

## Paul Kurstjens: Fieldtrip to Lisboa, a personal observation

Just after the 1974 Carnation Revolution I visited Lisbon for the first time. Despite the sunshine, the stunning views from Alfama and the many nice people I met, the city didn't appear that prosperous at the time. Images of the many dilapidated houses and poorly maintained public space marked my first impressions. This was outclassed by a visit to a slum of Mozambicans close to the airport. My host and fellow villager, a former missionary from Mozambique, showed me this sea of corrugated metal roofs, which has now disappeared.



Since then I have visited Lisbon a few times with architects, chasing spectacular new building projects. Each time public housing remained out of the picture, for no conclusive reason since there appears to be a significant amount of housing built after WWII. This impression was only reinforced through the single relevant book I was able to buy in English during our field trip, namely *The Architecture Guide of Lisbon 1948 – 2013*. It contains just a few *social* housing projects, one of them built at the exact same spot where I had visited the shantytown of Mozambicans in the 70s.

This sheds light on the municipal intervention of the past decades, where shantytowns got demolished and replaced by residential high rises, ever since drug crime had become too apparent among the corrugated metal roofs. This policy of the Lisbon municipality was common until the economic crisis struck and large-scale public housing was less favoured. Today it seems that only a combination of historic preservation and bottom-up initiatives succeed.

### *Historic preservation*

In the documentary *Lisboa Dentro* from 2008 that was screened at Pakhuis De Zwijger a week before our field trip, some officials inspected numerous dilapidated houses in the old part of the city. When monumental value was encountered residents were convinced to move out. It was painful to see the desperation of the poor tenants, that would never move back in after the economically constrained homeowners increased rents. The sentiment of Fado was tangible.

### *Bottom-up initiatives*

With the bottom-up initiatives shown by our host the Academia Cidadã I did get a more positive feeling. The office of the Academia is part of a social housing complex that was

meant for residents displaced from a shantytown that was tormented by drug offenders, on the other side of a busy road. In the complex today, you can see the elderly playing dominoes, girls dancing, boys sitting with their father behind computers and a handyman welding. And this all happened on the ground floor of the apartment buildings in - what we call in the Netherlands - a death plinth.



We also saw bottom-up projects in Cova da Moura, a neighbourhood of Cape Verdeans with the same optimism and perseverance. Instead of apartment blocks they live in low-rise housing with narrow streets. We visited a library, a communal kitchen and a music studio and a rapper showed us his skills from the balcony. Hospitality everywhere.





The following day Lisbon Sustainable Tourism brought us to some neighbourhoods in the old city where you felt the two sides of tourism. In one way you could say that the city of Lisbon accumulates wealth by attracting an increasing amount of tourists. On the other hand you can see that the local population has to move to other places because of new hotels, B&B's and foreigners buying apartments. Although this gentrification seems to be a natural phenomenon in several attractive cities around the world, you can nevertheless wonder if there isn't a trick that transforms negative effects into positive contributions. It can't be that the tsunami of tourists only solves a part of the vacancy and impoverishment but that it also forces the relatively poor population to move to the periphery. It can't be that the old city is no longer the domain of all people of Lisbon but only for the speculators with their particular preferences.



Thanks to the positive energy from the bottom-up approach and the cooperation of the municipality with its BIP/ZIP program, you should say that this is the right moment for an alliance between the bottom-up and top-down approach. This requires empathy of the municipality who together with the Catholic Church, owns approximately half of the land in the older part of Lisbon. And it requires a resolute approach from a well-informed population to cope with this gentrification. Shall we call this the new Carnation Covenant?

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