

Designed Self-Help. Producing Closed Forms for Open Buildings

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ABSTRACT. Designing Self-help sounds like a contradiction in terms. Indeed, a great deal of the scholarly accounts on self-help housing excludes the agency of the designer, stressing instead the roles of the policy maker and the owner-builder. In the architecture discipline, from the late 1950s through the 1980s the notions of open form, group form and open building, gained momentum as a reconceptualization of the relation between author and addressee. Yet, while pursuing similar goals, assisted self-help housing was a matter of interest mainly for social scientists, even though it became pervasive as an affordable housing policy in the developing world. In this paper I discuss the importance of the design decision-making process in assisted self-help housing, reshaping the latter as part and parcel of the rationale of the idea of open building. This paper will address two key questions: To what extent the agency of the designer in assisted self-help housing alienates or emancipates the other stakeholders in the process? And how can design expertise contribute for creating a more open and inclusive participation of the many actors involved in self-help housing strategies? I will examine the case of the Malagueira neighbourhood, a housing estate designed by Álvaro Siza in the late 1970s for the periphery of the Portuguese city of Évora. Supported by archival material, interviews, and empirical observations, I will discuss the contribution of design expertise to activate a productive negotiation between collective identity and individual expression. This paper will explore the intertwined relation between policy makers, designers and the grassroots to critically reflect on the use of self-help strategies to foster citizens' participation in the design-decision making process. The paper asserts that, in Malagueira, a carefully crafted design strategy to accommodate growth and change over time contributed to foster ownership and to promote social inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Incremental Housing, Self-Help, Architecture, Portugal, Álvaro Siza

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1 Introduction

The rationale that underlies the notion of open building suggests processes of negotiation between politics, design, and performance in human settlements. Housing activities are arguably a vital field of investigation to explore the resilience of that notion. Indeed, in 1974, addressing the crisis and opportunities in human settlements, Barbara Ward contended that “the house is the core, the central place, the starting point of all life in human settlements, in short, of human life itself.”¹ Ward’s classification of the house as the basic core of human life should be expanded, I would suggest, to acknowledge housing as a social activity that cannot be separated from the public realm. Indeed, following John Turner’s famous dictum that housing should be seen as a verb rather than a noun, I would thus argue that housing is an interdependent activity.² As such, the architecture of dwelling, specially the design of affordable housing, should be understood as a disciplinary approach that contributes a great deal to frame the relation between the individual and the polis, between self-determination and design. In this process, the spatial agency of architects has to be accounted for as part and parcel of a housing system that also involves, among others, policy makers and dwellers as co-participants.

Designing affordable housing has been and still is one of the key challenges in making sense of the social role of the architect and the societal impact of the architecture discipline. In reality, in moments of crisis, the housing problem surfaces as a key political concern that may be used as an instrument to mitigate tensions or to ignite rebellions. I would contend that architects and architecture play an important role in these moments, and that design decisions can either perform as vehicles for the preservation of the status quo, whatever that is, or instruments to foster social change. Hence, a critical application of citizens’ participation in design decision-making processes is a crucial aspect to promote the latter and avoid the earlier. Therefore, I would argue that the definition of housing standards is not inevitably a repressive instrument of biopower, as John Turner and Robert Fichter suggested in their *Freedom to Build*.³ Rather, as Umberto Eco put it in his *Opera Aperta*, standards should be seen as a vehicle to promote suggestiveness and to stimulate interpretation and performance.⁴

To discuss this thesis, in this paper I will single out self-help as a housing activity in which the relation between design, policymaking, and peoples’ social and spatial practices call for an intense negotiation between design and self-determination. My aim is to deliver a contribution to trigger a reconceptualization of the notion of open architecture, and to revive the creative potential of the dialectics between technical expertise and people’s sovereignty. I will examine the disciplinary and political dimensions of the relation between the designer qua author and the urban dweller qua addressee using a theoretical framework based on Umberto Eco’s concept of open work.

2 The Open Work

Umberto Eco’s 1962 *Opera Aperta* (Open Work) contributed to trigger a discussion on the potential of the open work that echoes the early 1960s appeals for a reconceptualization of the architectural object as an open form by the likes of Oskar Hansen, Fumihiko Maki and John Habraken.⁵ The elasticity of this concept is quite

¹ Barbara Ward, *Human Settlements: Crisis and Opportunity* (Ottawa: United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 1974), 31.

² John Turner, “Housing as a Verb,” in *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process*, ed. John F. C. Turner and Robert Fichter (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1972), 148–75.

³ John F. C. Turner and Robert Fichter, eds., *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1972). The notion of biopower, coined by Michel Foucault’s was later reconceptualized by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. The latter defines it as “the power of the creation of life; it is the production of collective subjectivities, sociality, and society itself.” See Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *Boundary 26*, no. 2 (July 1, 1999): 89–100.

