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Archaeologies of Destruction

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Introduction

In March 2024, following a research project dedicated to the problems of contemporary housing, the Almada Archeology Center was contacted by Susana Santa-Marta, a Portuguese artist, who, as part of her master's research, wanted to carry out a archaeological action in the 2º Torrão neighborhood (Fig. 1). Susana's objective was not an excavation, it was not prospecting, but an activity that would make the residents, through the participation of the children who live there, aware of their recent past, their identity and the importance of what is happening in your neighborhood, for yourself and others. 2º Torrão is a self-built neighborhood located a few km from the center of Trafaria where approximately 2000 people live.

The action took place on April 13, 2024 and simulated an archaeological excavation to learn about an important moment in the neighborhood's history. Between 2022 and 2023, 91 structures were demolished, 68 of which were housing, under the argument that they were located over a drainage ditch and, consequently, in danger of collapsing. The event generated a traumatic memory in the neighborhood, affecting the community, with the fear they had of losing their own homes. Fortunately, most families have been relocated, although some residents are still waiting for homes or a permanent solution. Unfortunately, the trauma remained.

The choice of site for the simulation was located on a part of the land where there was a house until a few months ago. There, a survey was set up and a pedagogical action was carried out with support from the CAA (Fig. 2). The children recovered what is commonly called trash and rubble. Pieces of the walls, the floor, remains of household appliances, bottles, toothbrushes, bottles, bags, shoes and everything that can be found in an emptied house, and that it no longer made sense to take to a new life. They did the work that archaeologists do every day, but they went further. The objects they collected were part of an exhibition visited by thousands of people at the National Museum of Natural History as part of a master's thesis at the Stockholm University of the Arts, which was called "Archaeologies of Destruction" and which was visible between May 2nd and June 2nd, 2024 (Fig. 3).

The exhibition aimed to show the housing problems related to disadvantaged and marginalized communities, located in normally forgotten suburban spaces and how the traces of the people who live there, tending to be excluded, can be viewed in a national museum, of unquestionable prestige, giving importance to your cause.

Communication between the artists, archaeologists and activists who were involved in this action began an archeology research project that included the presence of researchers from two Portuguese colleges, two foreign colleges and several associations and museums. in a project that became transdisciplinary, political, activist, community and anti-colonial. One of the goals of making archeology aware of social problems “is to think critically about the traditions within archeology itself that have prioritized certain histories over others and to challenge those priorities” (Barton and Weston, 2024, 241).

As researchers in the contemporary world, aware of the importance of science in today's society and the strength it can have, we could never disconnect from this challenge, of creating an activist movement associated with archaeology. A challenge for ourselves and for the discipline we represent, which tends to seek to study places with emblematic and glorious pasts, often forgetting marginalized communities, past and present.

All archaeologists say that archeology should study the past to improve the future, but in reality how many of us have the chance to do so? We feel that we do little to ensure that this discipline participates in actions that effectively change the lives of individuals and communities. To do this, however, we have to start exactly where we started in the 2nd Torrão: with the people. People and how they feel about what we are doing in a space that is theirs. And above all, how they feel that archeology can represent them.

This makes us question: what kind of archeology do we want to do in the 2nd Torrão and for whom? A contemporary and community archeology, where the people who live there have a say in what they expect from our work. Clearly also an activist archaeology, if with it we can draw attention to inequalities and violence. However, what we want most is archeology for the people, those who live there and who with us analyze their lives. To achieve this, we will have to choose strategies that relate people, spaces, times and communities.

The 2nd Torrão Neighborhood

The 2º Torrão neighborhood is located near the northwest tip of the Setúbal Peninsula, between Cova do Vapor and Trafaria, limited to the west by the POL Nato facilities and to the east by Torrão beach, which has only existed since the construction of the silos da Silopor in 1986. Here, the Tagus River joins the Atlantic Ocean, and the view reaches the beaches on the North bank, from Santo Amaro and São Julião da Barra beach, to the area of Algés and Praia da Cruz Quebrada where the Jamor River flows. This human settlement was built in a disorderly manner in the second half of the 20th century in the Northwest-Southeast direction, in areas of geologically recent sands and dunes, on the limestone and sand plate of Musgueira and Casal Vistoso, from the Miocene period, with a macro chronological scale of 15 – 20 million years (Ramalho et al., 2001) In toponymic terms, Torrão may be related to the name *terrão*, of land suitable for agriculture (Sousa, 2003, p.223). However, it may also be related to the word *turret*, due to the presence of 19th century military fortifications in the area.

