

# 74-14 SAAL AND ARCHITECTURE

Proceedings

International Colloquium 74-14 SAAL and Architecture

Symposium SAAL: Retrospective

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The symposium 'SAAL: A Retrospective' was organized on the occasion of the exhibition 'The SAAL Process: Architecture and Participation, 1974-1976' at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, Portugal, from 1 November 2014 to 1 February 2015. The exhibition travelled to the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal, Canada, from 12 May to 4 October 2015.

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# A precedent of SAAL: the National Laboratory for Civil Engineering's housing research program in the 1960s

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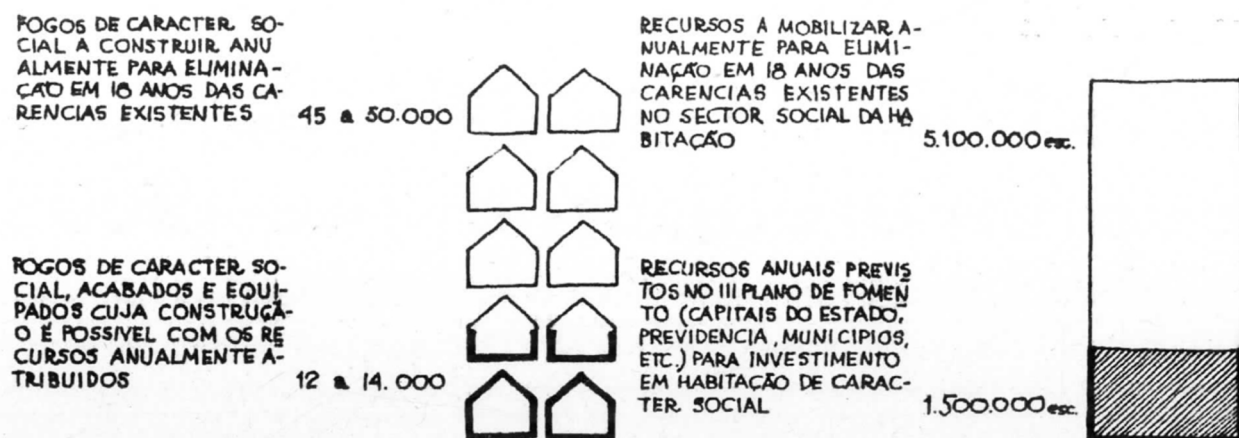
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1.

In the decree signed by Nuno Portas on the 6th of August 1974, informing of the preparation of a specialized technical team supporting ill-housed population, there are three key ideas that were already present in the document *Evolutional Housing (Habitação Evolutiva)*, published by National Laboratory for Civil Engineering (Laboratório Nacional de Engenharia Civil - LNEC) in 1971: 1) if the State wanted to expand its limited resources to the largest number possible of families, it should confine its action to the management of urbanable soil and the building of basic infra-structures; 2) housing production should not be divorced from its users' interests, and therefore it was necessary to direct the inhabitant's initiative towards a gradual investment concerning their own housing, fostering the use of its latent resources, constituted by either savings or work force; 3) the communities which had previously occupied terrains should be allowed to stay there, always and when urbanely possible and when interest prevailed, benefitting from the material and social assets already in existence.

2.

In this document, a formula called *evolutional habitation* was developed as an alternative to other formulae in practice in public initiative habitation block neighbourhoods (Portas & Silva Dias, 1971, p. 1), to which there had been pointed out the potentialities in the *Colloquy on Habitation Politics* commissioned by the Ministry of Public Works in 1969. It can be considered as the synthesis of a research branch initiated in 1961, when Nuno Portas, alongside engineer Ruy Gomes, represented LNEC in the *Group of Coordination of Housing Studies*, born out of the will to connect different organisms with responsibility in the study, planning and execution of collective habitation in Portugal.<sup>1</sup> The research led by him from then on, supported by a team of engineers, sociologists, mathematicians or architects, revolves around the qualitative reappraisal of the program and the problem of its configuration based on spatial dimensions and spatial relationships' description, as John Summerson had postulated years before.<sup>2</sup> To this methodological concern will contribute the contemporary works of Christopher Alexander or the open discussion environment in Nuno Teotónio Pereira's atelier, where he works with Pedro Vieira de Almeida.

