Against Le Corbusier’s opposition of architecture and revolution one may instead ask whether architecture—as a process rather than as an object—can itself be a form of revolution. The SAAL Process convincingly answered this question in the affirmative. An offshoot of Portugal’s 1974 Carnation Revolution, the Serviço Ambulatório de Apoio Local (Local Ambulatory Support Service) was enacted by a decree of the provisional government on 6 August 1974. While SAAL was a direct consequence of the revolution, it sprang from research on housing conditions in the 1960s conducted by architects Nuno Portas and Fernando Távora. Instituted during Portas’s nine months as secretary of state for housing and urban planning, SAAL had dried up with the revolution) and students (whose universities had been closed), SAAL brigades collaborated with local residents’ associations, and women often played a leading role in negotiating their future housing. Active from August 1974 to October 1976, the brigades included approximately one thousand people working with almost forty thousand families on 170 projects. The brigades’ goal was not to design formally inventive architecture—although that often resulted—but rather to produce the physical conditions for social mobility: decent housing as a prerequisite, and affirmation, of democratic citizenship.

The exhibition sought to reflect this heterodoxy through the selective choice of ten SAAL interventions as case studies. The variety was noticeable. While northern SAAL brigades centered on Porto intervened mostly within the historical city, those in Lisbon were often charged with urbanizing peripheral sites in the face of advancing sprawl. In Porto, the SAAL interventions dealt with ihlas (islands), informal neighborhoods often hidden behind formal buildings on major thoroughfares. The ihlas were sites of great social solidarity, but they were also ghettos to which the poor were consigned. Their central location within Porto’s urban fabric led to dual demands from their inhabitants: for the right to decent housing—beautifully summarized in the slogan Casas sim, barracas não (Houses yes, shacks no)—and for the right to the city. All too often the (inevitably partial) satisfaction of the first has led to the denial of the second, with the poor shunted to the urban periphery. Projects such as Álvaro Siza Vieira’s for São Victor (for which he became well known internationally) and Sérgio Fernandez’s at Leal, both in Porto, exemplify the elegant formal possibilities that can result from a serious consideration of these human rights. Perhaps inevitably, the brigades completed only a few of their planned projects before their abolition in October 1976; while their artisanal localism was in tune with the revolution’s (often anarchic) sprouting of participatory democracy, it was ill suited for Portugal’s new era of representative government.

The exhibition’s focus was on SAAL’s participative process and not its relatively modest—although often impressive—built production. The reproduction of large diazotype drawings (blueprints) supported this curatorial decision, as did the display of presentation boards handmade by architects to communicate their sociological analyses of the communities with which they were collaborating (Figure 1). These elements clearly conveyed a sense of the banal tools and techniques of design meeting the heady environment of revolutionary Portugal.

A particular challenge was to depict the agency of the local residents within their all-too-brief moment of empowerment. While exhibition visitors who did not speak Portuguese were limited in their ability to absorb the surviving minutes of neighborhood meetings or the content of newsletters distributed by the residents’ associations, the evocative graphic identities produced by the brigades for the associations testified not only to the architects’ commitment but also to their awareness of the revolutionary power of imagery. Patient viewers profited from a series of films, produced by the Serralves Foundation, that documented events at which architects, administrators, and local residents met again in 2014 to discuss SAAL. While tinged with nostalgia, the testimonies within these films provided visitors with the exhibition’s closest contact with the emancipatory energy of the process, as well as the innumerable anecdotes it produced.

The SAAL Process joined a number of varied and yet thematically consistent exhibitions presented in the past decade at the Canadian Centre for Architecture under the guidance of its director, Mirko Zardini, and chief curator, Giovanna Borasi. These exhibitions have explored themes such as the agency of nonarchitects to shape their environments and the radical openings that moments of crisis offer for rethinking existing structures. Actions: What You Can Do with the City (2008) celebrated another form of the “right to the city”: the right to shape it. Against the dominant ideologies of CIAM functionalism and the omnipotent planner, Actions presented bottom-up, small-scale strategies for urban inhabitation, from freecycling to seed bombing. The place of the architect within such practices was ambiguous; the most compelling examples used design expertise as a tactic for maneuvering around the boundaries of legality, performing a radical, if not overtly illegal, jujitsu with civic regulations.
The potential latent in the moment of crisis was the subject of the CCA’s 1973: *Sorry, Out of Gas* (2007). The remarkable panoply of alternatives that received mainstream attention during the 1973 oil crisis, from carless Sundays and efficient insulation to off-the-grid communes, was rapidly dismissed as “utopian” once the flow of oil resumed. However, as the exhibition poignantly argued, these alternatives remain at our disposition today, suggesting that the answers to our current ecological emergencies lie not in new Apollo programs (a metaphor as absurd and unhelpful for global environmentalism as “another Munich” is for international diplomacy) but rather in the reinstatement of previously rejected futures.

*The SAAL Process* left its viewers with two lingering questions: First, how can architecture constitute itself as an ethical discipline able to deploy its representative and instrumental functions in support of underrepresented publics? The challenge is to develop forms of participatory design capable of empowering the powerless rather than further entrenching vested interests. Second, are moments of revolutionary upheaval—the very power vacuums that make processes such as SAAL possible—so inherently unstable that the architecture created within them cannot be sustained? Must Thermidor inevitably follow the fall of the Bastille? And if so, what can truly participatory architectural processes achieve within the short periods of time allowed to them?

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**Related Publications**


**Notes**


2. Ibid., 28.


5. As Antoine Picon notes, utopias seem unrealistic only after they have been rejected. Antoine Picon, *Les saint-simoniens: Raison, imaginaire et utopie* (Paris: Belin, 2002), 27.