⁴ Umberto Eco coined the notion of open work in his book *Opera Aperta*, published in Italian in 1962. The first English translation was published (with additional chapters) in 1989. See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁵ In the early 1960s there was a growing interest in notions such as open form and open architecture. Among some of the canonical contributions to this debate, see Oskar Hansen, “La Forme Ouverte Dans l’Architecture - l’Art Du Grand Nombre,” *Le Carré Bleu*, no. 1 (1961): 4–7; Fumihiko Maki, *Investigations in Collective Form*, Washington University (Saint Louis, Mo.). School of Architecture Special Publication, no. 2 (St. Louis: School of Architecture, Washington University, 1964); N. John Habraken, *Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing*, trans. B. Valkenburg (Urban International Press, 1999).

remarkable. Sometimes acknowledged and other times not, the notion of open form still holds a notable presence in recent debates about new ways of doing for the design disciplines.⁶ Among the essays collected in *Open Work*, “The poetics of the Open Work” could be singled out as a major input to review the role of the individual addressee in the reception of the work of art.⁷ In this essay, Eco highlights the concept of open work as a rejection of definite messages, emphasizing the initiative of the individual addressee in giving aesthetic validity to a work of art introducing her particular perspective.⁸

Eco brings about a meaningful conceptual definition of the work of art as a closed form and open product. Closed in its uniqueness and wholeness and open in its susceptibility to be interpreted in infinite forms while preserving its specificity. He concludes, then, “every reception of a work of art is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself.”⁹ For Eco the reception of the work of art is an act of freedom and, as such, an imposition of a single sense at the very outset of the receptive process should be prevented. Instead, he champions suggestiveness as “a deliberate move to ‘open’ the work to the free response of the addressee.” Thus, he goes on contending, “an artistic work that suggests is also one that can be performed with the full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter.”

Eco’s conceptualization of the open work is, I would argue, a valuable intellectual framework to reassess the notion of assisted self-help housing. In effect, as in Eco’s open work, in housing processes based on the principles of assisted self-help there is also a deliberate drive to negotiate sovereignty in the interpretation and performance of the built artefact. To what extent, however, is this negotiation immune to the perils of authoritarianism, paternalism or populism? How can the design disciplines participate in this negotiation? In other words, can we resonate users’ self-determination with an emancipatory approach based on the rejection of standards? Or, otherwise, is it a mere instrument to mitigate social tensions and to outsource responsibilities in spatial agency?

Using the conceptual framework of Umberto Eco’s notion of open work, in the following sections of this paper I will discuss the interplay between author and addressee in design decision-making processes. I will focus my discussion on a specific historical moment, the 1970s, for this decade was arguably the period in which self-help housing gained momentum as a housing policy.¹⁰ To examine the multiple dimensions of this process, I will examine the Malagueira neighbourhood, a housing settlement designed by Álvaro Siza in the late 1970s where citizens’ participation and incremental housing were key components of the process. A reconceptualization of the notion of self-help will be brought about to discuss the nexus between design decisions and signs of interpretation and performance in human settlements. To set the background against which this discussion will unfold, I will first review the historical development of the concept of assisted self-help.

3 Self-Help: Interpretation and Performance

Self-Help housing is a timeless social practice by people to satisfy their need for shelter. In broad terms, it can be defined as an activity where citizens, individually or collectively, perform a great deal of self-determination in housing production. It does not imply, however, complete autonomy or autarky. In effect, self-help housing is far from a monolithic category. In pre-capitalist societies it was pervasive and arguably the most common form of housing provision, as one scholar of housing contends.¹¹ With the emergence and rise of the capitalist

⁶ See, for example, Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2011); Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation* (London; Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel ; MIT Press, 2006).

⁷ According to Umberto Eco’s introductory note to *The Open Work*, this essay was originally written in 1958. A translation into English by Bruce Merry firstly appeared in 1984. See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁸ Umberto Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Work,” in *The Open Work*, trans. Bruce Merry (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ As I will argue later in this paper, the “Habitat: United Nations Conference on Human Settlements”, held in Vancouver in 1976, is probably the epitome of this paradigm shift.

