

# Utopia(s) – Worlds and Frontiers of the Imaginary

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# Utopian visions in the Portuguese city: An interpretation of Planos Gerais de Urbanização

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**ABSTRACT:** One can have many approaches to utopia. While focusing on ideas aimed at transforming a particular context into a non-achievable reality, we are also referring to utopia. Within the context of dictatorship (28th of May 1926–25th of April, 1974), the Portuguese city, which was planned through *Planos Gerais de Urbanização* (General Urbanization Plans), was also a realm of utopia. This paper will have a non-conventional approach to those plans. It is expressed by a break with the former context. Aspiring to a new urban reality, which was focused on modernity, the town planners intended to break up with tradition. Accordingly, the car should be seen as a contribution for shaping urban space through innovative principles. Demolitions and new areas of expansion would be the most visible face of it, among a wide range of features for transforming the pre-existent context. However, even taking into account the inadequacy of Portuguese city to its own time, the Government was in opposition with complete ruptures. Instead, the adequacy to financial resources was in the centre of its concerns. In other words, the reality was Government's work scope in contrast to non-achievable goals. The architects, on the contrary, set their own goals well beyond reality.

**Keywords:** Portuguese city, Planos Gerais de Urbanização, Utopia, Estado, 20th century urban concepts

## 1 INTRODUCTION. MOVING ON TO A NEW REALITY

The concept of utopia can be used to define a dream that is either yet to be materialized or difficult to achieve. It can also be used to refer either to a fantasy, or a strong desire, or even to a place or an unattainable idea. This will be the scope of this article. It will be framed by the *Estado Novo* City<sup>1</sup> in the way the town planners/architects faced it. In other words, the scope of this paper will be framed by the city planned through *Planos Gerais de Urbanização* [General Urbanization Plans].<sup>2</sup>

Such city was conceived as an impossible place, considering the country that Portugal was at that time. The approach to this idea, considering the Governmental perspective, shows that the Dictatorship intended to build a completely new urban world upon an unrealistic range of settlements, from the north to the south, and from the smallest to the biggest ones. Over more than 400 urban settlements with more than 2500 inhabitants should be the subject of a new plan, including all the places with either touristic, leisure, climatic, spiritual, historic, or artistic relevance.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this purpose should be achieved in solely three years after the approval of the Decree-Law n° 24802, which took place in 1934. These figures are surprising within

the Portuguese reality. Portugal was then a country facing deep problems affecting almost all its infrastructures and urban equipment. It is important to notice that the Minister of Public Works, Duarte Pacheco soon intended to modernize Portugal<sup>4</sup> by building new roads and sea ports, developing energy production and its distribution as well as agricultural hydraulics, and by improving hospital facilities, building school and university buildings, law courts, city halls, and post and telegraph offices. In the urban context, which is the scope of this paper, many of such measures converged, in 1938, for the definition of both the *programa de melhoramentos urbanos* [urban improvements program], and the *programa de melhoramentos de águas e saneamento* [water improvements and sanitation program] (Costa 2012: 101, 109–113, 141).<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is possible to confirm that *Planos Gerais de Urbanização* took part in a wider program to transform profoundly the country and its urban world. Actually, this program was defined also under the dependence of the Minister Duarte Pacheco. In the one hand, the city councils faced the obligation to submit each plan to the ministerial administrative services through a very slow and bureaucratic process in order to obtain their approval (Lôbo 1995a: 46). On the other hand, the Minister on his own previously defined the group of town planners that

The idea of Utopia springs from a natural desire of transformation, of evolution pertaining to humankind and, therefore, one can find expressions of "utopian" desire in every civilization. Having to do explicitly with human condition, Utopia accompanies closely cultural evolution, almost as a symbiotic organism. Maintaining its roots deeply attached to ancient myths, utopian expression followed, and sometimes preceded cultural transformation.

Through the next almost five hundred pages (virtually one for each year since Utopia was published) researchers in the fields of Architecture and Urbanism, Arts and Humanities present the results of their studies within the different areas of expertise under the umbrella of Utopia. Past, present, and future come together in one book. They do not offer the readers any golden key. Many questions will remain unanswered, as they should.

The texts presented in Proportion Harmonies and Identities - UTOPIA(S) – WORLDS AND FRONTIERS OF THE IMAGINARY were compiled with the intent to establish a platform for the presentation, interaction and dissemination of research. It aims also to foster the awareness and discussion on the topics of Harmony and Proportion with a focus on different utopian visions and readings relevant to the arts, sciences and humanities and their importance and benefits for the community at large.

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