THE “ILHAS”

Typical of Oporto the “Ilhas”, as they are known, are the main form of workers’ housing associated with industrialization in the second half of the century XIX. The physical and

constructive solution of the “ilhas” is strongly linked to the city’s characteristics and are therefore very different from worker neighborhoods that have emerged in other European cities, and even in other Portuguese cities.

The city of Oporto grew within the Gothic walls into narrow streets that lead to several health problems. In the second half of the XVIII century, estimating the continued population growth of the city, it started extending outside the walls, creating wider streets, larger lots and larger squares. But the city did not have the expected growth in the first decades of the XIX century. There was even a certain population decline because of political factors such as the French invasion (1807-1813) and the Civil War (1832-1834). It is only during the second half of the century XIX, with the growth of the industry and with the decline of agriculture in the northern fields of Portugal, that you start to see a substantial increase in population. Between 1864 and 1900 the population of Porto doubled. The mass construction of “Ilhas” occurred in that time, emphasizing the social differentiation of spaces and thus the transformation of the urban space.

UNIQUE ARCHITECTURE OF PORTO – THE “ILHAS”

With some influence of the British, who already had working-class neighborhoods whose homes had only one front, the so-called back to back houses, the builders created an unique architecture for Porto– the “Ilhas” and knew how to take advantage of the business opportunity by combining the strong demand for cheap accommodation (aimed at industrial workers) with the spatial characteristics of the city.

The typical Porto building was approximately 5.5 m wide and 30,0m long. The owners of these lots, who were often also the owners of the factories, built their houses in the first 30m. They then opened a gateway on the ground floor level of their homes to the street behind it and the remaining 70m were divided into several houses, all served by this same very narrow pedestrian street.

Each house (from 9mto 16m each – inhabited by families of up to 10 members) consisted of a small living room, a tiny bedroom and kitchen with no water supply nor sanitary conditions. Sanitary facilities were usually common to all homes and were located at the back of the street. The houses had a door and a window open to the living room. The other spaces were unhealthy and without natural ventilation. Whole families lived in these houses without the minimal conditions of habitability and coomonly kept their animals inside the house.

This semi-private area of ​​”Ilhas” generated a climate of mutual care among its inhabitants. In fact the “Ilhas” always functioned as a place of urban integration for newcomers. The fact that the houses had such small areas made people use semi-public spaces as an extension of their private space, since the constructions were of very poor quality (no isolation and lack of privacy). Also the fact that the toilets were outside and common to the various houses reinforced this lack of intimacy of families.

With the threat of epidemics (cholera and bubonic plague) rulers started feeling concerned with health issues. This led to the emergence of revolutionary ideas and a strong mobilization for strikes and protests. In the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the XX century, in part to solve the health and social problems of the “ilhas” there were plans to move the most disadvantaged populations to the most peripheral areas of the city, leaving the valuable city center for the bourgeoisie. However these intents had no great consequence and this “hidden city” that lurked inside the blocks has persisted until

today, especially in the Bonfim parishes and Campanhã, where the industrialization process was more intense and where, even today , lies part of the poorest population of Porto. Nowadays the Municipality is starting to reveal a true interest in the recovery of this unique architectures of Oporto – the “Ilhas”,thus valuing them as identity heritage of the city of Oporto.

Questions

1) What are “ilhas”?

The ilhas are houses where the workers who worked in the second half of the 19th century lived. The ilhas the same cosntrucction characyeristics as the city but very different from those of the neirborhoods that emerged in European cities and in other Portuguese cities.

2) When and why did “ilhas” appear?

Ilhas appear in the second half of the XVIII century. At first the city was in a very bad condition with narrow streets and it was not until the second half of the 18th century that the city was expanding and making its streets and squares wider. But the city did not have the expected growth in the first decades of the XIX century. There was even a certain population decline because of political factors such as the French invasion (1807-1813) and the Civil War (1832-1834). Between 1864 and 1900 the population of Porto doubled. The mass construction of “Ilhas” occurred in that time.

3) What are their most common characteristics?

The builders created a unique architectura for Porto: the “ilhas”. The typical Porto building was approximately 5.5 m wide and 30,0m long. The owners of these lots, who were often also the owners of the factories, built their houses in the first 30m. They then opened a gateway on the ground floor level of their homes to the street behind it and the remaining 70m were divided into several houses, all served by this same very narrow pedestrian street.

4) Do the “Ilhas” still exist?

Yes, the Ilhas still exist. Because the are a united community, they have been living like this, through a long time.

5) What do you expect to see in an “ilha” in Porto? Can you describe how do you imagine one?

I expect to see in an Ilha in Porto, a tiny town, made of tiny houses with a few people, in an Island.

Very old houses, neglected. Talking about the people; I imagine they are traditional people,they have traditional and closed mentality, traditional clothes of Porto, with shared work and mutual help, in community.

6) What kind of intervention do you think can be done in order to rehabilitate the “ilhas”?

It could be: Have a better cleaning service on the streets, fix the streets, the roads, give a better physical appearance to the Ilhas in general. Give them a better communication with the rest of the world.

Build hospitals, for example: send them sanitary material, create groups of nurses and doctors who voluntarily accept to go and work in those hospitals.