SCALES OF THE INHABITED TERRITORY –
FROM COMPLEXITY TO THE ART OF RESOLUTION

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Abstract

This research process is about the urban condition in contemporary territories and about the methods to better know and operate on it. Using the Portuguese northwest region as a rehearsal, this paper, in particular, seeks to reflect on the importance of the concept of scale for the referred process.

A school and a factory, a farm field and an old church, a huge industrial centre, a forgotten caravan, a playground and a squeaking swing: this is the regime of conviviality and simultaneity that we seek to clarify. A promiscuous organization where different people, shapes, spaces, styles and times, from small fragments to huge objects cohabit in a very intense everyday life, with a very specific ethos of urbanity; and a scattered pattern of settlement that sometimes becomes apparently confusing. But behind this appearance, there possibly lay some complex relationships that go beyond visibility, and a careful recognition of the set mentioned above reorders our original perception. To reveal this complexity, we aim to propose a proper method of approach following some major movements: clarifying the social and morphological properties of the territory; documenting its components; structuring the organization of those components in time and space; and specifying the operating procedures between them. This can be the way of building a model of understanding of what we call, in a holistic sense, the inhabited territory.

The territories in which we are working become a challenge because they do not fit into the conventional models of the urban studies: they are not city or countryside, or both at the same time; they are not suburban or eccentric or peripheral; they are not the result of a recent process of city growth and neither do they have the characteristics of dependence on a centre. And, in addition to the morphological and social diversity, they are subject to an extreme multiplication of the conditions of belonging and referencing. Each place - in its very old and material sense – unfolds itself in many new places. That's why for a better knowledge and action this debate is flanked by a continuous methodological clarification and here is where the key issue of scales enters.

If, on the one hand, these are territories that work, as an assembled machine with thousands of constantly adapting pieces (they are extremely productive and have a young, active and especially merged society), on the other, they show many weaknesses, not only in the social sphere – as poverty, unemployment, de-industrialization, displacement – but also in morphological terms. We are talking about new sediments and micro-conflicts that sometimes, by being so small, become uncountable and neglected by the institutional frames: an isolated archipelago in the fabric, an inaccessible enclave, a side of the road that is impossible to walk on, an excessively noisy environment caused by a nearby highway... Surely, it will not be by reducing the planning to the greatest degree of distance or by levelling it to a scale of abstraction, unengaged with the concrete and material reality, it will be possible to advance in the mentioned challenges.

What we propose in this research is to find proper means to approach the inhabited dimension of the territory. Not as a "small is beautiful" manifesto, but to promote different variations and shifts of

scale that capture the movement, the everydayness and the transformation dynamics over time. With the permeability of that knowledge we seek to expand the limits of understanding to produce a denser explanation of the problems of the contemporary urban condition. The use of the creative process to face these problems could be called the Art of Resolution.

Keywords: territory, place, inhabited territory, approach

1   INTRODUCTION

It has proven to be increasingly necessary to understand the specific regimes of inhabiting and building in eccentric territories. That is the subject of the research that supports this presentation, common to many others that have been made recently. The presupposition is clear: if we assume that these kind of urban territories put a problem that has in itself its own value and that, in addition to being different from the problem of the city, is not defined by simple opposition to it, we must also accept that they require appropriate instruments of analysis, either formally, or in the social and cultural sphere.

In most cases, urban territories represent an enigma and a difficulty for disciplines such as Architecture, which proposes to reflect on them. Hence it is both important and frequent to discuss about the territorial condition and the ways of observing it, that is, about the instrumental condition of territorial analysis. Through the following points, and taking into account the theme of the present edition of EURAU, we propose to reflect precisely on this issue and, particularly, on the eventual contributions that a deepening in the idea of scale can offer to our research process and its objectives. The intention is to put as a hypothesis and test an approach movement to the inhabited reality of the territory, followed by a variation at several levels. It is our initial belief that this movement is more than less advantageous to advance in the knowledge of contemporary urban problem.

To this end, this presentation will come under the next alignment: firstly, the idea of apparent chaos or of territorial dystopia, equally resulting from insufficient knowledge or specification, of failed approaches or failed attempts, or the prevalence of the ideal of the city; secondly, territorial complexity as a posture to adopt before uncertainty, variety and heterogeneity; finally, the inhabited condition of the territory as a key concept to reverse the pejorative perception of *apparent chaos* and as a way of understanding and operating in reality.