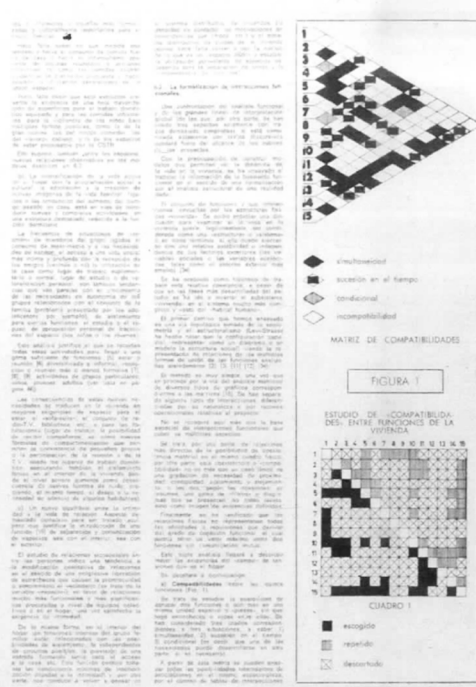
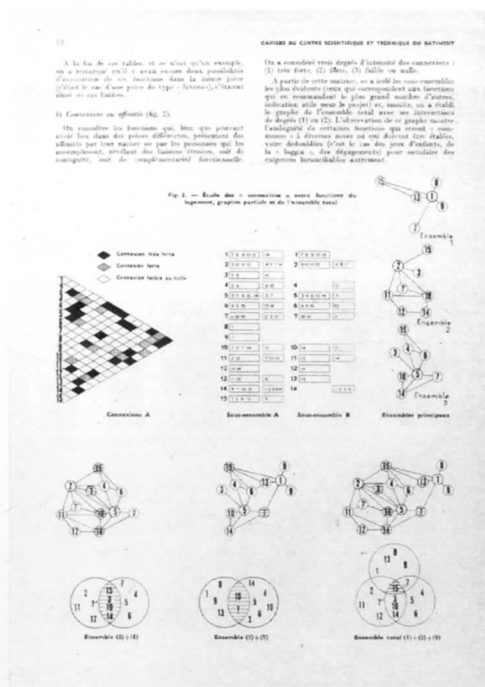


It is due to his first project within the frame of GCHS – a pilot survey aiming at putting in practice methods of direct interview to social neighbourhood inhabitants – that the evolutional conception of the house will be approached for the first time. In the first draft of *Study of Functions and Demand for Inhabitable Areas*, a proposition of revision concerning current standards is presented, justifying thus the establishment of a “minimum” as necessary priority in a urgency environment and safeguarding its provisional and evolutional character: as Portas enhances, “so that a good of stable and durable features such as a house can have a satisfactory economical return, it must be resistant to obsolescence” (1964a, p. 3).

This topic will be developed on the wake of the studies of sociologist Chombart de Lauwe, main reference in Portas’ research and speaker at a *Colloquy on Habitat* held in Lisbon in 1960, and the distinction proposed between *necessities-obligation* and *necessities-aspiration*: if the first referred to primary – and immediate – necessities of shelter, the second referred to fundamental desires which could only be predicted as a trend and which varied from society to society. Distinction that makes Portas consider as unacceptable, in the short-run, the vast majority of economical housing

facilities built in Portugal (because they failed to satisfy the obligations or because they failed to absorb the aspirations) and to conclude that functionalism, if literally taken – within inflexible area adjustments or house compartmentation –, is a “factor of evolutional value reduction in an object” (1964a, p. 46). He argues then that social dynamics must be considered for the establishment of standards, assuming them as a result of “partial and successive progress, destined to be revised and improved by the growing possibilities for investment and by the increase of families’ needs in which the evolution equally translates”, and not as something “statically determinable” (Portas, 1964a, p. 9).

This work would be complemented by the rationalization of housing solutions, presented in 1966 as the third part of the research plan in progress at LNEC: once the enquiries were elaborated concerning space usage, the family needs and the programs that could meet those demands, in what respects area, inter-relations and functional compatibilities, it was now proposed the insertion of systematic methods of project assessment so that a selection of optimized solutions could interact with larger scale reproduction. An extensive enquiry is the filter through which are valorized “projects that reveal more flexibility and where



occupations are multiple and even evolutionary, adapting to each family's sociocultural and even numerical development" (Portas & Alves Costa, p. 15).