¹¹ Hans Harms, “Historical Perspective on the Practice and Purpose of Self-Help Housing,” in *Self-Help Housing: A Critique*,

mode of production in western societies, providing proper living conditions became a key element to secure the reproduction of labour force necessary to support industrial development and capital accumulation. This was then the heyday of philanthropic ventures promoted by bourgeois reformers to provide decent housing for the working class. Since then, in periods of capitalist expansion, self-help housing in the urbanized world was swiftly replaced by market-based housing production. In periods of crisis of capitalism, however, self-help housing programmes came back recurrently, exploited, this time, by the bureaucratic apparatus of the state and its extensions. This was then the outset of aided self-help, or in more actual terms, assisted self-help. In central Europe, for example, it happened after the Franco-German war of 1870-71, in the aftermath of World War I, in the Great Depression of the 1930s, in the aftermath of World War II, in the first oil shock of 1973, and more recently in the financial crisis of the late 2000s.¹² The recent disciplinary interest in self-help testifies to this. Over the last decade Elemental's incremental housing system was awarded worldwide celebrity status with their project for Quinta Monroy in Iquique, Chile.¹³ Urban Think Tank explored a compelling story of informal vertical communities creation in their survey of Torre David in Caracas.¹⁴ The MAS in Urban Design coordinated by Marc Angéilil & Rainer Hehl presented a counter narrative of urban informality in their analysis of the Cidade de Deus settlement in Rio de Janeiro.¹⁵ Recently, self-help arrived at the rooms of a global cultural actor such as New York's MoMA, celebrating the exploration of tactical forms of urbanism to tackle the challenges of uneven growth.¹⁶ These are nothing but some few cases among many others that illustrate the extent to which self-help initiatives have been reassessed for their creative power and spatial agency.

Many authors, specially those examining assisted self-help housing from a Marxist point of view, see it as a politically charged concept, usually associated with a withdrawal of the state from its role as provider of affordable housing. There is a great deal of mystification in this understanding, though. In fact, self-help has been historically part and parcel of housing policies championed by a wide political spectrum, a phenomenon that was particularly clear in Europe throughout the 20th century. Indeed, governments controlled by communists, fascists, socialists, and liberal-democrats have all employed housing policies based on assisted self-help. Despite this versatility, or perhaps because of it, self-help housing policies were seldom credited intellectually and politically as a key housing policy.¹⁷

This does not mean, however, that the influence of self-help housing in shelter delivery processes around the world can be neglected. Rather on the contrary. For example, between 1972 and 1981 the World Bank alone promoted a particular instance of assisted self-help, the sites and services approach, lending money to finance shelter projects or housing components in 35 countries. According to a World Bank consultant, in that period the urban projects financed by the Bank benefitted some 3 million urban dwellers annually.¹⁸ Indeed, in the 1970s, the sites and services approach was championed as a pervasive housing policy for the developing world, and an influential contribution for the re-emergence of human settlements based on the concept of incremental housing and participatory design as tokens of democratic architecture. The "Habitat: United Nations Conference on Human Settlements", held in Vancouver in 1976, was arguably the touchstone event

ed. Peter Ward (London: Mansell, 1982), 45.

¹² An insightful account on the emergence of Self-help housing can be seen in Harms, "Historical Perspective." Recent appraisals on assisted self-help have surfaced in different disciplinary fields. See, for example, the April 2015 issue of the magazine *Volume*, dedicated to the theme "Self-Building City", and the prominence of assisted self-help initiatives in Jan Bredenoord, Paul Van Lindert, and Peer Smets, eds., *Affordable Housing in the Urban Global South: Seeking Sustainable Solutions* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

¹³ Alejandro Aravena and Andres Iacobelli, *Elemental: Incremental Housing and Participatory Design Manual* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013).

¹⁴ Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner, eds., *Torre David: Informal Vertical Communities* (Zürich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2012).

¹⁵ Marc M Angelil, Rainer Hehl, and Something Fantastic, eds., *Cidade de Deus!: Working with Informalized Mass Housing in Brazil* (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Pedro Gadanho, ed., *Uneven Growth: Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Megacities* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2014).

¹⁷ For a discussion of the diverse political nature of endorsement of assisted self-help, see Richard Harris, "Slipping through the Cracks: The Origins of Aided Self-Help Housing, 1918-53," *Housing Studies* 14, no. 3 (May 1, 1999): 281-309.

¹⁸ Jean-Louis Ginnsz, "World Bank: Catalyst for Third World Urban Development," *Cities* 1, no. 2 (November 1983): 195, doi:10.1016/0264-2751(83)90012-4.

that established the sites and services approach as “a sort of new orthodoxy in the housing policies advocated for developing countries,” as Lisa Peattie put it.¹⁹ Indeed, one could say this event was a major contribution for what Barbara Ward called “planetary housekeeping”.²⁰