2   A FRAME OF DIVERSITY

We seek to intercept these global notions with considerations about a specific territory. The Portuguese northwest coast serves, in this research as in this presentation, as an example or a rehearsal space.

In the Portuguese northwest coast as in many similar territories, while the cities centres – Porto, in this case – were facing a variety of problems – such as soil value speculation, gentrification, congestion, ... -, the outer areas emerged as socially inclusive and economically central spaces. Maintaining urban features, these eccentric territories were increasingly occupied and became the support of most of the population. This is, basically, the main reason that confirms the need to produce specific studies about it. It can be described in some fundamental aspects, partially or entirely common to other European regions, but that distinguish it as a separate entity in the Iberian peninsular context and particularly in the Portuguese context.

Firstly, it must be considered an extremely scattered and spaced pattern of occupation (only punctuated by some urban centres of medium size), which is mainly due to three factors: the highly favourable natural conditions (fertile soils, a moderate and wet climate, an extensive water network, hills and natural basins with good sun exposure, ...) that since protohistory have made possible the spread of thousands of small cells of inhabiting, embryonary of others that have successively reproduced themselves; a historical process with important stages of property

compartmentalisation, as well as a transmission regulatory regimen that led to its infinitesimal parcelization and to discontinuous pulverization of constructions; and, lastly, a constructive tradition based on the individual, highly rooted and extended in time, distributed in a territory that was built on continuity and by several hands, without any radical event of interruption and with few or slightly intrusive centralized or planned interventions, by action of the State or another institution. Through successive layers that have been incorporated and accommodated to the existing reality over more than two millennia of full activity and full construction, the northwest Portuguese coast has become a dynamic body with a distributed, multi-located intelligence.

Figure 1. The frame of diversity and the scattered pattern of the territory (Vizela valley, Portugal)

This factor is also in the origin of a wide range of programs, corresponding to a similar simultaneity of uses and to a fluidity between functions at first sight irreconcilable: an elementary school from the beginning of the 20th century contiguous to a technological industry, an agricultural field of archaic production next to a parochial church, a large football stadium, an abandoned caravan... It is a way of life and a territorial matrix, which, being urban, retain traces of an ancient rural history, either in practices or in the materials. That is: several simultaneous temporalities and cultures that coexist in times, compacted in the same space, without special predominance of one over the other. One characteristic to which a very diverse society in its composition of classes and territorial miscegenation also corresponds, organized and framed by both the division of labour - mainly industrial, which came to be predominant, from the 19th century on - as well as local organisations (clubs, associations, cooperatives), or, finally, by religious bonds of Christian tradition.

The structure of scattered settlement is supported in an extensive and dense capillary network of infrastructures, which incorporate themselves in the territory, also over generations. They are divided into the oldest, originated from a Roman-medieval tradition, and the most recent, either created in the period of developmentalism and liberal rise, in the 19th century, or created over the last quarter of the 20th century, especially since 1986, when the European Union Budget started to back up its construction. This network, formed by vicinal accesses, municipal, district or national roads and highways, has acted continuously over all the places, which have been integrated into a

suprarregional body. But it is also in this network that now lie many formal conflicts, overlaps and cuts of scale that have remained unsolved in the voracity of the transformation. An isolated urban archipelago, an enclave in the middle of two highways, ... – it is also in these spaces that many people live, sent to oblivion or fading away. Associated with this phenomenon there has been, over the past decade, the decay of a highly productive industrial scenario that had become matricial to the organisation of social and economic territory. This tissue of industries, closely linked to manufacturing, was based on some specific sectors, such as textiles, and a long tradition, which has been present since the 19th century.

Embedded in an ancient agricultural structure, these industries represented a continuity of older production profiles, i.e., we are before a process of *industrializzazione senza fratture* [1] (continuous process of industrialization), which extended practices and pre-industrial workshops knowledge to industrial manufacturing and which, through the intelligent combination of a geography of raw materials, labour force, means of production, distribution and energy, achieved a high efficiency. This efficiency has recently been interrupted by the crisis and depression that crosses both the territory and the society and leaves them both in an expectant state. Old industrial complexes, memories of a highly productive everyday life, are now ruins exposed to abandonment, or owned by other sectors that contradict or disqualify its initial vocation. A state of emergency that may be, however, the most appropriate moment for integrated reflections of context, which can make a kind of balance and, at the same time, design new ways of acting for the future.

