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# Empty presence | empty absence

## The critical role of housing in the shape of public space

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*ABSTRACT. Much research has focused on the transformation of public space and its traditional role as the locus of political life, and in the significant trends towards privatization as threats to social cohesion in society. However, as we shall argue, this change was precisely shaped by moral and governance concerns, which find its roots in the 19th century and its desire to build an image of public virtue. In fact, few studies regarded the process of housing reconfiguration, which started to take place at the time as an implementation of management programmes for the reconstruction of social life, as a major critical point. The present paper attempts to address the consequences of new specializations, illustrated by Henri Roberts' Model Houses, which sought to absorb society, and all that was socially and morally reprehensible, from public to private places, claiming their correlation as the leading cause for the replacement of empty presences, formerly public spaces, by empty absences.*

*KEYWORDS:* public, political, social, housing, reform, H.Roberts

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### **The public surveillance of the domestic**

Much research has focused on the transformation of public space and its traditional role as the locus of political life and in the significant trends towards privatization as threats to social cohesion in society. However, as we shall argue, this change was precisely shaped by ethical, moral and governance concerns, which find its roots back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its desire to build an image of public virtue. Few studies regarded the process of housing reconfiguration, which started to take place at the time as an implementation of management programs for the reconstruction of social life, as a major critical point. The present paper seeks to investigate the consequences of new housing specializations — which sought to absorb society, and all that was socially and morally reprehensible, from public to private places — claiming their correlation as the leading cause for the replacement of "empty presences" — formerly public spaces, by "empty absences".

Sennett has proposed the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the hinge that determined the imbalance between public and private spheres when western societies gradually shifted the focus of their social and political concerns to an inner and subjective world, characterized by an overvalued individualism and embodying a political retreat which reflected in cities, democracy, and personal relationships. Accordingly, the family was idealized as a refuge from the society and its threats, described by Iris Young as being: "immorality, artificiality, disorder and danger [...], treasonous conspiracies, illicit sex, crime, deviance and disease" (Young, 1995:264). This resulted, according to Simmel, in an attitude of alienation, or "blasé", which became a characteristic of the inhabitants of large cities, with consequences in everyday life: the inhibition of personal involvements and the overall effort to deny, minimize, contain and prevent the conflict with strangers. Consequently, today the concept of order means lack of contact, reshaping the former meaning of public space.

Reversing cause and effect, Foucault describes modernity as a disciplinary process in which institutions represent their own coercive apparatus. Mentioning architecture specifically as a series of spatial devices, which served as a model for public institutions, Foucault conceives the idea of government in a broader sense, understood as "the conduct of conduct", programs, strategies and techniques of acting on human beings with specific purposes. Thus, the ideology of intimacy which Sennett describes would not be more than a mechanism of governance, which found in the institution *home* a bureaucratic instrument for rational planning, aiming to combine norms and forms to structure an efficient social order.

Henri Roberts' studies, such as *The dwellings of the labouring classes, their arrangement and construction* and those for the World Exhibition held in London between 1850-51, will be examined as paradigmatic of a series of *biopolitic* reform campaigns through a set of moralizations that determined the concept of modern (nuclear) family as we know it today, extending the control of morality and vice, once confined to prisons, schools and churches to housing. Through architecture, the domestic space became a social hybrid field that legitimized the state for the inspection and evaluation of the activities and relationships of the individuals who constitute the population, allowing the social reform not only of the private sphere, but also of the structure of a new public order in civil society. It is precisely the predominant role of the modern construction of the *domus* in the contemporary definition of the *polis* that this paper aims to discuss.

### **The Model Houses as a Treatise on Civility**

Roberts' Model Houses appeared in the English context of the dynamics and tensions brought about by the Industrial Revolution. On the one hand, the

translation of all scientific discoveries, initiated in the previous two centuries, into major technological achievements truly useful instilled the society of the time with a strong confidence in the potential progress of humanity. This wave of optimism was confronted with the decline of the traditional city due to the speed of urbanization that occurred quicker than the city's capacity to monitor and adapt. Furthermore, the growing demand for housing resulted in a huge real estate speculation and, as a consequence, in the proliferation of "cavernous dwellings which mostly lacked individual water supplies or sanitary facilities" (Schoenauer, 2000:295). Under these conditions epidemics spread and, as the number of industrial workers in the poverty line increased, so did delinquency and crime. The growing awareness of the role of the State and its responsibilities in the management of economic progress, essential for the maintenance of political and military supremacy, resulted in deep political and social changes, and in the transformation of the city into a subject of specific policies to control and order an unexpected and chaotic imbalance in public health, safety and moral.

