

Urban inclusion of refugees and vulnerable migrants in Portugal

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Abstract: I will focus on my on-going post-doctoral research *INSEhRE 21. Socio-spatial and housing inclusion of refugees in contemporary Europe: Lessons from the African diaspora in Portugal* (2017-2023). The purpose is to situate the investigation and to discuss its further developments and alignments from a critical and operational standpoint. I will present my theoretical approach based on the key-concepts of ‘the production of space’ and ‘the right to the city’, ‘governmentality’ and ‘multicultural tolerance’. Also, I will refer to the main policies, practices and paradoxes of today’s Portuguese context concerning urban inclusion and cultural inheritances in general and, in particular, for refugees and/or vulnerable migrants moving to the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. Moreover, I will mention the government’s trend of sending these refugees to rural areas and small/medium-size cities, whilst pointing out the crucial role of digital networks in preserving social bonds and building citizenship. As for grass-roots initiatives, I will present the project *Refugi.Arte em Marvila*, boosted by the architectural Cooperative Working with the 99%, and the projects *Orquídea Silvestre* and *Tayybeh*, both spearheaded by the Association Family of Refugees, with different levels of action and effects. I will conclude with a short cross-checked theoretical-empirical analysis.

Keywords: INSEhRE 21; Refugi.Arte em Marvila; Orquídea Silvestre; Tayybeh.

Introduction

My paper cross-checks and analyses the information gathered for my individual post-doctoral research project entitled *INSEhRE 21. Socio-spatial and housing inclusion of refugees in contemporary Europe: Lessons from the African diaspora in Portugal*, during about the first two years of scientific activity, bearing in mind that the project was launched in early 2017 and is estimated to be concluded in 2023 (Viegas, 2016). Against this backdrop, the article focuses on the major political trends and dynamics currently formulated around the subject of socio-spatial and housing inclusion, including of refugees and vulnerable migrants, in Portugal, particularly in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, all the while confronting dominant approaches with three initiatives boosted by organisations of the civil society (hopefully!) countering exclusionary processes. My purpose here is two-fold: (1) to situate the on-going investigation; and, (2) to discuss its future steps and to determine some indispensable adjustments from a reflexive, critical and operative point of view.

For this initial phase of my research I adopted an exploratory and qualitative methodological approach, based on an interdisciplinary, although architectural-rooted, bibliographical review, theoretical and of empirical studies. Also based on fieldwork, including direct observations in particular neighbourhoods of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area and semi-structured interviews to privileged actors: grass-root communities, representatives of the state and immigrants from the Middle East and Africa. Furthermore, I participated in a myriad of national and international initiatives debating and informing of the urban and access to housing situation in Portugal and Europe, and in activities related to refugees, forced migrations and border regimes. Moreover, I started the production of an iconographic roadmap consisting of photographs and maps. For presenting my preliminary achievements I structured this article as follows: (1) the first section dedicated to (re)examining today's major policies, paradigms and contradictions concerning (a) urban and housing issues, (b) cultural inheritances (and material heritages) and (c) the socio-spatial inclusion of refugees and vulnerable migrants in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. At the same time pointing de-concentration strategies to rural areas and small/medium-size cities of Portugal, with digital social networks playing a determinant function in the building of (a complete form of) citizenship; and, (2) a second section referring to the grass-root projects *Refugi.Arte em Marvila*, *Orquídea Silvestre* and *Tayybeh*, these initiatives emphasising both structural difficulties and small and/or local scale opportunities and accomplishments.

Framework

I will now present the theoretical and empirical framework of the research project *INSEhRE 21. Socio-spatial and housing inclusion of refugees in contemporary Europe: Lessons from the African diaspora in Portugal*. Lefebvre's ([1968] 2009; [1974] 2000) well-known publications of 'the production of space' and 'the right to the city' structure my thoughts specially regarding spatial practices and their materialisations, and the building of (a complete form of) citizenship, as collectively they contextualise and differentiate the production of spaces of representation, i.e. commodifiable, with exchange value, from the production of representational spaces, i.e. with use value. At the same time, these two concepts underline ideas of (over)power, control and discrimination, as illuminated by Foucault ([1977/1978] 2008) and Žižek's (1997) words of 'governmentality' and 'multicultural tolerance', since they point to paradoxical processes of acceptance-rejection and of 'racism with distance'. Together, these notions provide a critical conceptual lens for the analysis of socio-spatial inclusion in general terms and for refugees in particular, as they help deconstructing assorted aspects of the question all the while suggesting specific levels and types of action. I presented a draft of this theoretical-methodological essay – *Spaces of Inclusion in Contemporary Europe* –, at the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) Annual Congress' 17 (Viegas, 2017a).

