



MAUMAUS

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Impossible Task (5), Walks in Alta de Lisboa

ALTA DE LISBOA refers to an urban planning-area in the north-east of Lisbon. This area is approximately three by one and a half kilometres wide. Geographically, the approximately 375-hectares of ALTA DE LISBOA are bounded by the Eixo Norte-Sul city highway to the west and by Avenida Santos-Castro and Humberto Delgado Airport to the north and east. In the south, the planning area closes with the Avenida Marechal Craveiro Lopes, the Lisbon Metro workshops, the Quinta das Conchas Park and the Avenida Mourao-Ferreira. ALTA DE LISBOA mainly includes areas of the villages of Charneca and Musgueira in the Lisbon outskirts as well as grounds of the Quinta Grande and Quinta da Musgueira estates, former semi-agricultural areas which also served as local recreation areas and excursion destinations for Lisbon citizens in the early 20th century. The planning of ALTA DE LISBOA started in 1984. The urbanisation plan was approved by the Lisbon City Council in 1996 and confirmed in 1997. In 1998 it was ratified by the Portuguese Council of Ministers. The work on ALTA DE LISBOA was supposed to be completed in 2015, but due to economic problems - in particular the global financial crisis of 2008/2009 - came to a standstill. However, the plan has not yet been abandoned.

1. I discovered ALTA DE LISBOA through an invitation from Jürgen Bock, the director of the INDEPENDENT STUDY PROGRAMME MAUMAUS. Jürgen Bock had invited me to an exhibition opening in Lumiar Cité, the exhibition space belonging to Maumaus. This exhibition space is located in ALTA DO LUMIAR, a part of the Lumiar district of Lisbon that is included in the ALTA DE LISBOA planning area.

Following Jürgen Bock's instructions, I got off the subway at Lumiar subway station. The subsequent twenty-minute walk to the exhibition space was a short but impressive educational journey through an urban space that was dissolving in both time and space. The same can be said about the two hikes through ALTA DE LISBOA that I later undertook - each lasting several hours - and also about the numerous car rides along the EIXO CENTRAL, the main traffic artery of the planned new urban area, and its side streets.

The further away my hikes took me from the subway station in the direction of ALTA DE LISBOA, the more the closed urban landscape of Lisbon seeped into the remains of fields, gardens, abandoned village streets and country lanes. And these remnants of villages or of an agricultural

area were simultaneously parcelled out and overrun by a new, suburban spatial organisation - although this spatial structure was not yet completed and in use, apart from a few streets.

So, I wandered through a simultaneously urban, suburban, and peri-urban landscape, in which it was never clear how the individual landscape structures overlapped and on which spatial, historical, or temporal level I was moving at a given point in time. It was also impossible to determine where abandoned qualities of space gave way to structures that were about to emerge, but which were not yet defining the space. And it was impossible to precisely note where those structures then in turn dissolved into qualities that - although nearly imperceptible at the time - would define urban space in the future.

At the same time, it seemed as if all structural development in Alta de Lisboa had come to a standstill. It seemed as if disappearance and emergence in ALTA DE LISBOA did not represent processes, but extra- temporal states. They were frozen – like the absence of any molecular motion at 0° Kelvin.

In addition to the spatial and temporal blurring of the spaces I wandered through, I also experienced how the layout of ALTA DE LISBOA opened more and more to the east and north-east and simultaneously dissolved both geographically and structurally, until it completely disintegrated on the ridge along the Humberto Delgado Airport. On this ridge, which is destined to become the heart of ALTA DE LISBOA, the urban space is only suggested by an orthogonal network of streets, whose main route, the approximately 3 km long EIXO CENTRAL, is intended to form the backbone of ALTA DE LISBOA. However, this EIXO CENTRAL runs almost exclusively through levelled empty areas fenced in with wire mesh and overgrown with grass. In their current state, these empty spaces are a non-space, that is not subject to any visible use. Nevertheless, the empty areas are visibly regularly mowed and kept up to maintain a stable visual appearance.

From their maintenance, one can conclude that, despite their inaccessibility, the empty spaces are given attention - and importance - although there is no discernible reason for this effort, except perhaps to demonstrate the presence of some sort of desire for order. However, this desire for order does not seem to pursue any apparent purpose other than the order itself. Due to this purposeless attempt to maintain appearances, the empty spaces are not just a form of non-space or junk space. They become a pure void whose temporality disappears in permanent visual uniformity.