Statistical compilations developed by a series of committees created to investigate the origins of outbreaks of cholera and other maladies, to discover the causes of poverty, unemployment and the growing problem of immorality of the lower classes became the applicant. The results usually emphasized the "absolute necessity of actively and energetically setting about the work of their suppression" (Gavin, 1848:4) to avoid the danger of their spread to the general population. Soon, the deterioration of the poorer classes started to be described as a consequence of the unhealthy conditions in their overcrowded homes, a source of diseases, sexual promiscuity, drunkenness and criminal conspiracy. This conclusion pointed the restructuring of the public domain as dependent upon major dwelling changes, understood as a primary source of all social problems.

The argument behind Roberts' essay, submitted to RIBA as a scientific and comprehensive study of the Model Houses he designed in the previous five years as the honorary architect of the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, the first company to develop model housings for the needy, follows these premises. Simultaneously a critical retrospective, the goal was to define, as he refers, some general principles as well as model layouts that should be taken into account when building dwellings both in towns and country, as they were widely pervaded by the same "evils".

The social conditions, the new technologies available and the urgency for urban renewal offered the ideal setting to demonstrate the ability of architecture to contribute in a decisive way, such as science, to build a fairer society, and also to claim its responsibility, which was not only artistic but especially social and political, to transform humanity and the world in a better place through their own instrumentalization, as could be inferred by Roberts' statement that the highest achievements of architecture were "accomplished through the instrumentality of the working classes, whose skill and persevering industry conduce as much to the fame of the Architect as the steady valour of the soldier does to weave the crown of victory around the brow of his triumphant General" (Roberts, 1853:1). In this sense, architecture became a toll at the service of morality and power, criteria which defined its value and usefulness in a changing world. The interest of the Model Houses relies in the conception of their internal layout with the purpose of confining to the private sphere what used to take place outside, according to the Victorian cult of intimacy, and its political character as the main vehicle for ideological conditioning, which prevails in most western countries, translated in the interior arrangements of dwellings and the (still) growing bourgeoisie fascination with privacy.

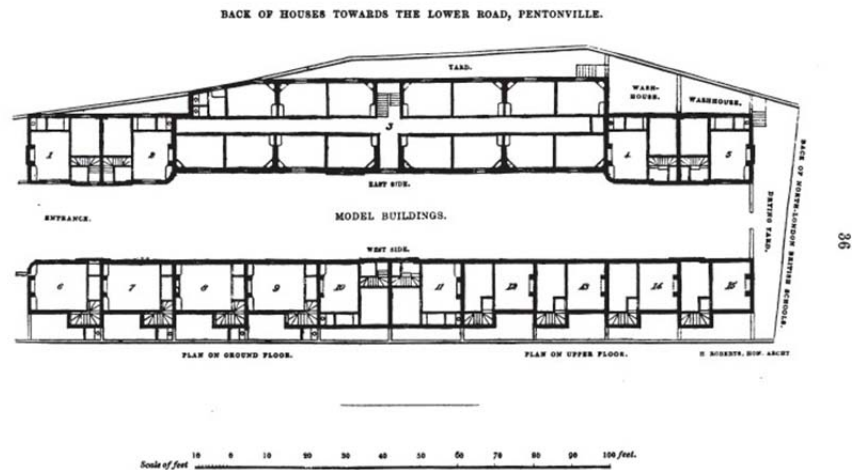


Fig. 1 Henri Roberts, Model Dwellings in Pentonville

From the projects described are worth mentioning the Model Dwellings in Pentonville, and the Model Houses for Families in Bloomsbury, the most important of the Society's buildings according to Roberts. The others were mainly Lodging Houses for single men or single women with communal areas and dormitories, superintended by a director under lodger's rules specified by the architect himself. If the Model of an Improved Lodging House for Working Men in Charles Street was retrospectively considered by Roberts not to be a "model of what a lodging-house ought to be" (Roberts, 1853:8), the Model Lodging House for Working Men in George Street — notwithstanding the fact that more than half of the individual compartments were interior, with no light or ventilation — at the time of its opening, was described as providing all needs while leading to the health and physical comfort, as well as tending to increase mutual respect and elevate the poor to moral and intellectual beings, and the architect's role acclaimed as fundamental to social progress (Evans, 2003:97-98).