In one of the most important documents that resulted from the Habitat Conference, the Declaration of the Vancouver Symposium, its subscribers called for a more balanced distribution of wealth from the 20% who lived in developed countries owning 75% of the world’s wealth, to the overwhelming majority of the poor, thus avoiding “an uncontrollable source of despair and violence,” that could spread all over the world. Facing the spectrum of this menace hovering over the “the frontiers which protect fertile land and ‘protein sanctuaries’”, the Declaration asserted that “the answer need not be fear, anger and entrenched greed. It can be a revolution not by violence but by design.”²¹ Remarkably, their call for a revolution by design was written in the same document where they asserted that “if shelter and community are to be provided and improved over the next three decades, every encouragement must be given to the citizens themselves to arrange, build and diversify their communities. For millenia, the building of settlements has had no other base.”²²

Seemingly the Declaration delivers a contradictory claim. On the one hand it encourages actions based on design as a tool for social control and betterment while, on the other hand, promotes self-determination as a token of individual emancipation. I would argue, however, that there is no contradiction here. To be sure, participation and openness are the keywords that reconcile these two propositions. In effect, the subscribers of the document alert for the fact that “the failures of the past and the need to underline a greater sense of community in the future suggest the need for greater citizen participation in the decision-making process.”²³ Further, they conclude that a future threatened by the propagation of despair and violence can be avoided if “we can begin, generously, imaginatively and openly, to build the common services of the City of Man.”²⁴ In my reading, thus, the Declaration suggests that there is room for the implementation of standards and some form of authority *if* the instruments of control are socialized and directed to the development of the commons as a process as well as an activity. This would prove to be a delicate balance to achieve, though. The plan for a housing settlement for 1200 families developed on the outskirts of the Portuguese city of Évora from 1977 on, just one year after the Vancouver conference, is a case in point to examine the delicate negotiation between authority and self-determination in design decision-making in housing activities.

4 Authority and Self-determination

On 7 March 1977, in a meeting at the municipality of Évora, architect Jorge Silva, the city’s alderman for housing and urban planning, suggested inviting Álvaro Siza to design an urban plan for the Malagueira estate. Silva argued that Siza had a good track record of technical expertise and personal skills to cope with the challenges of the operation.²⁵ Further, the alderman argued the international appraisal on Siza’s work could contribute to create better conditions to negotiate with the stakeholders involved in the process.²⁶ After some debate on the democratic legitimacy of a direct invitation instead of a public tender, the members of the municipal cabinet eventually agreed in inviting Siza. The architect accepted the commission on 26 March 1977

¹⁹ Lisa R. Peattie, “Some Second Thoughts on Sites-and-Services,” *Habitat International* 6, no. 1–2 (1982): 131.

²⁰ Barbara Ward, “The Home of Man: What Nations and the International Must Do,” *Habitat International* 1, no. 2 (September 1976): 125. This text reproduces Barbara Ward’s talk at the Habitat Conference, delivered on Tuesday 1 June 1976 at the Conference Plenary Hall, Queen Elizabeth Centre.

²¹ AA.VV., “Declaration of the Vancouver Symposium,” *Habitat International* 1, no. 2 (September 1976): 140.

²² *Ibid.*, 136.

²³ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁵ The most relevant aspect in Siza’s track record at that time was his participation in Porto’s SAAL operations, which were part of the new housing policy implemented by the provisional governments that ruled Portugal after a coup d’état on 25 April, 1974.

²⁶ During the year of 1976 there was an unprecedented interest of the international architectural media in Portugal. The May/June 1976 issue of the influential French magazine *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, directed by Bernard Huet, was dedicated to Portuguese architecture with the theme: “Portugal Year II”. Some months after, the November 1976 issue of the prominent Italian magazine *Casabella*, directed by Bruno Alfieri, featured a long account by Francesco Marconi titled “Portugal – Operação SAAL”. In the following month, the December 1976 issue of *Lotus International*, directed by Pierluigi Nicolini, published Álvaro Siza’s project for the S. Victor neighbourhood.

and presented the first version of the Malagueira plan in August of that year after participating in several meetings with the future residents.

Two disciplinary approaches surfaced notably in the urban plan for 1,200 new dwelling units delivered by Siza. At the urban scale, the plan integrated seamlessly the existing squatter communities (the so-called *clandestinos*), extra-legal settlements that have developed on the site since the 1930s. **(Fig.1)** At the building scale, the most striking aspect was the reduced palette of dwelling types, only two, which were designed to accommodate further expansions through time. **(Fig.2)**



Figure 1: Álvaro Siza – General Plan for the Malagueira neighborhood in Évora (in black the new buildings and in grey the existing constructions). Source: Author’s drawing.

