From legality to an urbanism of reception in the informal city

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From the 1950’s on, Portugal’s capital Lisbon grew quickly, in the context of the late-industrialisation period and a massive exodus from poor rural areas. Since 1974, with the end of Estado Novo’s authoritarian regime and the independence of the former African colonies, the inflow of expatriates, political refugees and, later on, labour migrants, has added new elements and complexity to the expanding urban landscape. The urbanisation of the city’s new metropolitan area included the expansion of the informal city, in a context of acute housing shortage.

Cova da Moura, the neighbourhood (bairro) this paper is about, is a migrant squatter settlement, resulting from occupation of farming land, available in the interstices of the expanding Greater Lisbon Area. As a result of occupation of both privately and state-owned land, and of building without permit, the bairro is neither constructed on legally acquired plots, as is the case in many areas of illegal genesis, nor a result of occupation of exclusively publicly owned property, a fact that makes it unique in Lisbon.

Nowadays, Cova da Moura is located centrally, at the doorstep of Lisbon’s municipality (the central area of Greater Lisbon), with easy access to public transportation networks and to the main highways. However, an impasse as to how the status of illegality should be overcome keeps the bairro particularly vulnerable to reproducing dynamics of spatial segregation and social exclusion.

On the other hand, deeper acquaintance with Cova da Moura reveals what Alain Bourdin designates as ‘an urbanism of reception’ (accueil), both regarding the dynamics of space appropriation and the multi-scaled solidarities that are involved in those processes, and regarding the set-up and development of local organisations and cultural expressions by residents. After a brief presentation of the first kind of approach that we have identified, we will focus on less visible practices of accueil (reception), which create room for habitation and identities alternative to those most conveyed by the dominant, stigmatising representation of the place.
’The problem-ridden neighbourhood’ (’um bairro crítico’)

I arrived [in Portugal] from Cape Verde in 1975, along with my parents, because things had changed. [...] Here the revolution of the 25th of April had already taken place, we were in 1975. At that time the government had much to do, because the country was full of problems. And, also, thousands and thousands of repatriates and refugees had arrived to Portugal. Those who were out, in Angola and so on, all came here [Portugal].

[...] [T]he owner of a bar [...] told me, in private, “Look, I heard that over there at Cova da Moura there’s land.” [...] The following weekend we went [to Cova da Moura], to see what was going on. By chance, I met a man that I knew from Sal [in Cape Verde]. He had a shack there, at Rua do Moinho, a wooden shack, 7 by 3.5 meters, and he wouldn’t mind selling it, because he wanted to leave and join his children. This was the best that could have happened to us, since there was in fact available land, but we did not live here and were not acquainted to anyone. I said to my brother: “Look, the best thing to do is to buy this shack, we get the materials and we build a small house” (interview with Mr T, February 2012).

This account by Mr T reveals the sort of circumstances faced and chosen by the settlers who built the first houses. Among other aspects, it indicates the role played by social relationships in accessing information and, also, land. For the construction of the house, as well, it was important to rely on family and friends. Houses needed to be built quickly, often over one weekend, in order to evade police control and the risk of demolition. In this process, the sort of mutual help that Capeverdeans designate as Djunta Mon, in which family and neighbours gather to build each house quickly, played an important role.

Soon enough, on the other hand, a Residents’ Commission was created in Cova da Moura in an attempt to regulate the settlements situation. It functioned, to some extent, also as an extension of local authorities in its attempts to discipline construction work so as to ensure a regular urban structure. In the late eighties, however, an ambivalent relationship between public authorities and the settlement evolved into clear antagonism between residents – fighting for their right to stay and keep their houses – and the municipality that in 1994 targeted Cova da Moura as a strategic area for urban development. In 2002, the first studies for a master plan indicated the demolition of most of the bairro (circa 80 percent) and were met by fierce opposition from three local associations and residents in general.
Cova da Moura and an ‘urbanism of reception’

According to Alain Bourdin (2011), contemporary cities – as part of today’s cosmopolitism – need to consider ‘the right of reception’ (accueil), linked to the interlocking of different ways of life and habit within one and the same city. Bourdin suggests that peripheric neighbourhoods, where most migrants find their first city residence and, with that, a way into urban life, could be approached as localities well suited to fulfil the right of accueil as part of their right to the city. In these places, immigrants find access to information, provisory protection, whilst also becoming able to move beyond them and relate to the city more widely. They may also work in ways similar to a centre of interpretation for the city, through which the newcomer may get attuned to the urban life s/he encounters (Bourdin 2011, p 86). Should these vocations be encouraged, as part of an ‘urbanism of reception,’ through which a person’s right to reception in the city is operated? In many ways, Cova da Moura displays characteristics of the kind indicated by Bourdin.

In the 1970’s, Cova da Moura offered an opportunity related to the availability of land in the interstices of the expanding formal city, allowing migrants to find a place for themselves, not far from the centre and from working places. Also, it enabled access to ownership of a house and some degree of social mobility in a rather difficult context. Connections to acquaintances from the places of origin or other places inhabited in the past (as narrated by Mr T) and – in a place characterised by intense forms of public sociality and the cultivation of kinship ties – to the extended family and/or new neighbours, provided a valuable resource for residents and newcomers, which contrasted to what migrants found available in other locations in central Lisbon. Hand in hand with house construction, especially once the urban tissue was consolidated, house tenancy also became significant in Cova da Moura. It allowed newcomers to find accommodation and make their first social connections, especially important as opposed to the discrimination exercised by landlords in other areas of the city, where tenants of African origin could still be subjected to discrimination.

Such connections have contributed, in the past and today, to the access of income through economic exchanges in the bairro (many within the informal economy), and to jobs outside Cova da Moura, along a network that may extend from Lisbon and other locations in Portugal to several countries in Europe and the United States as well. Therefore, whilst having been the largest migrant enclave in Portugal during the mid-eighties (Horta 2000, p 163), and despite structural effects of spatial segregation, social exclusion and lack of sufficient economic
opportunities, the *bairro* has never been an isolated reality. Relationships beyond Cova da Moura as well as intrinsically related to the kind of sociality that characterises the *bairro* have always been a crucial resource for its inhabitants. This extended social network configures an ‘urbanism of reception’ (*accueil*) as a space of opportunity that also finds expression in the physical shape of the neighbourhood. Although constantly approached as a case of chaos by the disciplining authorities, the shape of the *bairro* (buildings, public space etc) presents a ‘flexible space’ (Malheiros [year needed, and to be included in References – or already there=2006?], quoted by Cordeiro 2007) able to accommodate arrival, departure, movement, change.

Conclusion

While acknowledging an imbalance between the central and the peripheral city, Bourdin asks whether we could find in the periphery what he designates as ‘stimulating places,’ able to challenge such an imbalance. Cova da Moura constitutes in the Great Lisbon Area a sort of quintessential social construction of migrant otherness and has too often been framed negatively as a stigmatising location, associated with precariousness, poverty and delinquency or, ‘positively’/romantically,’ as a place of exoticism. As this paper shows, it may better be constructively characterised as part of an urbanism ‘of reception.’

References


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