This plan would be presented and discussed that same year by Nuno Portas in the *Colloquy on Habitat* in Bucharest, dedicated to the housing problem in underdeveloped or developing countries, where he would resume contact with numerous scholars involved in the same area of studies, such as G.A. Atkinson, Duccio Turin or Chombart de Lauwe.<sup>3</sup> The drafting of the colloquy's conclusions included, in its first subparagraphs, appeals to the "elaboration of construction programs in conformity with the culture and aspirations of the interested countries, regardless of innovative techniques or their link to local traditions", or to the existence, during the project's elaboration, of "actions that aim at problem awareness on the part of the populations involved" (AA.VV, 1966, p. 18).

The following year, while preparing the subsequent UIA colloquy as a delegate of the portuguese section, Portas will return to the work conducted at LNEC in the *Conseil International du Bâtiment* symposium held in Stockholm, his intervention will focus again on

the importance of prospective, the prediction of social evolution incidence over forms of living. Besides the institutional meetings attended from the mid-sixties onward, one must consider the link between Portas and a Spanish group of architects, from a mainly Catalan circle, and his participation in informal reunions this group held since the late-fifties. It is precisely in 1967 that he participates in two *Pequeños Congresos* (as they would henceforth be known) addressing the theme of "housing units, common territory between architecture and urbanism".<sup>4</sup>

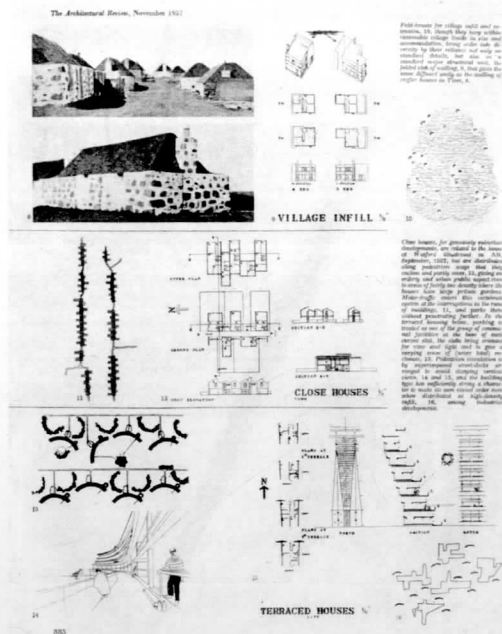
### 3.

In the 1971 document, housing was considered as a system in which needs – and the possibilities to meet them – evolved throughout time and therefore an initial minimum phase was accepted that met the urgency inherent and prepared gradual *quantitative* and *qualitative* improvement. To this process was associated still the ability to produce urban fabric, by stressing the relationship between type of housing and the city shape, in a close apprehension of what had been steering international debate on new forms of thinking urbanism: "also physical structures of urbanization and residence will



#### 4. Alison and Peter Smithson scales of association: the cluster concept

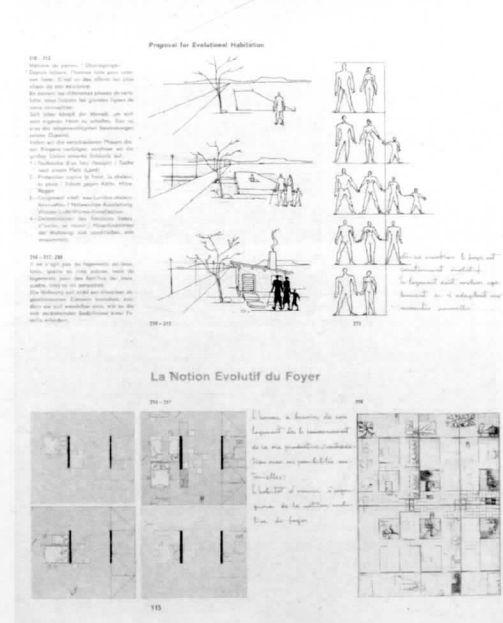
*Architectural Review* n° 730, 1957



have to be adapted, that is, conceived in such a way as to improve, expand or renew with as minimum institutional and financial damage as possible" (Portas & Silva Dias, 1971, p. 3).