1st version	1bedroom	2bedroom	3bedroom	4bedroom	5bedroom
Type A					
Type B					

Figure 2: Álvaro Siza – Malagueira Plan; Preliminary design for the dwelling types (August 1977). Source: Author’s drawing

While at the urban scale Siza's plan was triggered by an "as found" approach, at the dwelling scale Siza's minimalist solution stemmed both from iterations with the future residents in the design decision-making process and from the architect's acknowledgment of vernacular social and spatial practices.²⁷

Indeed, in the Malagueira plan Siza deliberately explored the potential of creating multiple combinations using a very reduced palette of dwelling types. In effect, in the drawings produced to explain the two types and their incremental growth, Siza included drawings and models simulating a random assemblage of variations of the two types. These simulations showed the solution's potential to generate diverse streetscapes and avoid the shortcomings of a monotonous repetition of similar types. **(Fig.3)**

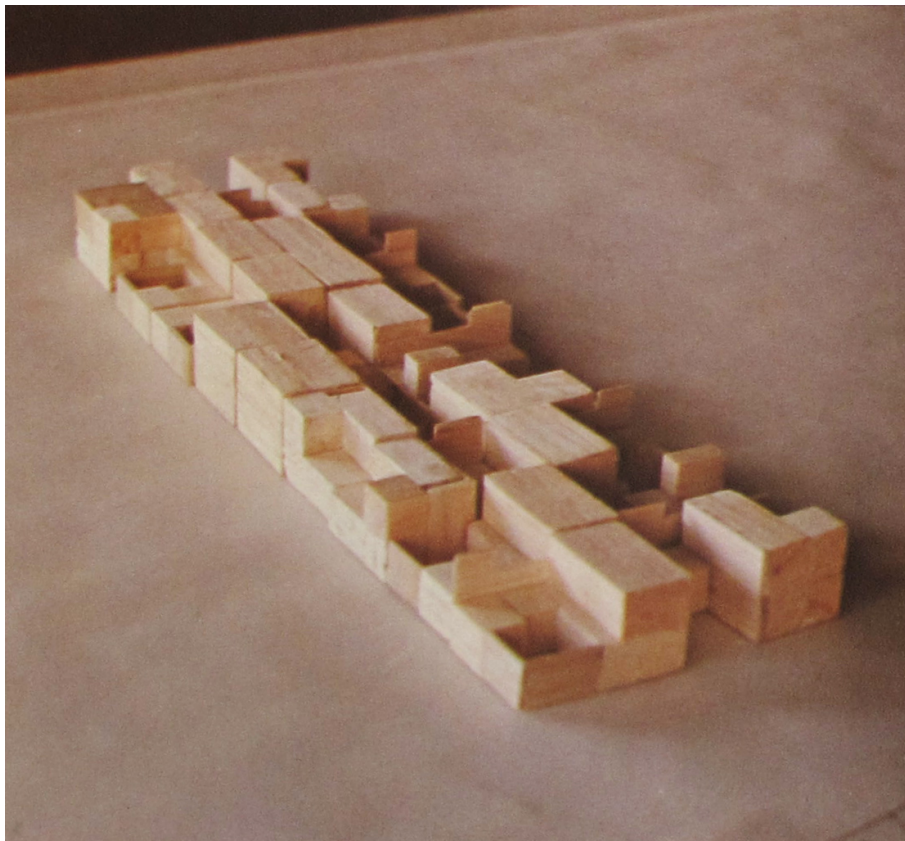


Figure 3: Model showing several possibilities to combine the two dwelling types designed for the Malagueira neighbourhood. Source: *Arquitetura*, 4a Série, 132 (March 1979), 46.

Next to the dwellings designed for the housing cooperatives, Siza defined also the guidelines for the houses to be self-built on one hundred plots assigned to individual initiatives. Siza's guidelines for these plots, whose area and configuration was similar to that of the plots assigned to cooperative and social housing (8x12m), were straightforward and eminently prescriptive. **(Fig.4)** They defined the minimum size of the patio (in both types), the height of the house and of the wall facing the street, as well as the maximum size of the openings.

²⁷ On 27 May 1977, Siza received a summary with a social and economical analysis of the members of the "Boa Vontade" housing cooperative (CHEBV, *Cooperativa de Habitação Económica "Boa Vontade"*). While he was preparing the preliminary version of the urban plan, he discussed the project for the dwelling units with the members of the cooperative. Finally, Siza and the residents agreed on the two incremental dwelling types that were presented with the Malagueira plan in August 1977. See Álvaro Siza to Cooperativa de Habitação Económica Boa Vontade, "Projectos de 350 Fogos Para a Cooperativa Boa Vontade," Letter, (July 29, 1977), Álvaro Siza archive.


