

**There is Africa in Lisbon.  
Spatial practices to support the struggle for spatial justice in a migrant  
squatter settlement in Greater Lisbon.**

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**ABSTRACT**

Based on the insights of Iris Marion Young and her 'politics of difference' (1990), this paper aims to search for the embodiment of cultural differences in the discourse and practices of urban planning by institutions. Urban researchers and immigrant dwellers of an African migrant squatter settlement in Greater Lisbon are currently engaged on the production of spatial practices that can enhance a participated discussion to question the dominant paradigm of equality and inclusion, when equality corresponded to equal treatment ignoring the practices of disadvantaged groups.

**KEYWORDS**

informal urbanism; squatter settlements; politics of difference; right to the city; post-colonial immigration

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## 1 Introduction

With the geopolitical reconfiguration of African countries formerly colonized by Portugal after the Carnation Revolution in 1974, and the entrance of Portugal in the EU in 1986, immigrants from Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe, moved to Portugal, mainly to Greater Lisbon, area that still concentrates today more than 80% of the immigrants from Portuguese-speaking African countries (Malheiros and Fonseca 2011:52).

Between 1953 and 1973 social housing represented only 10,8% of the total amount of households built (Gros 1994:83). The absence of effective housing policies after the beginning of the democratic period in 1974, when the pressure for response was needed, resulted in the construction of 'bairros de lata', Portuguese description for what is recognized as a 'shantytown'. The housing shortage led to the production of vast unplanned areas in the periphery of Lisbon where Portuguese migrants from inland and immigrants from Portuguese-speaking African countries played an important role.

In 1993, a major public housing program named PER (Slum Relocation Program), aimed for the 'eradication of slums', describing 'bairros de lata' as a 'social wound', linking to this places a perception of poverty, marginality and illegal activities as drug trafficking, crime, or prostitution (Cachado 2008), overshadowing other type of possible representations. During the 1990s and early 2000s, PER copied the "grand ensembles" model (when they were already being demolished in France), clustering together disenfranchised communities in massive housing blocks, ignoring singularities and cultural practices of immigrants. Beyond the critical assessment made to PER and the type of urban form it generated, we can find today places where severe socio-spatial exclusion takes place, precarious neighbourhoods where no answer was yet arrived.

## 2. Terras da Costa, an African migrant squatter settlement in Greater Lisbon

Only 10 kilometres away from Lisbon's city centre, Terras da Costa is a migrant squatter settlement situated in the Costa da Caparica ward, in the municipality of Almada, on the south side of the River Tejo. With no paved roads, no sewage system, and power sourced illegally, 300 people live in 80 precarious constructions. The majority of dwellers are Cape-Verdeans, inhabiting 55 houses surrounded by cultivated fields, while a smaller Romani group lives closer the road, next to the middle-class buildings orientated towards the beach. This place configures an occupation of municipal land, classified both as RAN and REN, acronym for agricultural and ecological national reserve.

With no water supply until September 2014, this community shares today a single water point, after the construction of a community kitchen that brought water to the site. Until that date, dwellers had to carry jerrycans from a public fountain, 1 kilometer away from the houses. Designed by ateliermob, an architectural office, the project had the financial support of private institutions and the political consent of the municipality, crucial to allow the construction, since nothing can be build on this protected area. Together with an improvement on their quality of live, the community kitchen brought visibility to this place, questioning a permanence of more than 3 decades with visible lack of basic living conditions.

### 3. Spatial practices to support the struggle for spatial justice

Along with the arrival of the water point, another major achievement of the dwellers was the formal creation of the neighborhood association (AMTC), a starting point for the dialogue with institutions regarding an socio-urban resolution for Terras da Costa. In 2015, the left-wing municipality of Almada decided to make a pilot project, a resettlement that can embrace diversity and respect the spontaneity of everyday practices from this immigrant community. Despite the fact that (re)housing is a responsibility of the central government, Almada claimed that due to the extreme precariousness of this settlement, the process of finding a solution for housing had to start immediately, overpassing the lack of formal framework in current housing policies.