It is, thus, with this analytical tools that I started looking at the problem of the socio-spatial and housing inclusion of refugees in contemporary Europe, specifically in Portugal, also having as reference the reception of migrants moving from Portuguese-speaking African countries since the emancipation of Guinea (1973), and Angola, Mozambique, São Tomé e Príncipe and Cape Vert (1975). This two-fold orientation favours a deeper analysis of the subjects here under scrutiny – access to space and housing, benefits of urbanisation and the building of (a complete form of) citizenship –, bearing in mind issues (once again) linked to relations of power, such as those accompanying post-colonial and economic matters, discrimination practices, and its physical

expression and consequences. In effect, by adopting a historical-geographical view I provide a privileged starting point for the analysis of the current narratives, policies and practices of the Portuguese government regarding the urban inclusion of refugees in light of the state's principal responses to the urban and housing inclusion of other populations in need, for example African migrants and their descendants, over approximately the last forty years. My article for the Journal *Espaços Vividos, Espaços Construídos (EVEC)* (Viegas, 2018a) opens the discussion around this connection while creating an elementary referential of analysis concerning refugee camps and targeted housing *versus* self/co-produced and rationalised spaces, also launching an investigation bridge to what recently became the New Generation of Housing Policies' political goal and conjectures.

Specifically regarding refugees, the so called 2015 migrants crisis and with it, the European Relocation and/or Resettlement Programmes, introduced new dynamics and challenges to the Portuguese government and the non-state system, this including central and/or local structures activated for the reception and integration of the newcomers. From the Lisbon City Hall to the Plataforma de Acolhimento de Refugiados (PAR) and/or several religious congregations (Serviço Jesuíta aos Refugiados, etc.), numerous were the actors involved in the uncontrolled process of receiving these refugees in a country structurally unprepared for this task, even if the official narratives were, as they still are, of extraordinary openness and support for the cause and persons. Hence, the results of this operation depend(ed) of the room of manoeuvre, capacity of action and primary intentions of those involved in the process, such as technicians, civil society, church members, etc. Also from the limited capacity of response of the Foreigners and Borders Service (SEF). At the same time, the High Commissioner for Migrations (ACM) assumed its important institutional role with enthusiastic support for the integration of refugees and new assistance structures were created, e.g. the Support Centre for the Integration of Refugees (NAIR). What is more, former refugees residing in Portugal created grass-roots associations adopting an exemplary role of care leaders, specifically in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area that received the majority of refugees: according to an interview with a technician (9th April 2019), the Temporary Reception Centre for Refugees (CATR) of the municipality of Lisbon received close to 250 individuals since 2016, out of a total of 1,520 refugees coming with the European Relocation Programme (ACM, 2017:6); In its turn, the Refugee Reception Centre (CAR) of Bobadela, located in a periphery of Lisbon, managed by the Portuguese Refugee Council (CPR), oversaw more than 500 spontaneous asylum seekers in January 2019. Here the infrastructure is saturated and, at the same time, many migrants face extraordinary difficulties as are not legally eligible for obtaining the refugee status (Poulet, 2019).

Urban inclusion

Concerning urban and housing inclusion in general and, in particular, for refugees and vulnerable migrants moving to the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, I will shortly refer to the primary policies, practices and paradoxes of today's Portuguese context as follows: (1) starting with a bird's-eye view on the main exclusionary paradigms, namely the urban renewal processes, some resettlements and forced evictions of those inhabiting in other's property; (2) moving to the topic of cultural inheritances and the building of an ideal(ised) urban society and space, while cross-checking this subject with those of housing struggles; (3) finishing with the government's present-day trend of sending the refugees to rural areas and small/medium-size cities, while stressing the role of digital

networks in preserving family and/or social bonds and building citizenship. In this context, I will firstly refer to the access to adequate housing by middle-income and low-income populations of different cultural and/or ethnic backgrounds, taking into account the transformation of the urban society in progress. Secondly, I will speak of the normative narratives sustaining the contemporary western world's common perception of cultural heritage(s) and material inheritances, all the while supporting the forging of an ideal(ised) urban society and space. Finally, I will refer to the dynamic urban-rural whilst emphasising the attractive features of the benefits of urbanisation, even under difficult conditions.