The dwellings in Pentonville consisted in a double row of two storey houses to accommodate twenty-three families and thirty single females, representing, therefore something in-between a Lodge House and a House for families, a difference paradigmatic of the discussions that were taken place at the time about the advantages and disadvantages of both. If a Lodge House had considerable benefits from the economic point of view, on the other hand it also allowed more easily the spread of epidemics, while the spatial separation of functioning could be a kind of preventive quarantine contagion in case of disease. In that sense, the project in Bloomsbury proved extremely daring for its time, implementing the separation of families, abolishing the communal areas such as toilets and kitchens, which became incorporated within the private areas. But the specific emphasis on privacy was not meant to improve the freedom of intimacy, but on the contrary, it became a way of public conditioning, in which the institution family, previously understood as a wide organic entity, as described by Donzelot, played a crucial

role. That is, the private became public, not in spatial terms, but in political terms. Thus, according to Habermas, the very notion of family acted as a government mechanism of exclusion that aimed to enclose people within family life, restricting possible conflicts between different groups.

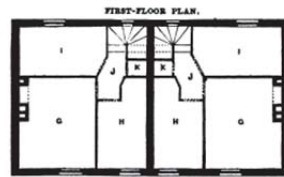
In the following study, Roberts conceives a model-schema for family homes to be presented at the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations* in London, proposing the definitive reconfiguration and reform of housing. The plans were intended to be able to reproduce indefinitely in as many floors as necessary. The novelty of this proposal lied in the separation of families on the one hand, and between family members on the other. The typical connecting doors between various compartments were also eliminated, each having its own to assure the users' privacy. According to the general rules for family dwellings defined in his essay, none had less than three sleeping apartments, each with a distinct access, — for the couple, for the boys and for the girls — as no other arrangement could secure an effective separation of sexes and, therefore, the morality within the family (Roberts, 1853:5). Another innovation was the staircase with an exterior access connecting common landings and leading to the main door of each apartment, allowing greater privacy and autonomy among families. Thus, the Model Houses equalled the treatises on civility, that have been produced since Erasmus, in a graphic way. They are an architectonic mark of a major transformation to the consubstantial notion of modesty, and specifically to the role of housing as an artefact of governance that, according to Nikolas Rose, have come to fill the space between the 'private' lives of the citizens and the 'public' concerns of the rulers, involving the "calculated management of human forces and powers in pursuit of the objectives of the institution". This paradigm of social criticism is characterized by "moral entrepreneurship of professional groups; the medicalization of social problems; the extension of social control; the ideological nature of knowledge claims; the social interest of scientists; the psychological sciences as legitimating areas". Thus the idea of government "refers neither to the actions of a calculating political subject, nor to the operations of bureaucratic mechanisms and personnel". Accordingly, the Model Houses can be understood as a spatial programme for the management and reconstruction of social life, organizing human beings "to reach social and political ends, acting in a calculated manner upon the forces, activities and relation of the individuals that constitute the population" according to the criteria provided for us by others (Rose, 1999:2-5).

The new definition of family was not simply the result of ideological impregnation, but largely the result of transformations carried out in domestic architecture through housing-model programmes according to the values and norms of capitalist society, a product of liberal reform. Until the 19th century, the house of the working class was the hall, which etymologically simply meant "a place covered by a roof", with no divisions, where everything happened: "cooking, undressing, sleeping, working, washing, bathing, defecating, urinating, fornicating, dying and given birth" (Evans, 2003:104). The term hall evolved only to the sense of entry or vestibule in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, "at a time when the doors opened onto the main room of a house". Even the word room was only registered as a separate division in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, and this applied only for the upper classes. Furthermore, the specific distinctions of rooms, such as bathroom or living-room, were first mentioned in 1780 and 1795, respectively, although the word bedroom as evolved from bedchamber since the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Harper, 2001-2012). By the nomenclature in use, such improvements started to take place by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the idea of turning housing more private, as opposed to places whose doors were always open, to reinforce the once almost indistinct boundaries between the domestic and the public spheres, through intentional new spatializations, which attempted to separate rooms and circulations, assigning them different functions,