The construction of the kitchen allowed an aperture of the neighborhood to different type of urban agents. Architects and researchers were invited to work along the local association, providing technical assistance. Since 2015 a multidisciplinary collaboration, linking urbanism, architecture and anthropology explores the dynamics of socio-spatial appropriation, experimenting new ways of acting, refusing misconceptions on immigrant communities. It is aimed to discuss the challenges of urban transformation in planning processes in order to provide effective answers to the struggle of dwellers ensuring their Right to the City, rooted on the transformative potential of the Lefebvorean conception (1968). Conceived as an action research project, it expresses a response to the depoliticization and the technicization of the contemporary urban planning.

The process of resettlement coordinated by the municipality started by failing to observe the same diversity they were so interested in preserve. The refusal of municipal technicians on accepting help from the local association to complete the initial survey that assigned a number to each existing house, led to an action where houses where marked on walls with oversized numbers. Dwellers fell resigned with this lack of care on scribbling their houses imperfectly, given that they are 'illegal'. Illegality is the ground for many of the procedures that highlight dynamics of racism and discrimination.

As a reaction to the powerlessness that dwellers experienced, during May 2016 a workshop was proposed to make new house numbers using tiles and stencils. All dwellers participated actively, redoing something that they classified as 'properly done' in a 'dignified mode'. While creating the tiles a rich conversation emerged, addressing dweller's aspirations and fears regarding their resettlement. This participated moment substantiate a dialogical approach trough the creation of objects, guiding a critical cartography that recognizes their right to be there. This was a counter-response to a procedure that the

municipality frequently repeats. It was vital to demonstrate to dwellers that they can dialogue and negotiate in formal processes with technicians, questioning their ideas about authority and expertise, if authority and expertise are being support on biased representations of disenfranchised communities.

This type of agenda can work towards ‘the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression’, the definition of Young for a notion of social justice that goes further than the distributive paradigm (Young 1990:15). If framed like this, this concept can easily transmute for the design of public policies related with space, making the creating of a Just city (Fainstein 2010) the central core of urban planning.

During fieldwork, urban researches are working in all ‘five faces of oppression’ appointed by Young; exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, by questioning power relations between urban agents, challenging configured practices of dwellers, decision-makers, and technicians and their repercussions in space. Regarding this community, with everyday practices still deep rooted in African traditions, it is urgent to problematize the persistent colonial forms of representing cultural difference (Braga, Lages, and Veiga 2015).

#### **4. [This is not a] Conclusion**

Greater Lisbon has still today places where basic living conditions are non-existent or very precarious. In spite all efforts done in the past decades, the most severe situations were left with no response. This final section is not a conclusion but a start for Terras da Costa. After 30 years a participated process is slowly starting, a resettlement will be made nearby to the place where dwellers live now. Staying in the same area, closer to the fields they cultivate, or the schools their children attend is considered for dwellers a first victory.

Going beyond the ethnographic fascination that this type of places exerts on architects, especially in the last years after a certain type of ‘social turn’ gained media attention (an example is the 2016 Venice Biennale with Aravena as curator), it is urgent to recognize diversity when diversity is seeing further than the exotic Other.

As frequently seen, planning technicians sustain the idea that in informal settlements no valid knowledge can be found, that people in situation of exclusion are less interested, or are not able to participate in the resolution of their housing problem. Workshops orientated towards a critical cartography like the one described in this text, or other actions that support the struggle for more spatial justice, can help both dwellers and technicians, leading to a revision in our current planning procedures.

Undermining oppression and domination through practices that can recognize other forms of representations of the people who live in places like Terras da Costa, will contribute to build a city with more spatial justice (Soja 2010), in the search for a concept of the Right to the City that supports the transformation of the city while transforming ourselves (Harvey 2008).

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