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Lisbon: Resilience and Vulnerability. Reflections on the post-25 April 1974 city. Introduction to the dossier.

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The city is the place where culture and technology, man and nature, come together to create a possibility for the common good. Nowadays, it is a site of potential and confrontation, of cohesion and protection, but also of instability and exclusion. What always prevails is its enormous potential and capacity for improvement.

In the last century this phenomenon became more complex, moving the idea of the city further away from the impetus behind its foundation. Perhaps the most important issue in contemporary architecture and urbanism is the ability to create space for public life.

It is estimated that, by 2050, 75% of the world's population will be concentrated in cities. Even in European cities, which have a slow and cohesive morphological evolution, as in the case of Lisbon with its Roman, Islamic, Enlightenment matrix, and exponential modern growth in the twentieth century. Today the question for those who imagine the city is: what makes it resilient and wherein lies its vulnerability?

Life in European cities has always involved tension between the physical condition of the built environment and rapidly changing living patterns. Lisbon confronted this issue with particular intensity in the second half of the twentieth century. Its expansion to the north, with internationally inspired projects (Alvalade, Olivais and Chelas), resulted in the progressive abandonment of the centre. This was further aggravated by the sprawl of the metropolitan area, with scattered occupation, and no systemic ambitions beyond road connections. This gave rise to a large population in the urban fringes. As a result, from the 1960s, a new form of public life and generational renewal began to take place far from the centre.

To define the profile of a city, one needs to be involved in the dialogue and confrontation between urban culture, that is, living standards, and the culture of urban development, which determines the physical condition of the built environment. Urban culture incorporates all the complexity and variation of each period of the city, its crises and aspirations. Urban development culture, on the other hand, results from a political vision that structures a territory and uses planning instruments.

Sometimes these two cultures come into in conflict. This creates an unstable city profile, which dissociates its life from the shape of the city. This is a common phenomenon in territories where there is less room to play with the facilities and public spaces. Conflict also arises when a city incorporates global flows, which are subject to private investment where the notion of space is reduced to economic space. This is where the form and urban life diverge.

Contemporary Lisbon appears to have an ability to find a compromise between form and urban life, perhaps because planning instruments became more flexible by looking at specific cases and finding concrete solutions to a problem or a possibility. Lisbon is a city whose historical form has become contemporary in a holistic, referential and habitable way. However, there are several territories and social fabrics that may benefit from positive transformation and which need to be included in a new strategy.

Resilience means there is no extinction – it means a city does not become an archaeological site. The Chiado fire in 1988 gave us an opportunity to look again at this city and address the loss of mixed-use occupation and public life. Álvaro Siza's project made it possible to try to implement mixed-use occupation. His project reprograms the contents of the interior space in the blocks and buildings – that is, the links between the public space and the new mixed-use programs. In recent years, since 2009, the results of this vision and its legacy have been visible to city dwellers. Nevertheless, there is always vulnerability, and therefore one always needs to preserve the values of the common good in the face of economic difficulty.

Tourism appears to be the favoured path towards economic recovery – but it represents a return to the monofunctionality of previous cycles and to an artificial encounter between ourselves and others. If it is not controlled, the tourism industry creates misconceptions about a place‘s identity – an identity based on what is inherited, but which is also being continuously refashioned. But notwithstanding the development of the public space, the main threat to communities is the danger that real life will be destroyed. Lisbon‘s vulnerability results from the fact that this process found a historic centre that was available for creating a monothematic urban structure. In places where there was previously not much heterogeneity it is easy to impose absolute homogeneity.

The vulnerability also reflects the fact that Portugal is experiencing a social crisis. Work has been devalued, and it is hard for public opinion to have a voice. This means that, in a crisis, politicians fall back on managing market forces rather than taking up the challenges presented by the various sectors that are capable of imagining the city. The challenge includes contributions by architects and from other areas of knowledge, but also ways of thinking about how to reuse the space, and also programs and strategies to generate collective meanings. This implies creating policies simultaneously favouring private initiative as well as the public domain and the common good – schools, day centres, student residences and social housing. The greatest vulnerability of all is a process of consumption and extinction.

In view of these concerns, we challenged a group of thinkers from various fields to share their views on the crossroads moment at which the City in Portugal finds itself, 50 years after 25 April 1974. We start with a visual essay by photographer Duarte Belo, a journey of those who walk, step by step, through a changing reality, without ever ceasing to reflect on the before and after. Pedro Trovão do Rosário details the legislative changes, which reflect a maturing democracy, which Ana Brandão discusses from the perspective of the transformation of territory. Maria Matos Silva and Ana Beja da Costa help us understand how, from the perspective of landscape architecture, mindsets are also transformed when we refer to green spaces and public spaces. We end with a conversation between anthropologist Filipa Ramalhete and geographers Margarida Pereira and Gonçalo Antunes about half a century of urban life in Portugal.

We hope this dossier will contribute to deepening and enriching a reflection that all of us who live in the city and enjoy it need to make – in order that Architecture, in collaboration with other disciplines, can offer a better response to the challenges, crises and vulnerabilities of the post-25 April 1974 city.