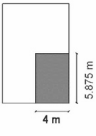
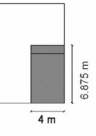
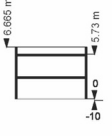
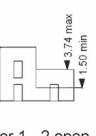
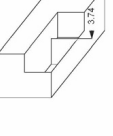
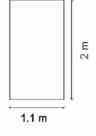
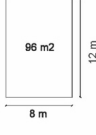
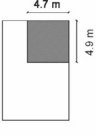
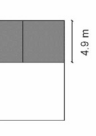
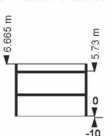

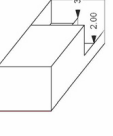

Housetype	Lot area and dimensions	Alignments and mandatory free-space 1 st floor	Alignments and mandatory free-space 2 nd floor	Maximum number of floors	Street elevation: maximum surface area, number of openings, and wall height	Maximum volume	Openings: maximum dimension (only second floor's street elevation)	Recommendations
Frontyard				0 = floor 1 level 	 floor 1 - 2 open floor 2 - 1 open		0 = floor level 	Check the Town Hall's project-types Enclosing walls and chimneys should be studied in collaboration with the Town Hall
Backyard				0 = floor 1 level 	 floor 1 - 3 open floor 2 - 1 open		0 = floor level 	The yard should be gardened or covered by an ivy lattice
Specifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) One or two-storey houses b) Annexes, store-rooms, and garages are not allowed c) Respect for the National and the Municipal building regulations d) First and second floor levels should be requested in the Town Hall e) Use a Town Hall's expandable project-type or a project that respects these regulations (subject to approval by town hall) f) Individual or collective garages available, according to Town Hall plan and regulations g) Use service gallery and its walls h) External whitewashed walls, terraces, wooden or colored aluminum mullions are mandatory i) Overhangs or cantilevered volumes are not allowed j) Number and dimensions of openings are constrained. Mortar frames with a maximum overhang of 1 cm and 20 cm wide, painted in the traditional colors (gray, yellow, green, blue, and rose) are allowed 							

Figure 4: Álvaro Siza – Building guidelines for private developers in the Malagueira neighborhood. Source: Courtesy of José Pinto Duarte.

Both in the housing types designed for the cooperatives as well as in the guidelines for self-help housing, Siza conspicuously pursued a critical harmonization with the vernacular tradition. Indeed, this aspect was celebrated by architecture critics in trade journals as well as by some of the stakeholders involved in the process. For example, just two years after the outset of the process, Abílio Fernandes, the communist mayor of Évora, praised the first results of Siza's project, specially highlighting aspects such as "affordability" and "compatibility" with the region's vernacular architecture. The mayor claimed "the author's merit results from being able to introduce in his understanding of and respect for Alentejo's architecture an inexpensive solution that could be affordable for the most needy members of the population, integrating popular contributions, which he was able to stimulate and harmonize."²⁸ Interestingly, Fernandes' review of the Malagueira plan resonates a great deal with Umberto Eco's poetics of the open work. Indeed, Siza's ability to stimulate popular contributions testifies to the project's suggestive possibilities, "a deliberate move to 'open' the work to the free response of the addressee", as Eco would put it.²⁹

In reality, the support and authority of the local mayor was instrumental to facilitate a smooth articulation between the architect and the members of the cooperatives in the participatory process. This contributed, I would argue, to secure the conspicuous presence of authorial signs throughout the process. In effect, while Siza made some changes to the initial dwelling types to accommodate the residents' suggestions for improvement, his fundamental conceptual approach prevailed, thus testifying to the architect's zeal in preserving the consistency of the project. (Fig.5) In effect, this consistency, which some observers called monotony, became a matter of contention from the outset of the project and would trigger heated debates and conflicting views regarding the qualities of the project.

The prevalence of a single housing type, for example, became a political issue disputed by the opposition

²⁸ Abílio Fernandes, "O Presidente Da C. M. de Évora Fala Sobre O Projeto," *Arquitectura*, 4, no. 132 (1979): 36.

²⁹ Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," 9.

members of the municipal assembly that considered the project was “inhumane” and “unacceptable.” Notwithstanding being aware of this criticism, the architect went on with his critical disciplinary approach. Indeed, as Siza put it, “this fear of monotony is a challenge to pursue diversity, which cannot be solved as an aesthetic issue, because in so doing, the result would immediately appear artificial, caricaturized or invented.”³⁰ Further, while the construction of the settlement was still underway, with new sections being built on different parts of the site, popular discontent became more noticeable. In 1983, only six years after the onset of the plan, some of Évora’s residents and a few dwellers from Malagueira criticized the settlement’s architectural characteristics. It was called derogatively “the Arab neighbourhood.” “It is very monotonous,” some dwellers contended. And they went on claiming “it’s always the same thing: the houses resemble animals’ enclosures and the streets look like intersections of telephone cables.”³¹



Figure 5: Aerial view of the Malagueira neighborhood in 1990, showing the *clandestinos* settlement to the left of the new housing complex. Source: Arquivo Fotográfico da Câmara Municipal de Évora. Photo: © José Manuel Rodrigues.