Exclusionary paradigms in Portugal, particularly in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, such as urban renewal operations, resettlements and forced evictions, tend to be followed by resistance performances and/or the counter-actions of those denouncing and fighting against dominant interventions and their fierce effects. The dynamics are tangled demanding for an operative and emphatic line of action based on strong political responses that are, on the one hand, capable of analysing the major tendencies of the actual forces in charge, all the while anticipating new neoliberal-driven outcomes and, on the other hand, strong enough to listen and include the revindications of those in need. Currently, in Portugal, the Socialist Government in power is rehearsing a New Generation of Housing Policies, with different programmes, purposes and beneficiaries. At the same time, the parliament discusses versions for a New Housing Law, all proposed by left-wing parties. It is, in fact, an extraordinary political moment regarding housing issues in Portugal. Nonetheless, despite all inclusive narratives and ideological intentions, great paradoxical exclusionary movements tend to consolidate since they reproduce a myriad of socio-spatial inequalities intrinsic to the prevailing neo-liberal system. Yet, both the reading of the main examples and contradictions, and the recent political actions attached, are important to frame the refugee's urban and housing current and awaited status, for being aware of common problems and possible solutions, as recently explored in the article called *Access to housing by all and for all? Paradigms and paradoxes of the Portuguese actuality* (Viegas, 2019a in press).

Cultural inheritances (and material heritages) are also important entrances for conceptualising refugees' conditions, as they provide us with a broader perception of the western world's common self-representations, social and spatial. In fact, these inheritances tend to stress the production of political spaces for the building of 'strategic-oriented' new legacies all the while neglecting or rejecting the production of social spaces based on everyday life practices, these general occurring according to particular necessities, cultures and/or habits. Even (or especially) if these routines support ground-breaking narratives of unique heritage(s) (Viegas, 2019b). Given this worldwide tendency and the very specific Portuguese political moment concerning the access to adequate housing, I question: (1) Which plan is Portugal adopting for the transformation of its ideal urban society and space, and for this matter, how is the country responding to the 2015-onwards (very much) complex European migration issues? Moreover, (2) what spaces are being forged for the deprived communities, particularly in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area? And, (3) what characteristics differ refugees from other migrants and/or social groups in need? As far as I understood (Viegas, 2018b), we are witnessing controversial dynamics as, in general terms, the official narratives of inclusion and openness do not counterbalance the dominant exclusionary logics. What is more, political messages on the subject of refugees do not focus on housing issues as a primary choice albeit, paradoxically, they emphasise the role of the migrants as users-consumers in major urban centres, such as Lisbon.

Small/medium-size cities and rural areas became the principal alternative for distributing and receiving these refugees and numerous were the actors involved in the processes of having the migrants around the country. Yet, difficulties regarding this strategy were manifest, namely the isolation amongst family members, including parents, siblings and/or adult sons, and related communities – much of this partially filled by the use of social networks on digital platforms by closed groups –, lack of opportunities and great dependency of the host institutions and their technicians, including regarding jobs and housing opportunities. Some were supplied for the same entity, as will remain for a long time. In its turn, in Lisbon, access to housing problems amongst refugees are now emerging or becoming visible, particularly after the conclusion of the initial 18 months of institutional and financial support, as guaranteed by the European programmes. These occur because many refugees have problems with learning the Portuguese, something considered by them as the ‘key’ of integration. Accordingly, employment opportunities amongst the formal sectors are very limited, and with short earnings. Due to cultural and/or religious aspects, many women do not usually work outside home, hence the families that depend on the mens’ income now have to adapt. Complexifying these situations are the neo-liberal market-driven urban tendencies and their urban paradigms of the city renewal, rehousing and forced evictions, by all means interfering in refugees’ daily lives, some also being targeted with racism and/or xenophobia. Given all these difficulties half of these refugees illegally left the country, some going to the northern European countries, as Germany, while others returned to their original at war and/or devastated African or Middle-East countries.