3   THE DYSTOPIA OF URBAN TERRITORY

Even though these territories are a potentially infinite work field, even observing the needs and scarcities that are still unsolved and for which architects can develop solutions, a certain prejudice about them remains in our discipline. We often speak of chaos and entropy; we often speak of "ghettoization", marginalization, poverty and exclusion, and it is said that the territory is the domain of the ugly. For many, the "periphery" is an image that does not matter and from which they distance themselves in an almost militant way. In fact, the very definition of periphery already indicates a certain contempt that is applicable, in general, to the "suburbs" and other similar terms. When someone says "the periphery" or "suburb", refusing to specify a little more the concepts, they seem to refer to a spatially, morphologically and socially homogeneous entity only inhabited by "the others". This is the risk in which we may incur when viewing an object from the outside and without equipping ourselves with appropriate instruments to understand it. Laura Vaughan [2] speaks precisely of this risk and refers to both the condition of otherness and to the one-dimensional suburb as mythologizing processes of urban spaces.

It is also often discussed "what is acceptable to the peripheries" and "what is acceptable to the centres". This level of variable admissibility, dependent on the geography or, more properly, on the urban system and its symbolic density is the greatest proof of the prevalence of the dystopia of the urban territory. But beyond that, this relativism has implicit the recognition that qualities like freedom or wide admission remain in the called "periphery", resulting from relief from over-regulation and congestion that the centres are mostly subject to.

In the case of the Portuguese northwest coast, the conviviality and miscegenation regime, relieved of the city spotlights and protectionism, seems to result in a kind of harmony that contains some operating principles, even though insufficiently clarified. There is a kind of common happiness that can be proved, for example, with the fact that the eccentric municipalities are the ones with a younger population, higher productivity indexes and business activity indexes and less exposure to extreme poverty, which is attenuated on the one hand by self-production and on the other hand by the networks of solidarity and neighbourhood that reproduce and transmit themselves over successive generations.

We wonder, then, about the reasons that may be behind this so pejorative feeling that resists about the urban territory. It may be essentially due to two factors, inextricably linked between themselves: the first is related to the prevalence of an ideal of city, or rather, a Eurocentric idea of *the good city form,* which, to some extent, achieved the status of paradigm and is rooted in common sense. That

means to try to observe the whole urban territory through the same lenses with which we overlooked the city and to try to find the same categories there: compactness elements, geometry, blocks, square, etc.; the second arises from the difficulty in understanding a frame that is adverse, from approaching to a fact that is different, and from producing an "Anatomy of the sprawl" [3], as Brenda Case Scheer suggested [18], mapping its elements and describing the various systems that lie there - that is, the logics that lie behind the fragmentation and that give it a clear sense.

4   BEYOND THE APPARENT CHAOS

The word or concept of chaos is particularly significant if it is understood from a wider angle. Eduardo Lourenço, an essential philosopher of Portuguese contemporary thinking, states that "while it lasts, what we call chaos evokes the idea not only of confusion and disorder of the elements, but a kind of inability to understand and even less dominate a state of affairs, of the world, society, history, where it is not seen the shadow of an order." [4] In fact, the apparent chaos does not result from a property of things themselves, but from our perception of them, or the absence of it.

The pursuit for an order, that is, the search for a single rationality to reverse or counter the apparent chaos, or the attempt to order the chaos in the design process always reveals itself unfruitful.

4.1   The scale of *Extensive Urbanization* – a first attempt

Coinciding in the understanding that there is a lack of studies that systematize the knowledge and adequately describe the urban territories and in a precursor attempt to respond to this need, a group of authors from countries of southern Europe, such as Portugal, Spain and Italy, have produced important work over the last decades. They are mainly concerned with issues of analysis of urban form and territorial pattern and they advance with a new taxonomy and a wide variety of words hitherto little used in the thought of the territory. Their goal seems to be to defend a new scale for the contemporary territorial reality.

In the context of the Portuguese northwest coast, the expression "Território Difuso" (Diffuse territory), especially from the 90s and 2000s, gained a lot of importance in academic circles. Several authors, such as Nuno Portas [5], Álvaro Domingues or Manuel Fernandes de Sá, found a structure of similarities with the context of Veneto (Italy) and Catalonia (Spain) and with the literature of *Tre Italie* [6], and defended the need to find a "geographical pertinent scope to understand the multiple dimensions that structure the dynamics and the processes" [6] of contemporary territory transformation. This is the domain of extensive urbanization.