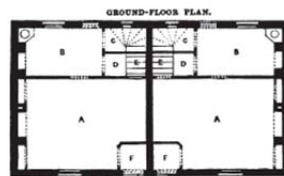
occurred just in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the bedroom would confine sleeping, as well as sex and prostitution; the living-room would avoid the public grouping of marginal crowds, the kitchen looked up for controlling waste and smells, the wash room attempted to turn the body and its biological needs intimate.

FOR WORKMEN'S DWELLINGS IN TOWNS,  
TO BE BUILT IN PAIRS, OR IN A ROW.

PLANS OF A DOUBLE HOUSE FOR ONE FAMILY IN EACH.

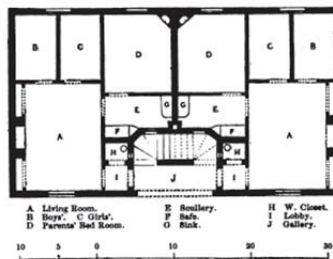


G Parents' Bed Room. I Boys' Bed Room.  
H Girls' Bed Room. J Passage. K Closet.



A Living Room. D Fuel Store.  
B Scullery. E Staircase.  
C Pantry. F Porch.

PLAN of a DOUBLE HOUSE, with FOUR DISTINCT TENEMENTS on Two Floors,  
the Upper one being approached by an Open Staircase.



A Living Room. E Scullery. H W. Closet.  
B Boys'. C Girls'. F Bath. I Lobby.  
D Parents' Bed Room. G Sink. J Gallery.

Fig. 2 Henri Roberts, Model Houses for Workmen in Towns.

**The Model Infiltration**

Eventually, the model, which received the patronage of the Prince, was built for four families, two on each floor, and was later transferred to Kennington Common becoming known as The Prince Consort's Model Cottages. Although they were hailed as a true example of how the family home should be designed, they were rarely equalled in that century. Nevertheless, in many ways they paved the way for further discussions and left a corpus that has imprinted a considerable influence and ascendancy over several generations of architects, marking the research for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Their design is still imprinted in our homes today, increasingly private and specific, following the bourgeoisie model behind moral issues around the preservation of children, the evils of servants, and the moral dangers of lodgers and communal sleeping arrangements, as illustrated by Robert Kerr's *The Gentleman's House*, even if the modernist agenda sought the maximum efficiency of the dwelling reducing its space to the minimum necessary.

Mies, who could be pointed as having been subversive to this model, followed and further improved it in the Weissenhof apartments. He provides apartments of one, two, and three bedrooms, and in that sense he extends the concept breaking up with the idea of lodging houses for singles, anticipating much of the actual discussion about different family types. This argument could be confronted with the degree of spatial uncertainty of Mies' patio houses, namely the absence of a specific space that could be called bedroom, and the specific placement of only a single bed in the composition. However, from our point of view the projects for patio houses were not a research on a housing typology, instead they reveal an interest on structures and archetypal space organizations, repeatable and usable in a wide variety of situations or programmatic activities.