The traffic spaces of the EIXO CENTRAL, on the other hand, are completely different. They are used by cars and equipped with all the components of an urban street network. There are benches, bike stands, traffic signs and bus stops for potential pedestrians. Thus, the traffic spaces are, in their equipment and their viability, in a state of spatial and structural functionality. And in this functionality, they are integrated into the passage of time. However, since the fencing of the empty spaces is transparent, their non- temporal nature and emptiness, and the temporality and spatial

functionality of the road network dissolve into each other and thus neutralize one another. The empty spaces and the traffic areas jointly form a bubble of awkwardness and “spacelessness” that encompasses the entire EIXO CENTRAL. And since it is the EIXO CENTRAL that was designed to give meaning to ALTA DE LISBOA, this phenomenon of dissolution radiates throughout the entire planning area.

2. In addition to the observations described above, the quality of ALTA DE LISBOA as a non-space in a bubble of Non-Time is based on another problem: ALTA DE LISBOA is a paradox, both in the ideological and theoretical specifications of its planning and in their spatial and temporal implementation. This paradox is already introduced in the foreword of the programmatic book ALTA DE LISBOA - A MEMÓRIA E O FUTURO and is more precisely developed in its first chapter, “O Plano de Urbanização do Alto do Lumiar – A génese da Alta da Lisboa”. According to these two texts, ALTA DE LISBOA is intended on the one hand as an extension of the central urban space of Lisbon and, with its backbone, the EIXO CENTRAL, and its core area, the PASSEIO DE LISBOA, is intended to represent a structural refection of what the same texts describe as the “historic axis” of Lisbon (the continuation of Avenida Fontes Pereira de Melo / Avenida da República / Campo Grande). ALTA DE LISBOA is neither meant to be a suburb nor a dormitory town, but rather is intended to merge with the historic city center of Lisbon and form a completely new, larger, unified, historical, and urban whole.

At the same time, however, ALTA DE LISBOA, according to the same text, is intended as a self-contained and autonomous unit, which must be clearly recognisable and immediately understandable as such in its unity and autonomy.

Thus, in the introduction to the book ALTA DE LISBOA - A MEMÓRIA E O FUTURO, two planning assumptions are carried out simultaneously even though they fundamentally contradict and neutralize each other. In addition to this ideological-theoretical problem, the inherent paradox of ALTA DE LISBOA can also be found in the planning processes, for ALTA DE LISBOA respects, in its frozen current state, the two contradictory planning premises, but at the same time completely ignores them. ALTA DE LISBOA respects the premises, since the area exists as a geographically identifiable space and therefore inevitably has a geographical form that can be read using the planning premises and refers to them. Yet ALTA DE LISBOA also ignores the planning premises, since none of the basic conditions that they outline, and which give meaning to the planning area are fulfilled.

It is impossible, both structurally and visually, to imagine the merging of historical Lisbon with ALTA DE LISBOA, since the EIXO CENTRAL and its core area, the PASSEIO DE LISBOA, as already described, run exclusively through empty spaces, and along abandoned plots of land. So exactly in the area where the urban merging of historical Lisbon with ALTA DE LISBOA should be

accomplished, ALTA DE LISBOA as an urban space simply does not exist. In addition, the EIXO CENTRAL is neither connected at its southern end, via the Rotunda Nelson Mandela, to the “historical axis” of Lisbon by means of a planned but not yet realised direct passage, nor is there a rectilinear connection to the Eixo Norte-Sul city motorway at its northern end. The roundabout that could have connected the two axes was built and it is even connected to the Eixo Norte-Sul. However, there is no connection to the EIXO CENTRAL. A merging of the traffic flows and the life of historical Lisbon with the planning area ALTA DE LISBOA can therefore not take place. In addition, the EIXO CENTRAL is cut off at Rua Melo Antunes by a fence that encloses an empty space of about 40 hectares, more than a tenth of the total area of ALTA DE LISBOA. In this area, both the traffic areas and the fallow land surrounded by them serve as a material storage site for any further construction projects and as a parking space for construction machinery. The presence - and the extent - of this repository of material completely dissolves the image and notion of an emerging urban space - and even more that of a city center. And since this impossibility emanates from the structural core of the planning space, it in turn radiates throughout ALTA DE LISBOA. ALTA DE LISBOA detaches itself from the spatial structure of Lisbon and disappears into itself.

Even on a symbolic level, it is impossible to imagine the merging of historic Lisbon with ALTA DE LISBOA, since the separation of the two spaces is deliberately underlined: in the middle of the Rotunda Nelson Mandela, the afore-mentioned roundabout that acts as a connecting element between the historic axis of Lisbon and the EIXO CENTRAL, there is an approximately 10 m wide and 3 m high sign indicating “ALTA DE LISBOA”. This text can only be read when coming from the city center. In this way, drivers coming from historic Lisbon are informed that they are leaving old Lisbon and that something else lies behind the lettering and that ALTA DE LISBOA is, finally, only a peripheral area.