The "Extensive Urbanization" [7, 8] is the device of scale and operation that this line proposes in order to recognise the processes of territorial reconfiguration of great dimension, for example, the meta-transformations of infrastructures. The intention of maintaining a degree of very considerable distance in relation to the object-territory finds in other times and in other initiatives some parallelisms; however, here this group proposes the fixation of an observation post from very far away, from a distance that allows to understand all the great scale at once in a very wide geographical unit that is *extensive* and not *intensive.* On the basis of this proposal is the assumption that the contemporary transformation settles on territorial forces that act in a standardized way throughout space and assimilate the local specificities, making them less relevant compared to global phenomena. This is the same as saying, in other words, that, for this current, places are in a continuous process of erosion [8] and that the knowledge of their properties becomes irrelevant compared to the knowledge of the properties that extensive urbanization allows to observe.

But other perspectives, quite distinct from this one, have been pointed out regarding the issue of scales of understanding. They call into question the idea that distancing the point of view from the object-territory may somehow be more informative than the approach to concrete reality. One of the authors who stresses the need to promote both multi-disciplinary and multi-directional approaches to the urban territory is Laura Vaughan [2], already mentioned above. Ruth McManus [10] also emphasizes the need for new approaches to the suburban territory through its history.

Broadly speaking we can say that all these contemporary authors appear in the sequence of a long tradition of Place, a key concept that frames in a theoretical and practical structure the old question of approaching. "How can the place be a contribution to addressing the complexity" – is the question we must seek to answer, explaining, first, our understanding of complexity and, second, the concept of Place itself.

4.2   The places of territorial complexity

Regarding the idea of complexity, the words of Edgar Morin immediately arise, when he argued that instead of an order or a disorder it is in the concept of organisation – the result of the convergence between the two – which we should focus on. This principle is at the origin of complex thinking, a potentially useful cognitive tool to build an attitude towards the uncertainty and unpredictable conditions of the urban territory. The original sense of the word "complex" itself (from the Latin: "*complexus*") is extremely informative: "what is woven together." As Morin says, to think the complexity is "to respect the common fabric." [11]

Many [12, 13] conceptions of territorial complexity were created since Robert Venturi's Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture [14]. Overall, they coincide in the common understanding that there are no single processes for the construction of the territory, and thus there also is no single angle for its understanding.

As the disciplinary knowledge deepened and specialized into increasingly circumscribed theoretical niches, the tendency to pursue global explanations from specific phenomena advanced. We ourselves, architects, frequently fall into a contradiction with our own formation and carry out excessively focused studies in built forms, ignoring their meaning, their condition and their roots in natural, political and social circumstances. The truth is that the attempt to find a singular rationality always failed, and that is because the territory is a plural thing and the phenomena to be taken into account for its understanding are multiple and regularly go beyond what is reasonable or what is rational. Grataloup and Margolin speak about the "territorial puzzle" [15], "a network of places forming social and economic spatialities defined by a large variety of relationships with extent and duration." [16] This simple statement is what seems to be in a consensual basis of the idea of territorial complexity, which is, basically, an approach to the urban problem.

Addressing the territorial *complexus* implies to accept that it is made up of many different parts – components – mutually interacting between themselves. Being physically inseparable in reality, these components are organised by systems that we can infer from our observation post: systems of production, consumption, distribution, solidarity, religiosity, work, property, … While defining the corpus of these systems and their *specialization* in the territory, we are facing the clew that used to be called the "apparent chaos" and we are proposing to dismantle it.

We are back in the territory of the Portuguese northwest coast. In the search for an organisation or, more properly, for different organisations one can reflect, for example, on the production system set around an industrial plan. It includes the collective of workers that shapes the work force, the feedstock, the customers, … - but also the specific physical structures of each of them and the circuit formed between them all. As it can be seen, these systems aren't autonomous and there is no geographic unit that separates them. They necessarily interact with the social systems of the communities and, in many cases, even with the religious, political or cultural systems. But although the promiscuity among them is total (and this consideration needs to be constantly in mind), the identification of each can be advantageous as it allows us to create visibility schemes and to reveal the reality of everyday life.