Grass-root initiatives

Regarding the initiatives boosted by organisations of the civil society (hopefully, not surely) countering exclusionary urban policies, I will concisely present three case studies as they were explored in my field work: (1) the project *Refugi.Arte em Marvila*, supported by the architectural Cooperative Working with the 99%, an art-based inclusive shelter for refugees, economic migrants and low-income residents planned for a municipal under-used heritage facility in Marvila (Lisbon), the Marquês de Abrantes Palace; and the projects (2) *Orquídea Silvestre*, and (3) *Tayybeh* both promoted by the Association Family of Refugees, started by Syrian refugees in Portugal. The first project is an ecovillage and a multicultural community space to be built in the country side of Portugal. The second project is an entrepreneurship that seeks to promote inclusion through the celebration of Syrian cuisine in eastern Lisbon. Collectively, these three case studies provide an overview of the dynamics created around the building of innovative (re)settlements by (and for) refugees and migrants, in the capital and in rural areas, as together they sustain the importance of forging ground-breaking approaches based on, and promoting, a complete form of socio-spatial emancipation. They also stress the great value of civil society, e.g. the local people, refugees or migrants, in promoting inclusionary processes.

Refugi.Arte em Marvila, was conceived in 2017, so as to help with the revitalisation of the low income Marvila Street and surrounding areas, namely the housing neighbourhoods and the disused industrial areas near the river, through the rehabilitation of the Marquês de Abrantes Palace, as marked in Figure 1. It was also thought to empower local communities, vulnerable migrants and refugees, all the while promoting spaces of encounter between these actors as a strategy for curbing down segregationist and/or xenophobic tendencies. The long term presence of the Cooperative Working with the 99% in Marvila Street for two participatory experiences in the neighbourhood

(2014-2017), co-financed through the Municipal Programme for Neighbourhoods and Priority Intervention Zones (BipZip), enabled the building of trust with local residents. Together with a multidisciplinary team they actively participated in and appropriated the shaping of this art-based inclusive shelter-to-be. However, despite the recent international recognition of the project by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and UN-Habitat, under the scope of the Mediterranean City to City Project (MC2CM), as reported by Cabannes *et al.* (2018), it has not been launched. On the one hand, the funding request for the implementation of this project (Viegas, 2017b) was denied by the municipality. On the other hand, the City Council prepared a master project for the district with European funding, overlapping local interests and intentions.



Figure 1. Marvila Street and surrounding areas (Viegas, 2017).

Orquídea Silvestre, was launched in mid-2018, and is an ecovillage and a multicultural community space(-to-be) built in the country side of Portugal. The original location was a 134 hectares rural land situated in Aljustrel called Morgado, as marked in Figure 2. Currently the project is considering another placement in Crato, at the barragem das Nascentes, in a close dialogue with the festival Waking Life. The Association Family of Refugees wants to promote inclusion for refugees and migrants, whilst repopulating and revitalising the interior of Alentejo, at the same time communicating and interacting with local people. The first phase of the project concerns the pioneering stage and includes finding access to sustainable infrastructures (e.g. energy and water supply, Syrian vernacular housing – earthen domes, etc.) and food self-sufficiency for 5 persons (refugees and activists) through the use of local resources and the engagement in everyday life activities. The second phase of the project, extended to accommodate 12 persons, considers the diversification and amplification of rural routines aiming at the economic sustainability. The last phase, for 24 persons, targets new forms of entrepreneurship such as ecotourism. The success and timings of this project depends on the capacity of action and the room of manoeuvre of the

Association Family of Refugees taking into account legal and funding difficulties, among others, as well as the involvement of potential partners, such as government agencies, private institutions, etc.