But the premise of an urban unit that is visible in its autonomy, to which the sign ALTA DE LISBOA could then refer, is not respected either. Currently, the planning area mainly consists of the afore-mentioned fully developed road network; however, the construction of potential residential areas has only started on the eastern and northeastern edges of the planning zone, far away from EIXO CENTRAL. And the development is on very different execution levels - from fully developed and inhabited blocks of flats to uninhabited new buildings and urban ruins - already decaying buildings for a possible future infrastructure - to the fenced-in empty areas around the EIXO CENTRAL and the material storage site north of Rua Melo Antunes.

Even the built-up zones on the eastern and north-eastern edges do not represent clearly defined urban units, as they are not recognisable as a coherent space in their current state and as their edges dissolve in the surrounding wastelands. Furthermore, the principle of urban sub-units within ALTA DE LISBOA is not mentioned in the programmatic texts. Such sub-units cannot be

recognised even when looking at the development plan. So, the built-up areas of ALTA DE LISBOA in their current state are only what has just been built - an expansive yet floating and formless combination of buildings in an undefined space.

But what most contradicts the interpretation of ALTA DE LISBOA as an autonomous, self-contained space is the resonance between the fenced-in empty spaces around PASSEIO DE LISBOA and the large material storage area north of Rua Melo Antunes. The existence of these areas and their resonance makes it impossible to recognise ALTA DE LISBOA as a coherent autonomous entity with a coherent structure of time and space. The empty spaces maintain ALTA DE LISBOA in the state of a purely ideological, theoretical, and formless entity. The only autonomous thing about ALTA DE LISBOA is its appearance as a vast urban absence.

3. All the characteristics listed so far have made ALTA DE LISBOA a treasure trove of material for my artistic work. The merging of spatial statuses, the neutralisation of time levels, the dissolving of ALTA DE LISBOA into itself, its geographic and material presence and simultaneous urban absence are an echo of questions I ask myself in each of my works. Added to this was my experience while walking through the planning area: It seemed as if I didn't belong there as a passer-by or flaneur. As a self-contained body in space moving at about the same speed, as a vehicle of coherent space and time, I was a disruptive factor. While I was able to wander around in ALTA DE LISBOA, I was never able to relate my presence to my surroundings. I could also pause at a given place in ALTA DE LISBOA and spend a bit of time there, but I still couldn't connect to that place. I was always in the wrong place and my surroundings were inaccessible to me.

During my wanderings, I also understood that the urban absence of ALTA DE LISBOA and the bubble of Non-Time that surrounds it would isolate any coherent autonomous gesture in the planning area just as they isolated me as a passerby. So, it became clear that I could only act in ALTA DE LISBOA if I managed to reinterpret the Non-Time bubble and the urban absence from the main threat to any coherent undertaking to the core premise of my doing and to my primary production material, and that no artistic gesture could exist in ALTA DE LISBOA that did not consider its own possible disappearance as a defining component. A sculptural gesture for ALTA DE LISBOA should therefore generate an autonomous form that can mutate up to its possible final disappearance, but nevertheless does not lose its autonomy in the process.

Furthermore, a sculptural gesture for ALTA DE LISBOA can only be efficient if its form is based on both the paradoxical ideology of the project and the effective development of the urban planning area. In the same time, the sculptural gesture - itself a paradox - underlines both premises in their incompatibility as well as their impossible merging and translates all of ALTA DE LISBOA into a third state for the time of its presence.

A suggestion for ALTA DE LISBOA:

The empty spaces and fallow land touched by the EIXO CENTRAL and its side streets, as well as the fenced-in material storage space at the northern end of the planning area, are all areas yet to be developed, as shown in the programmatic book ALTA DE LISBOA - A MEMÓRIA E O FUTURO. As such, they are all to be excavated to the depth indicated for them in this book. This depth is dictated by the underground infrastructure of the individual buildings that are to be built on top of them. The horizontal empty spaces and fallow areas in ALTA DE LISBOA are thus given a spatial and temporal functionality and use. They become excavations. As such, they are both concrete spaces with a pragmatic *raison d'être* and projection spaces for the buildings that can arise on them.

All the empty spaces are excavated at the same time. Since the excavations take place in the entire area, ALTA DE LISBOA becomes, through the simultaneous visibility of the different excavation pits, a projection surface of what is absent. It will be a negative spatial reflection of both what is already built in the planning area and the boulevards and side streets in historic Lisbon that the Eixo Central and the space surrounding it were designed to continue and mirror. Absences fills emptiness.

And should the work in ALTA DE LISBOA be continued, nothing will change. Only excavations disappear.