In Malagueira, different forms of social control hindered the residents’ level of self-determination. For one thing, the main developing agent in the neighbourhood, the housing cooperatives, played a key role in preventing discretionary transformations to the houses that could jeopardize the wholeness of the housing

³⁰ Álvaro Siza, *Imaginar a Evidência* (Lisboa: Edições 70, 2009), 115–117.

³¹ In Mário Robalo, “O ‘Bairro Árabe’ de Siza Vieira,” *Expresso*, July 2, 1983, sec. Actual, 20–R.

complex. For example, in the Malagueira folders at Siza's archive, there is a document made by one of the housing cooperatives with a list of several changes desired by their members as well as transformations they had already made.³² These modifications were categorized as "authorized" and "to be discussed," i.e. non-authorized. In reality, Siza had already accounted for some of the authorized changes in the scheme for incremental growth and in his guidelines for the self-help built units. As for the non-authorized changes, the document listed mainly the occupation of the courtyard and changes to the sizes and decoration of window frames and doors.³³ Eventually, with or without the architect's permission, and with or without an "official" approval issued by the municipal authorities, many of those non-authorized changes were actually produced. Those more noticeable from the public realm are the stairs built in the courtyard to access the terrace on the first floor, changes in the proportion of the openings, and decoration of the surfaces.³⁴ **(Fig.6)** All these changes can be seen as tokens of the project's *indeterminacy*, and instances of events where the residents acted as performers of the open work.

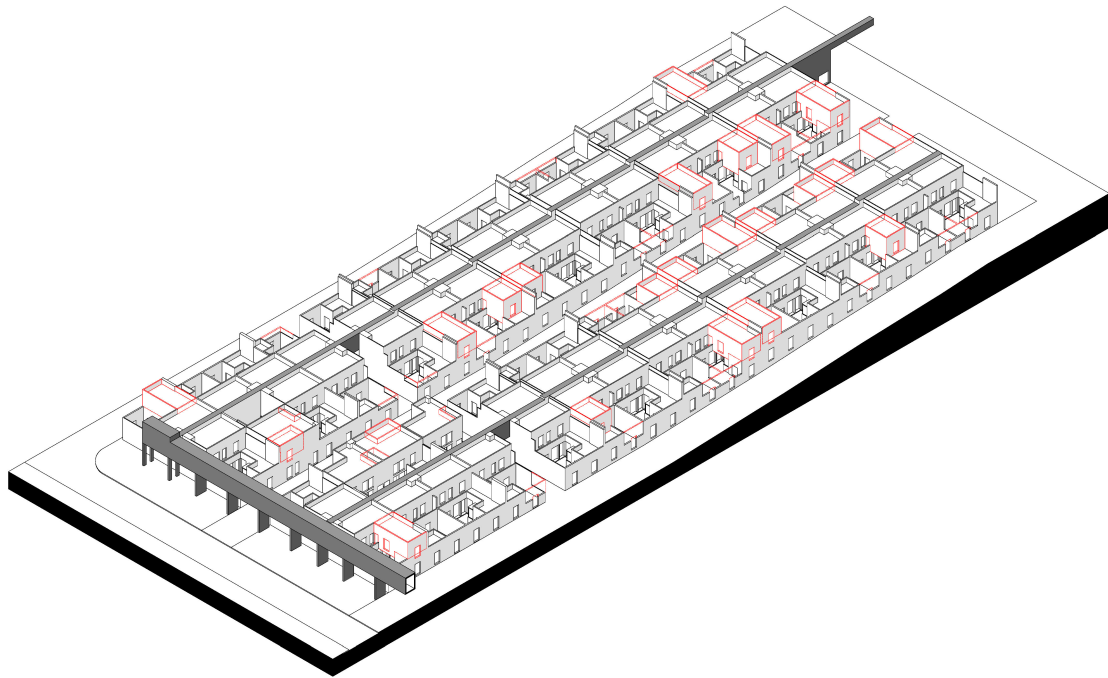


Figure 6: Two housing clusters at the Malagueira neighborhood. The extensions to the original dwelling configuration are rendered in red lines. Source: Author's drawing.

³² The author had access to the document 'Relação das Obras que os Sócios Pretendem Fazer' held in Álvaro Siza archive.

³³ The list mentioned that the cooperative members planned to do fourteen authorized and ten non-authorized types of changes to the type A houses (front courtyard). Regarding the nature of the changes that had been already made to the same type A houses, the list recorded eighteen that had been authorized and ten non-authorized. Concerning the changes in the type B houses (back courtyard), the list recorded only two types of changes already made and three other planned by the residents.

