

# Republican affordable housing. Art, hygiene and modern architecture in Portugal

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## ABSTRACT

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Right through the history of social housing in Portugal, a first cycle can be circumscribed that closes in the 1930s. Here the degree of intervention of the central administration for the resolution of the decent housing deficit had been previously discussed and simultaneously the construction of a diverse set of solutions which functioned as models to test against slums. On the one hand, the so-called “casa barata” (cheap house) began to be seen as an important political instrument in the struggle for power and social control; on the other hand, it continued to be understood as desirable real estate integrated in the complex fabric of economic interests woven into urban housing production. Although the operations conducted in this period and dominated by the *First Republic* were episodic and insignificant compared to the country's housing needs, some continue to have historical relevance as test balloons in the *positivist* laboratory that was the universe of *republicanism*.<sup>1</sup> Some neighbourhoods were authentic condensers of the complex debate inherited from the eighteenth century, which, based on scientism, sought in this way the orderly and progressive reform of society<sup>2</sup> in order to, among other issues, solve the so-called *social question* in which the problem of working-class housing was included.<sup>3</sup>

Confronted with the overwhelming rhythms of social and technical-scientific progress of the first decades, affordable housing was to be one of the most sensitive architectural programmes in the synthesis between tradition, history and modernity. In the disciplinary field of architecture, in many cases the economic, social and cultural valuation of the new dwelling and its particular technical and formal constraints redirected the *modus operandi* and the professional interest of the architect onto other themes hitherto adjacent to the central problem of *style*. In this transformational process of the architectural field, one of the aspects that must be mentioned concerns the regulation and normalization imposed by the hygienist rationality, putting the binomial *art* and *science* at stake. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to contribute to a reading of some pre-1933 economic districts centred on the international effect of hygiene considered as scientific knowledge and, also, a programme of values. In particular, in the light of a more precise explanation of modern breathing in the late 1920s, the document is structured in two parts, comprising, respectively, the definition of control measures imposed on house design, and use of a formal, clearly purified and diaphanous lexicon, determined by the triangulation between *art*, *economy* and *hygiene*.

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<sup>1</sup> About *republicanism* in Portugal, see, for example, CATROGA, Fernando, “O Republicanismo Português (Cultura, história e política)”. In *Revista da Faculdade de Letras – HISTÓRIA – Porto*, III Série, vol. 11, 2010, pp. 95-119

<sup>2</sup> GARNEL, Maria Rita Lino (coord.) – “Corpo: Estado, medicina e sociedade no tempo da I República”. Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 2010, p. 8

<sup>3</sup> Note Rui Ramos’ observation when he states that housing problem was an important signal of the “Social question”. In, RAMOS, Rui – *A Segunda Fundação*. MATTOSO, José, coord. – *História de Portugal*. Vol. 6. Lisbon: Editorial Estampa, 2001, p. 211