Systems are variable entities, merged and overlapped, which relate to each other and globally reconcile themselves in the place. That is why we are able to say that the place is an access to complexity [17], that is, by comprehending in itself all systems, place becomes an especially revealing instance and provides a kind of information that probably no other entity can provide. But it is important, however, to underline the need to update the concept of place, whose mutation is as fast as time itself. Today, places can no longer be seen as closed units from a morpho-spatial point of

view – it is necessary to understand their connectivity and how they interact with other places and it is considering the new data on it that the place can become an approximation mechanism to the inhabited condition of the territory.

5   THE INHABITED TERRITORY AND THE ART OF RESOLUTION

The inhabited condition of the territory is a methodological statement and simultaneously an ethic of the design process. To be achieved it is needed a contemplative and lengthy work that can be synthetically explained in three points: first, we need to focus our discourse in what is related to life in the territory [18], as it is appropriated, circulated and named by the people who inhabit it – the urban territory is not the space of the others but the space of the most, including ourselves; then, its representation can never lose the *sense of the concrete*, that is the material recognisability of things that compose it. Even a more abstract analysis should rise from a reality principle and never abandon it, under penalty of becoming merely graphical and without tangible value to the represented reality; finally, it is necessary to understand the problem in space but also in time, accept that the forms are not static and, therefore, to admit to incorporate the transformation process.

It is important to clarify that the inhabited territory is not a matter of scale. Or rather: it is not a matter of *scale* in the singular, but rather *scales* in the plural. There isn't the scale of the inhabited territory – there are, as the title of these text states, *scales of the inhabited territory*, that hypothetically can be all. On this issue, it immediately occurs to us that briefing of Tom Emerson entitled "Making and the territory", where he said that "to make a building is to make the territory. From a single step adjusting ground to a humble windowsill – he goes on –, design crosses culture with climate to define how we dwell. And whether built or grown, our environment is designed and constructed in a combination of modest fragments and great ensembles." So, we would say, things do not happen at different scales – they just happen. No matter how simple or how big it can seem, each act of transformation will participate in a joint and indivisible dynamic of "modest fragments and great ensembles" [19]. To be perceived, this dynamics must be faced as a whole. The *making* as a constructive, cultural and procedural practice of everyone, of everywhere and of all times is the glue that connects that whole.

By putting the problem through this perspective one can realize why the place as an approach mechanism to the inhabited territory is not hostage of any particular scale, either small or local. There are not, as often it is said, a contradiction or opposition between the scope of places and the scale of urban meta-transformations, as if there was a clash of times. To reorder this perception it seems necessary, therefore, to go further with the concept of place and to understand it less as a socially closed and territorially delimited entity and more as a contemporary form of organisation of life in the territory, a porous body in the established relations with the near and distant context, socially open and without spatial or morphological borders.
What is important is to incorporate what we call the Conscience of Place in the numerous scales of observation and operation, whether they are more approximate or more distant, subjecting them all, through this way, to a strong bond with the inhabited condition of the territory. And so, instead of trying to think or represent the place, instead of traveling *from space to the place and back again* [20], we would say that this work is rather to travel in the territory through the place. The whole territory, regardless time and scale, can be understood through the place.

Such intention can be achieved in various ways. The most plausible, from our point of view, is a strategy of permeabilization applied to the numerous scales of representation. This consists in transferring information between the most distant approaches and the closest ones. As Tom Emerson remembered, a single step adjusting ground to a humble windowsill is itself an act of transformation of the territory. And all those "insignificant" acts, as a whole, form an extremely significant dynamics. In this sense, the omission of this dynamics in the most distant overviews can lead to an irretrievable loss of relevant information. In the same way, we recall the conflicts caused by different levels of infrastructures that we mentioned above, when we described the Portuguese northwest context. An old neighbourhood sliced by a new highway, for example, represents a break

or a mismatch between various scales and corresponds to the loss of the inhabited sense of the territory.

The solution may be, from our point of view, to reconcile the relationship between both architectural and urban operation. That is, if we put the same conviction, the same rigor and the same lengthiness in the representation of the common elements of our everyday territory [21] that we put, for example, in the representation of a work of Palladio, then we will certainly obtain an advanced degree of information and also new data that can be available to all scales.