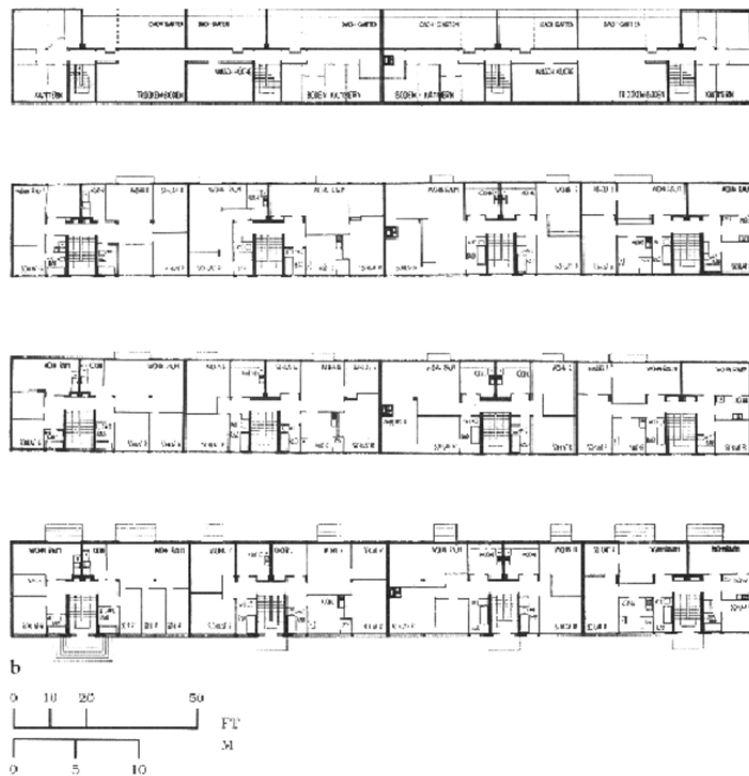


Fig. 3 Mies van der Rohe, Weissenhof apartments, Stuttgart.

Nevertheless, the model houses were mainly a floor plan arrangement, and they did not have a critical impact on the overall design of buildings or in public space until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What they did was to build up a kind of ethical scenario about what the public and private spheres ought to be, assigning them a new role within society. Almost in line with Michel de Certeau's argument about the subversive "ways of using products imposed by a dominant economic order" (Certeau, 1988: xiii), it was only with the advent of modernism that the design of public spaces was definitely challenged, recognizing the absolute necessity of a different production of the urban space along with the domestic by taking further several arguments underlying the Model Houses. In fact, if we look at Le Corbusier's Immeuble Villas' floor plans, the room scheme is very similar, but the increasing importance of the balcony, the *roofscape* and the terrace meant to incorporate the outer space, within the private, confining it to its specific social group. The urban greenery was not meant to be used, but to be enjoyed from the inside of one's home, the roads were for speed commuting, the streets replaced by pathways and housing galleries, or even internal streets as in the Unité d'Habitation.

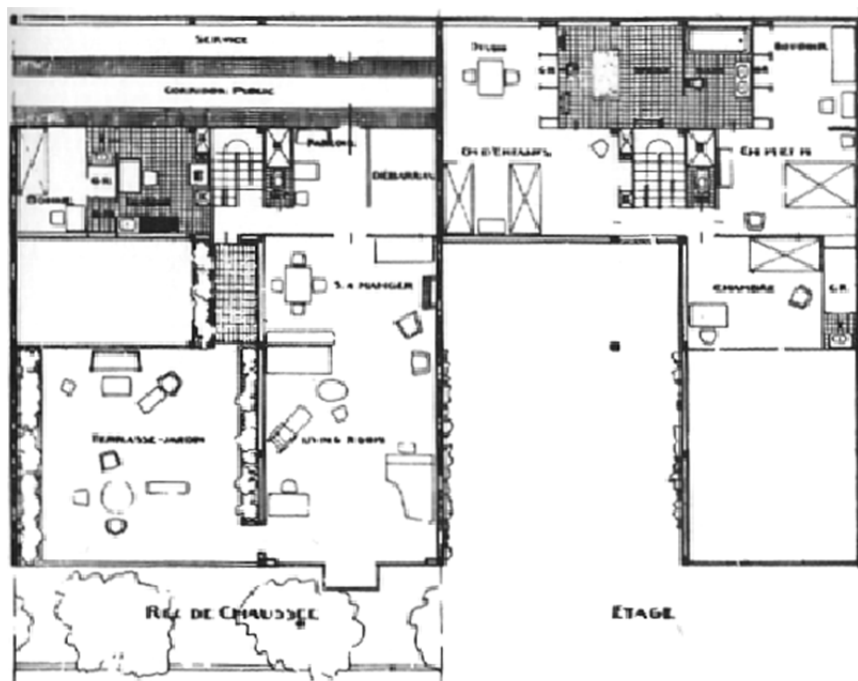


Fig. 4 Le Corbusier, Immeuble Villas' floor plan.