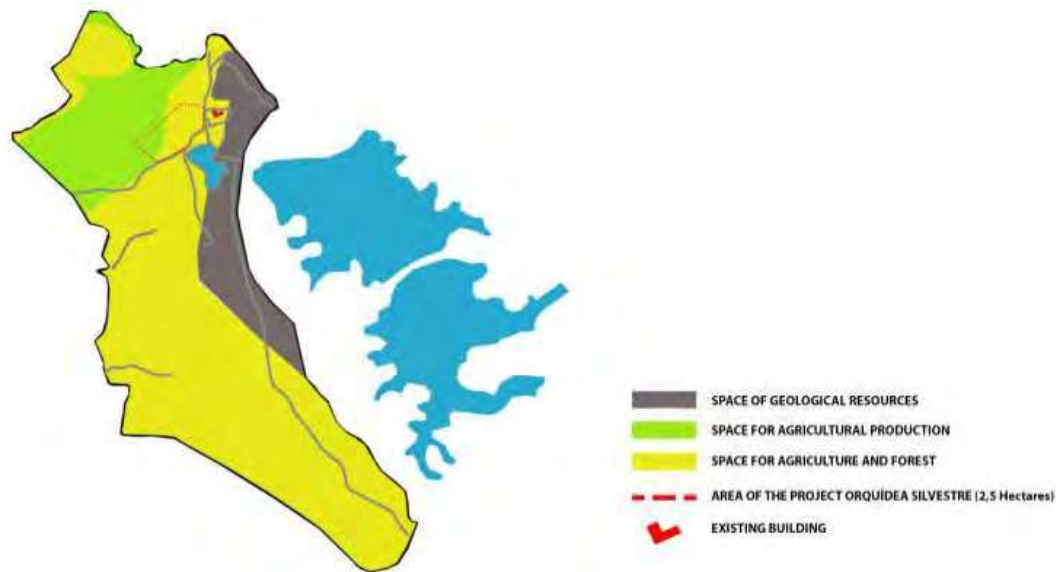


Figure 2. Morgado in Aljustrel, unscaled (Viegas and Velasco, 2018).

Tayybeh was launched in 2017, first as a catering service and later (in early 2019) evolving to a restaurant. The name is Syrian and means both delicious and kind. The project began as a start-up aiming to support Syrian refugee women to create (self-)employment opportunities and, at the same time, to present the Syrian cuisine and culture to the Portuguese society (Figure 3). During the first and second phases of the process, Ramia Abdalghani, with her husband Alaa Ghunim, invested personal time, material and financial resources to develop this entrepreneurship, also to assure the continuity of the project independently of the lack of institutional support and funds. As a caterer, *Tayybeh* served numerous events, some cultural and academy related. Presently the restaurant is established in Moscavide, a consolidated medium and/or low-income housing neighbourhood in eastern Lisbon, bordering the highly expensive urban area Parque das Nações, with its workers and inhabitants. The restaurant was mostly decorated through exchanging services with other start-ups identified online. Take away and oriental cooking school are additional services provided or in preparation. Albeit these refugees' many personal difficulties, *Tayybeh* is functioning being a fine example of emancipation associated to strong dynamics of socio-spatial inclusion trough food, with its recent large media coverage being important for its success along with the quality of the service (Viegas 2019c).



Figure 3. Alaa, Ramia and their co-workers at the restaurant *Tayybeh* (Viegas, 2019).

Analysis and future steps

The article situates the project *INSEhRE 21. Socio-spatial and housing inclusion of refugees in contemporary Europe: Lessons from the African diaspora in Portugal* as I identify the dominant narratives and the production of political spaces associated to the access to urban space and/or housing for, and by, several sociocultural and economic strata. Future steps of the study must necessarily focus on a more profound exploration and analysis of the refugees' contemporary conditions. Besides, from another point of view, I emphasise the participation of civil society regarding the refugees' problems through the presentation of three case-studies of emancipatory practices or efforts. Those must be accompanied and others should be identified. These cases will contribute to interpret the Portuguese 'urban question', bearing in mind both political and grass-roots approaches, also discussing operational aspects. Given this framework, emancipation *versus* dependency patterns amongst these migrants are crucial dimensions concerning the right to the city, since the access to urban benefits (housing, employment, health, etc.) is not, *per se*, the path for the co-building of (a complete form of) citizenship. Here, the role of digital networks could be further explored taking into account the denoted urban-rural dynamics. These could be examined as particularities of the system, since each group of actors and geography have specific routines, to contrast with activities in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area.

From a much more specific point of view, case studies as the project *Refugi.Arte em Marvila* contribute to a broader perception of the role of architects, with other technicians, as privileged mediators between local actors and the political arena, taking into account different strategies – top-down and bottom up – for achieving the same goal, *i.e.* socio-spatial and housing inclusion of refugees in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. Also, *Refugi.Arte em Marvila* underlines polarised understandings of the use of cultural heritages under the political umbrella of inclusion. As for *Tayybeh*, since it is located in a particular eastern part of Lisbon, it may provide relevant information regarding the socio-spatial and cultural dynamics built around the initiative, as well as inform about small scale interventions penetrating the society. In its turn, the project *Orquídea Silvestre* follows the strategy of the Portuguese government regarding the repopulation of small/medium-size cities and rural areas, even if these decentralisation trends do not follow global movements for the large cities. This case study could be exemplary for analysing the reception of self-empowered refugees and vulnerable migrants in specific rural areas, also for comprehending the difficulties attached and the ways to overpass them. The construction of rural housing – e.g. earthen domes of the Syrian-type –, different from the Portuguese, and the building of infrastructures are also of interest for the project *INSEhRE 21*.

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