Before the 10th CIAM took place in Dubrovnik in August 1956, the new generation in charge had already given instructions to all work groups, stressing the need to study communities as they exist and influence each other, according to a scale of association, and the need to predict their *growth and change*. Their aim was to propose new ways of thinking the city, capable of responding to mass society, opting for pragmatic and open methods of planning which included as a constitutive principle both the mutation and a continuous verification of the relationship between the whole and its constituent parts. During the congress, the concept of *cluster* was particularly enhanced, concept that the young Smithson couple described as a close knit aggregation – corresponding to a specific pattern of life – but also complex and changing, capable of expanding or renewing it, thus attaching it to the vitality and regeneration which suit a living organism. Amongst the members of Team 10, it may have been Candilis who most vehemently put to practice these ideas, both in urban and single building scales: in the last CIAM meeting, he presented a

#### 5. Candilis-Josic-Woods proposal for evolutionary habitation, as presented in the Otterlo Meeting *CIAM'59 in Otterlo*, ed. Oscar Newman

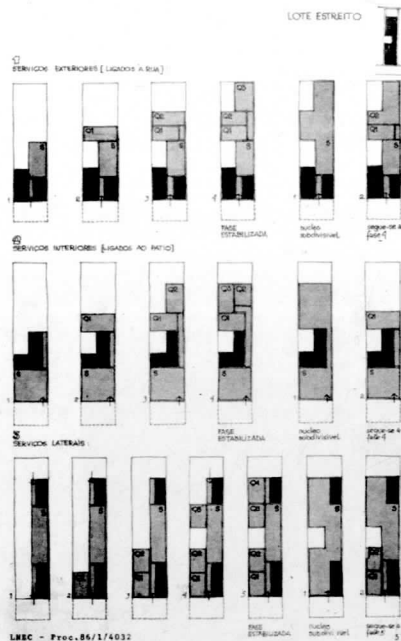


plan for Bagnols-sur-Cèze which predicted a complex of 2000 cells disposed according to the distinction between *determined* and *undetermined* elements, concentrating the former in a fixed nucleus, allowing for a set of spaces that could be organized in multiple ways, depending on each family's needs and its growth in time. This evolutionary concept would be, years later, incorporated in the *Programme Architecture Nouvelle* (PAN) launched by the French *Ministère de l'Équipement*.<sup>5</sup>

A more articulated notion of the concept of form, as it is explored by the Team 10 generation, would also be presented in the field of aesthetics at the beginning of the sixties. In *Opera Aperta*, Umberto Eco considered the value of *openness* in the progressive awareness on the part of the author and its application as a critical tool, beyond the immanent condition presiding the whole reception of a work. It was the deliberate penchant for the introduction in its structure of levels of *indetermination*,<sup>6</sup> fostering potential plural senses, which interested him in what refers to the historical and social context of mid-20th century. Nuno Portas, who rapidly acknowledges the critical potential of Eco's viewpoint, links it to an "active attitude on the part of the users" (1964b, p. 82) who, in the

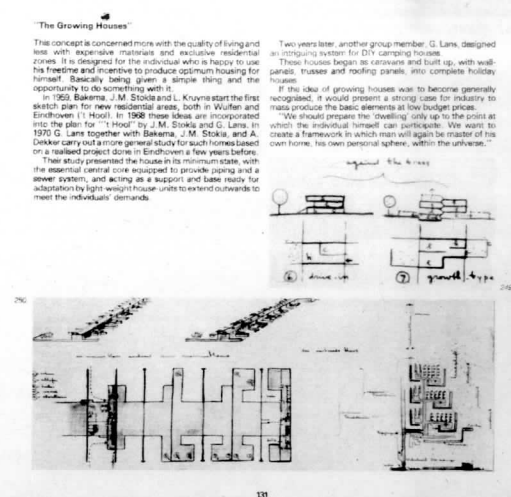
## 6. Evolutional schemes for one case study (narrow plot) and solid-void studies

*Evolutional Housing*, p.57



## 7. Bakema growing houses, 1959-70

*Thoughts about Architecture by J. Bakema*, ed. Marianne Gray



face of a work of architecture, would be invited to complete it and transform it following the pedagogy it entailed, orientating and yet non-binding.

In this regard, the *openness problematic*, as Eco himself was well aware, opened up a much larger cultural chapter, a "page of sociology and pedagogy, more than a page of art history" (1962, p. 89), for the invitation to freedom, exerted on an esthetical fruition level, could not but be involved also on the daily behaviour or social relations plane – what came to be corroborated by the vindication movements rise in the last years of the decade. It is not mere coincidence that during this period theories are put forward by philosopher Henri Lefebvre regarding the social construction of space, presented as an ideological critique of the predominance of *exchange value* over *use value* in the industrialized city. The use, that is, the capacity of participating in a social life, within a community, could not exist, according to Lefebvre, without appropriation: "The appropriation is the finish line, the sense, the aim of social life", it is what distinguishes a social space from a geometrical one (1967, p.164).