More recently, in Borneo-Sporenburg's Master Plan, West 8 defined a series of rules for the patio dwelling houses, where among others 50% of the surface should be devoted to introverted gardens or patios and the cars should be preferably given a parking space inside the plots in private garages. For Adrian Geuze, "in the hectic contemporary life with hundreds of decisions and fragmented landscapes", the



home should be “safe and defined”, a “base” that “prioritizes enclosure before the view”, introverted and incorporating “nature within instead of exposure to it” (Geuze,2000:10-11).

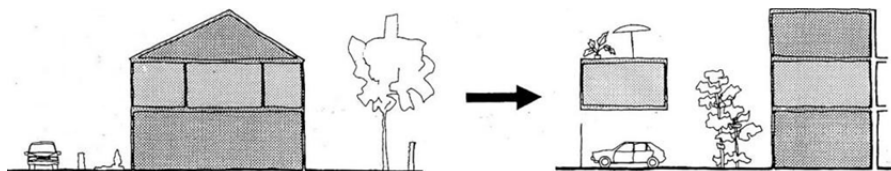


Fig. 5 West 8, conceptual diagram for the patio dwelling houses in Borneo-Sporenburg.

### **Intertwining definitions of public and private, political and social, collective and individual**

The definition of public space has been often, if not always, ambiguous. Hannah Arendt points out, in *The Human Condition*, how the aristotelian concept of *zōo politikon* was mistranslated into latin to *animal socialis*, and further developed into *homo est naturaliter politicus, id est, socialis*, an unconscious replacement of the Greek meaning of political by the social, whose Roman roots do not find an equivalent in Greek. In fact, the human capacity of political organization was not only different but opposite to this natural association founded by the house and the family, whose destruction preceded “the foundation of the polis” (Arendt, 1958:24). To the Greeks, being politic and living in the polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion, the antithesis of the pre-politic and violent family organization subjected to the despotism of the head of the household. The public sphere was the realm of individuality, the only place where one could express what they really were. On the contrary, modern privacy, as described by Sennet, is a threat to the political sphere in its understanding of it as the realm for being social, that is, acting according to the conventions that once regulated impersonal relations in public and, consequently, promoting cosmopolitanism and civility. Paradoxically, the Model Houses attempted to empty the public space in order to make it virtually ordered, safe and moral. They tried to mask existing class struggles and deny the heterogeneous essence of cities, aiming to normalize its members and to avoid spontaneous or unexpected actions. Still according to Arendt, the emergence of the social sphere, which was neither private nor public, is a relatively new phenomenon, whose origin coincided with the modern era. In the contemporary world, the social and political domains are not as different as they used to be, because the domestic and all the issues previously inherent to the private sphere were transformed into collective interests and concerns, assuming a public importance. Even the word privacy, which formerly meant literally that one was deprived of something and therefore could be only a slave or barbarian, is totally the opposite of its contemporary meaning. Additionally, “modern privacy is at least as sharply opposed to the social realm — unknown to the ancients who considered its content a private matter — as it is to the political, properly speaking. The decisive historical fact is that modern privacy in its most relevant function, to shelter the intimate, was discovered as the opposite not to the political sphere but to the social, to which it is therefore more closely and authentically related” (Arendt, 1958:38).

It is interesting to note that the endless discussions around public space over the last decades were not able to define what characterizes a good design for it. However, it is generally accepted that a good public space is one that promotes

social encounter, social bounding, social and cultural interchange. By reflecting on the impact of different housing concepts on the intertwining definitions of public and private, political and social, collective and individual boundaries, we might recognize that in order to discuss public space design, a broader reassessment of its meaning and role is still needed, and its discussion cannot be separated from that of housing.

### **Biography**

Mónica Pacheco (b. Lisbon, 1977) graduated in Architecture from Faculdade de Arquitetura Universidade Técnica de Lisboa (2000). She has completed a Master in Housing and Urbanism at the Architectural Association in London (2004) and is currently finishing her PhD thesis in Architecture at FAL/UTL. She has been assistant professor at ISCTE-IUL since 2004 teaching design studios, and is also a member and researcher of CIAAM and DINÂMIA-CET. She worked in architectural offices in Portugal and the Netherlands, as UnStudio and OMA. Her research interests focus on the correlation of domesticity, housing and urbanism, and specifically in the link between drawing, techniques of spatial conceptualization, the process of architectural design, and questions of representation and governmentality.

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