³⁴ For a sociological approach on the evolution of the Malagueira neighbourhood, see Jean-Michel Leger and Gisela Matos, "Siza Vieira Em Évora: Revistar Uma Experimentação," *Comunidades E Territórios*, no. 9 (December 2004): 39–53.

5 Conclusion

Throughout the diverse phases in the development of the Malagueira plan, there was a constant negotiation between the policy makers, the architect, and the dwellers in the design decision-making process. While citizens' participation was an important methodological tool for Siza in Malagueira's design process, it was far from an approach driven to pursue a Habermasian consensus. In reality, the conflicts between the architect and the other stakeholders involved in the process became part and parcel of the design process, and a positive contribution for a critical approach. Indeed, Siza claimed "participation procedures are above all critical processes for the transformation of thought, not only of the inhabitants' idea of themselves, but also of the concepts of the architect."³⁵ Hence, despite all the struggles and setbacks encountered in the course of the project, Siza acknowledged the importance of citizens' participation to deliver a negotiated outcome without shying away from his responsibilities as a technician.

In an interview given in 1995 to RTP, the Portuguese public broadcasting TV channel, Siza argued, "my goal [in the design of the Malagueira plan] was to create very precise limits to spontaneous intervention." This was nonetheless a conscious strategy, he contended. In effect, he claimed these limits were defined "knowing right from the start that this strictness does not have translation into practice, because there is an anxiety to be different, which conquers all, but if it does not have a solid framework, it leads to the chaos that we experience in so many parts of the country."³⁶



Figure 7: Current street views of the Malagueira neighbourhood (left), and the *Clandestinos* settlement - Bairro de S. Maria (right). Photos: © Nelson Mota.

In this interview, Siza was purportedly reacting to the frequent critiques he received on his plan for Malagueira. A great deal of the critiques claimed that the neighbourhood was monotonous, dull, anonymous, inhumane, and oppressive.³⁷ Siza reacted to this criticism contending that the plan's "regulations are tyrannical, with the belief that the limits to tyranny, fortunately existing, will foster subversion".³⁸ Siza's assertion resonates, I would suggest, with Eco's idea of the work of art as a closed form in its uniqueness that, nevertheless, constitutes an open product susceptible to be interpreted and performed in multiple ways,

³⁵ Álvaro Siza and France Vanlaethem, "Pour Une Architecture Épurée et Rigoureuse," *ARQ: Architecture/Québec*, no. 14 (August 1983): 18.

³⁶ Quoted in Maria Filomena Mónica, "Régua e Esquadro," *Indy*, January 23, 1998, 29.

³⁷ Cf. Robalo, "O 'Bairro Árabe' de Siza Vieira"; Mónica, "Régua e Esquadro."

³⁸ Mónica, "Régua e Esquadro," 29.

“which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity.”³⁹ To be sure, paying a visit to the neighbourhood in its current condition, signs of individual performance are omnipresent. Comparing images taken immediately after construction with present-day pictures of the neighbourhood, one can observe multiple “acts of conscious freedom”, as Eco would put it. **(Fig.7)** Interestingly, in 1991, commenting on the appropriations and changes made by the residents, Siza claimed, “it’s true that all this goes far beyond the control of the design. Yet,” he went on, “none of it is chaotic or irrational since our aim was to build a structure open to transformations, but that’s able to maintain its identity nonetheless.”⁴⁰

The pervasive transformations made to the buildings render to the streets in Malagueira spatial characteristics that mimic the region’s vernacular social and spatial practices. Moreover, triggered by the design principles of the project, the growth of the dwelling units unfolded randomly. Actually, this process is progressively creating streetscapes that come closer to the urban atmosphere of the architecture without architects of the settlements of *clandestinos*, thus blending design and self-help. In conclusion, I would contend, following Umberto Eco’s poetics of the open work, that the present-day condition of the Malagueira neighbourhood testifies to the emancipatory potential of Siza’s design approach, in which the project’s closed form and uniqueness encourages acts of freedom that activate the interpreter’s full emotional and imaginative resources. In other words, the Malagueira neighbourhood is a seminal illustration of what could be called “designed self-help”, a reconceptualization of a timeless activity that could contribute to create a combination of authority and self-determination, a much needed activity to perform today what Barbara Ward called four decades ago, “planetary housekeeping”.

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³⁹ Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Work,” 4.

⁴⁰ Álvaro Siza, “Comment Parvenir À La Sérénité. Interview with Laurent Beaudouin,” *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, no. 278 (December 1991): 64–65.

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