Thus, it is to be understood its importance within the frame of a project enacted by the *Institute de Sociologie Urbaine* on the detached house: unlike vertical collective

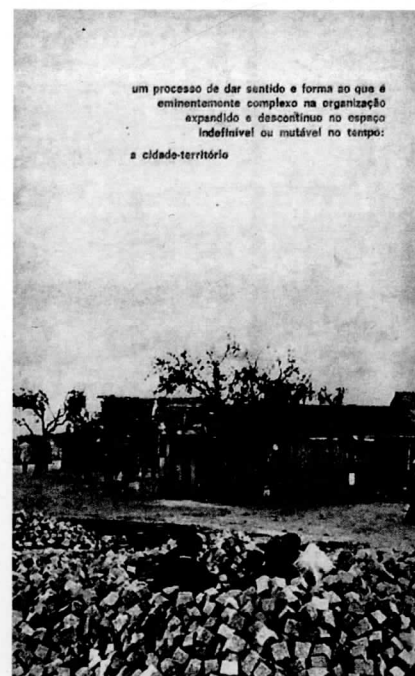
blocks, its residential space, "composed of fences, gardens, various available nooks, gives the act of inhabiting a slice of initiative and limited freedom, yet real" (Lefebvre, 1968, p. 32). It would be precisely the "horizontal compact grouping of individual houses, with free, extra, private space, still partially erectable", to be conveyed as preferential typology in evolutionary housing (Portas & Silva Dias, 1971, p. 3). Its growth potential had already been explored by Bakema, when adapting the principles of Candilis to the house-yard, although the undetermined elements were not only confined to the pre-ordained logic by the unmovable core: they presupposed that each inhabitant would build them through the addition of small units along external space, according to growth patterns already predicted in the overall general structure.

It must be said, though, that this fundamental feature of the inhabiting praxis (appropriation) was typical of Mediterranean-influenced agglomerates, with a strong hold in Portugal, and were being studied by Silva Dias.<sup>7</sup> Underlying this work there is a pragmatic sense of acknowledging the surrounding reality and the re-definition from "materials and systems already somehow available, albeit only analogically", as Portas would

8. Paper on marginal urbanization signed by M. Solà-Morales, J. Busquets, M. Domingo and A. Font (Barcelona School of Architecture)  
*Cuadernos de Arquitectura y Urbanismo* n°86, 1971



9. Nuno Portas' second book back cover: a photograph taken by the author in a suburb of Lisbon  
*A Cidade como Arquitectura*, ed. 1969



refer to in his little *manifesto* against utopian excursions of a technological bent, no doubt evocative of the Smithsonian *the found / as found* (1969, p. 157). The observation of the spontaneous city growth around Lisbon, made out of precarious and/or clandestine settlement located close to work or equipment sites, and the significance attributed to its latent resources (technical, social and human) were also part of this realistic strategy, which little differed from the studies made at the Department of Urban Planning of the School of Barcelona concerning the suburb or marginal urbanization, later central themes of the *Barcelona Urban Planning Laboratory*.<sup>8</sup>

Through the juridical figure of right to the surface, one could predict the permanence of certain communities in the occupied sites, respecting their demands of proximity to what the city offered, taking advantage likewise of the social space already built. Implicitly, it was also predicted that this legal form of ground granting might encourage the investment of inhabitants in their own house and foster communitarian participation, "through the use of equipment of sociability and the strengthening of ties both in the neighbourhood and in the city", and the increase of a security feeling (Portas & Silva Dias, 1971, p. 41).

It implied, quite simply, the assignment of responsibilities: while the public entities managed the infra-structures, densities and networks, the open and free spaces, etc, popular initiative defined the private spaces; but not only that: the *transitional* or *semi-public* spaces as well. This strategy, which hoped to involve the users in the process of progressive betterment of the built environment, was being studied by John Turner within the Latin-American context and systematically tested in Holland by the research group presided by John Habraken.<sup>9</sup>

4.