To act in urban territory is to act in an existing reality – a notion that has been especially underlined, given the current circumstance of crisis and scarcity. The contemporary challenges point to reconciliation and conflict solving, here and there, rather than looking for a new unitary rationality that would solve all the existing problems at once. This is also why it seems clear that it is urgent to reinforce the inhabited sense, entering a new agenda for places as for the Architectural praxis: care, repair, rewire, reuse and transform the existing reality through the existing reality. That could be the Art of the Resolution.
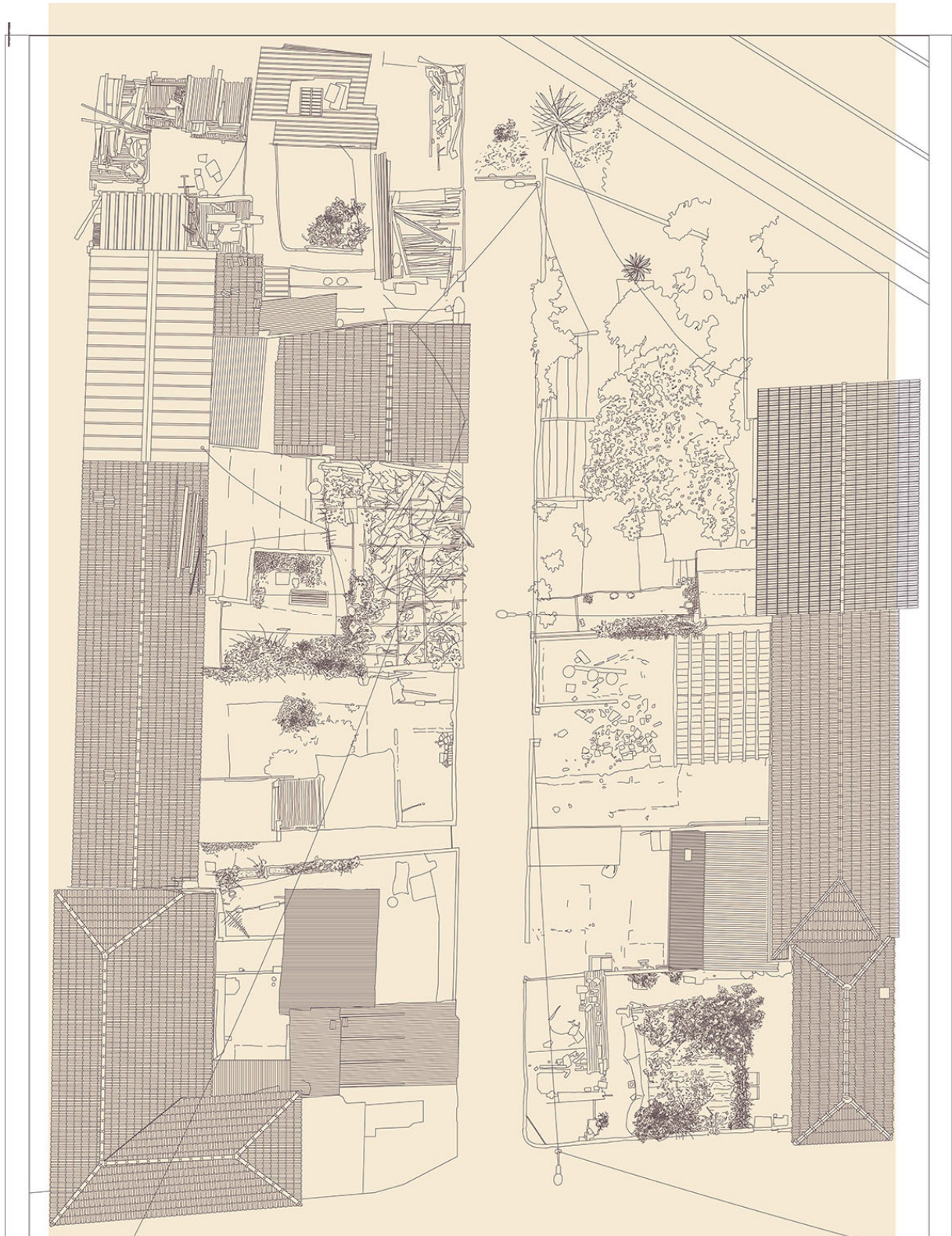
Figure 2. A drawing that attempts to approximate to the inhabited condition of the territory. A consciousness that can be transferred to any scale. (Alto dos Oliveira, Portugal)

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