premise in the proposed project. The caution to approach people who are going through moments of great change and sensibility led to the exercise of a patient fieldwork, willing to adapt itself to the reality of the residents and not the opposite. The camera was chosen not only as a tool, but as a *way of thinking*, as described by Dorothea Lange, a possible means of approaching and returning the results to those who agreed to participate in the project. We believe that “using a camera is still a form of participation. Although the camera is an observation station, the act of photographing is more than passive observing”.¹³

13 Sontag, *On Photography*, 8.



[Fig. 2]
Catarina looks out through her bedroom window in the old house, before the block was demolished.



[Fig. 3]
Catarina explains to Celeste, her grandmother, that she doesn't intend to take all their belongings to the new house, such as their large number of plants.



[Fig. 4]
Image of Alda's bedroom entrance.



[Fig. 5]

Alda at the door of her temporary home, part of her furniture had to be left outside the house.

Before photographing the residents and the interior of the houses, we established as a method the conducting of interviews guided by a script of exploratory questions – always adapted to the moment in which these were carried out, so it was often not strictly followed. In these moments the camera was not used, only an audio recorder.

Less *invasive* than the camera – and less demanding to operate considering the project's objectives – the audio recorder allowed long conversations with the residents, recording their descriptions and impressions when they were still inside the old houses and, later, inside the new houses, looking at the space and objects, describing them freely.

Through these conversations people had more time to become comfortable with the presence of the researcher. The photography was a fluid extension of the dialogue, a more relaxed moment when people tried to show scenarios of interest that had been mentioned and discussed in the interview. Residents presented their houses, the rooms they liked the most, pointing out what had been there for many years and what was going to be changed or discarded, what they wanted to bring to the new home, the arrangements and decorations made for Christmas, without knowing if it would take place in the *old house* or the *new one*.

During the post-production work, the audio material was of great importance. Before looking at the images again, it was possible to listen and recall the dialogue with the residents without the visual *distraction* or the commitment to the *right here and right now* of the fieldwork interaction. These moments contributed to reflect and rethink on the photographs when choosing and processing them.

Conclusions

From the photo experience during the rehabilitation works of the Rainha Dona Leonor social housing, in Porto, we reinforce the importance of listening, recording and showing the most intimate and sensible aspects of urban narratives in transformation. Socioeconomically vulnerable populations not only have almost no control over these transformations, but they are intensely affected by them – their daily lives and identities. We insist, therefore, on the importance of continuing to study and document, with patience and proximity, these issues and places.

To approach the scenario from this perspective, we discussed the importance of assuming subjectivity in research that combines the scientific and the artistic dimensions. We believe that this is a way to seek ethics when interacting with people who accept to be portrayed and to participate in the project by opening their own homes and telling their life stories.

Thus, the images produced about these people and their contexts, their spaces, are not copies or faithful translations of reality, no matter how close the photographer is and how immersed he/she is in the fieldwork. They are clippings, possible interpretations, "the photographer does not understand everything going on in them. There remains a mystery, and this may be their most respectful and challenging message".¹⁴

On the other hand, the sound recordings of the conversations and interviews with the residents of the neighborhood were a valuable resource to reflect on the field work while processing the images. Furthermore, this material can be developed in different ways in the future, such as the creation of sound pieces, or in combination with images in a documentary film.

Finally, photography was the medium that allowed a specific return of the results to the project participants. After the blocks had already been demolished, we were able to offer them their portraits in their old houses, when their objects – plants, furniture, ornaments – had already gained a new meaning, a new space. "The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: "There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way".¹⁵

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All images were taken at Rainha Dona Leonor neighborhood (Porto), by the author of the paper (Ana Clara Roberti) between 2017 and 2019.

¹⁴ Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*.

¹⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, 17.