International criticism did not take long in giving protagonism, on the first pages of specialized press, to the SAAL and to associate its programmatic intentions with the revolutionary times that allowed its fulfillment. However, the media attention which accompanied such publications avoided a more serene reflection which would have permitted the analysis of the body of work at the base of the project and the distinction between what was fundamental and what circumstantial. The open or evolutionary solutions of the house appealed to, more than the inhabitants' participation in occasional



decision-making, an ampler and durable sense of *appropriation*.<sup>10</sup> Those solutions were in tune with various currents of thought that contributed throughout the sixties to a structured take on inhabiting, which made possible the vindication of housing as a *process that builds community* and which must give its inhabitants progressive freedom, more than just impose on them a certain idea of freedom – to quote only two very different contributions to the cause as those of Turner and Chombart de Lauwe. On the other hand, the evolutionary principles that were being studied at LNEC pre-announced a Lefebvorean *right to the city*, to the possibility of its construction without segregation or alienation: quite significantly, one of its first practical endeavours was possible due to a community's refusal in abandoning the sheds built in Alto da Eira, in the centre of Lisbon, to inaugurate housing facilities offered by municipal authorities in the city outskirts.

<sup>1</sup> Besides LNEC, in the first meeting of the Group of Coordination of Housing Studies participated also the Federation of Welfare Funds – Economic Housing, the Urban Development Services Board and the Housing Technical Office of the Municipality of Lisbon. Later, also joined the National Building and Monuments Board and the Internal Colonization Board. Cf. Portas, N. & Gomes, R. (1963). *Grupo de Coordenação de Estudos de Habitação: relatório 1961-1962*. Lisbon: LNEC.

<sup>2</sup> I'm referring to The Case for a Theory of Modern Architecture, originally published in the *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal*, n°64, 1957 [also available in: Ockman, J. (1993). *Architecture Culture: 1943-1968. A Documentary Anthology*. New York: Columbia Books of Architecture, Rizzoli].

<sup>3</sup> In July 1965, Nuno Portas goes to the 8th Congress of the International Union of Architects (UIA), in Paris. He will establish contacts with national agencies involved in

similar studies in order to exchange information, such as the London Building Research Station, where Atkinson is working. Cf. Portas, N. (1965).

*Estudos sobre habitação: relato sucinto dos contactos estabelecidos por ocasião do Congresso UIA*. Lisbon: LNEC.

<sup>4</sup> In 1967, Oriol Bohigas invites Nuno Portas for the congress held in Tarragona between May 4 and May 7, for which is also invited Aldo Rossi. Late that year, N. Portas and C. Duarte organized a congress in Tomar, Portugal, with Leslie Martin and Giancarlo de Carlo as guests (none of them would be present). In both congresses, N. Portas presented the LNEC ongoing research. [see also: Correia, N. (2010). *O Nome dos Pequenos Congressos. Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya. Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona* (Projecte final de màster)].

<sup>5</sup> Programme Architecture Nouvelle, launched in 1971 by the Ministère de l'Équipement, later the base of the European competition.

<sup>6</sup> Initially, Eco had in mind for the title of his book "Shape and indetermination in contemporary poetics", which reveals the importance of such concept in his work. (Cf. Eco, 1962, p. 6).

<sup>7</sup> Francisco Silva Dias receives a scholarship from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation between 1966 and 1968. The final report, entitled *The Urban Art of Portuguese Mediterranean-influenced Agglomerates*, is delivered in 1970. Its foreseen

publication as book never took place. Cf. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Fine Arts Department, folder SBA-1484.

<sup>8</sup> The Barcelona Urban Planning Laboratory (Laboratorio de Urbanismo de Barcelona) is created in 1969, although a comprehensive research on urban growth, including the problem of marginal urbanization, was being carried since the mid-60's, when Manuel Solà-Morales became Chair of the Department of Urban Planning at Barcelona's School of Architecture.

<sup>9</sup> Stichting Architecten Research, foundation established in 1964 for mass-housing research, coordinated by Habraken. The result of ten years of SAR work was compiled in a book that would be published in english in 1976. Cf. Habraken (1976). *Variations: The Systematic Design of Supports*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

<sup>10</sup> Consider the following observation by Lefebvre: "Another obsessive theme is participation (connected to integration). But it is not a simple obsession. In practice, the ideology of participation permits the acquiescence of interested and concerned people for a minimum cost. After a more or less dilated simulacrum of information and social activity, they return to their quiet passivity. Isn't it clear that real and active participation has already a name? It is called self-management. Which raises another kind of problems". Cf. *The Right to the City* [O Direito à Cidade, p.105].

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