The neighborhood was impacted by the infrastructural dynamics of the region after the introduction of steam-powered transport at the beginning of the 19th century (Rodrigues, 2000, 548) and the implementation of large industries in the second half of the 20th century, when the territory between Almada and Costa da Caparica exploded demographically and urbanistically. The importance for the local development of small industries related to cork production, storage of riverside products or the production of civil construction materials is undeniable. These activities, in addition to fishing and the occupations it provides, have made the south bank a settlement point for populations seeking to be as close as possible to Lisbon.

The 2º Torrão Neighborhood is one of the Almadenses agglomerations that was formed with the social changes brought about by the 25th of April 1974, although there were already buildings in this location before this date, mainly associated with fishing activity.

(Fig. 4). Some families who worked in the dynamite factory in Cova do Vapor, established in 1873[1], migrated to this area for reasons related to the advance of the sea over the coastline to the west, where they settled. Much of this land between Cova do Vapor and Trafaria belonged to the administration of the Port of Lisbon and to private families, and was being used by fishermen who built small houses to store fishing equipment in the first phase, later expanding these houses to be able to stay longer. Migrant populations also took up residence on these beaches, first with tents and precarious constructions, made from different materials, and later using masonry and raw materials that were more resistant to wind and storms. As they are places of difficult access, however, they were overlooked by non-residents, as the neighborhood

is covered by a forest of pine trees that makes it impossible to see from the national road, over the last 50 years, a connection has been created. neighborhood among residents, as a territorial conquest, even under adverse circumstances such as precarious employment or the scourge of drug addiction[2].

Characterizing the 2nd Torrão is a difficult task, especially if this characterization tries to present numbers and chronological evolution. We know that the oldest houses are located closer to the Trafaria area and were placed there by people linked to the sea. Later, the neighborhood began to attract migrant communities from former colonies, with communities of Cape Verdeans, Angolans, São Toméans and, to a lesser extent, Guineans and Mozambicans being established, with several families of gypsy ethnicity also standing out. We cannot specify numbers, but it is estimated that between 2000 and 2500 people live there in houses built as a solution to the lack of housing, leading to solutions considered precarious and unsafe. This was the reason given by the local city council that led to around 60 families being relocated and their homes demolished, a process that occurred in an accelerated and unethical manner, as denounced by several institutions and associations.

The 2nd Torrão is thus a community with a cultural and identity diversity as varied as the origin of its residents who, as they are mostly associated with countries explored during the colonial process of previous centuries, are target of structural discrimination that they share with similar communities in different parts of greater Lisbon. Also in these communities, similar relocation procedures did not take into account the community ties established by decades of coexistence that created community support.

Community Archeology

Why an Archaeological approach? This is the first question we would like to answer regarding the intervention in the 2nd Torrão. There is something that moves us, in addition to the aforementioned intentions. Unfortunately, historical records about this place, about the communities that lived there and still live there, are practically non-existent. An archaeological intervention would be a way of recording and understanding - before the evidence that can still be found disappears - fragments of a recent past, which is still very present and which marks the lives of each of the neighborhood's inhabitants, understanding their lives and counteracting the tendency towards their marginalization. We would study the past to understand the present.

However, it is also our intention that this archaeological intervention be carried out through a community archeology approach, something that, we claim, has not yet been done in Portugal. Community archeology is a recent approach at an international level (Marshall 2002, 211; Moshenska 2017, 11), when compared with the history of archeology itself, but in Portugal, it seems not to have had the success that happened in other countries (Thomas 2017, 18). As Yvonne Marshall mentioned more than 20 years ago, Europe as a whole, perhaps due to the lack of “indigenous peoples” in its space, seemed to have forgotten this “new” approach (2002, 214). Fortunately, this statement is less and less true in many European countries, and, unfortunately, it is still relevant when we talk about Portugal.

Dissenting voices may claim that open days have been held in Portugal for a long time and that local communities are used in excavations, however, we think that community archeology is much more than that. Community archeology is public archaeology, but not all public archeology is public archaeology.

community. Public archaeology has probably existed as long as Archeology itself has existed. Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1956: 224) stated that “it is the duty of the archaeologist, as well as the scientist, to reach and impress the public by molding one's words in the clay of a common language”. According to some authors, Wheeler, even so, was far from being the only (or even the first) archaeologist to promote the idea of public archeology (Moshenska and Schadla-Hall 2011).

However, public archeology is so many things, so different from each other at the same time, that it is easy to imagine possible confusion. From local communities who want to protect their “own” heritage, to archaeologists and producers who collaborate to create television documentaries, to users of metal detectors (in England for example), to archaeological sites that investigate the details of their visitors, acting accordingly , or students studying the representation of prehistoric women in comic books and much more (Moshenska 2017, 3). Public archeology is so many things and community archeology is one of them.

But then, what community archeology is this that we defend and that we want to do in the 2nd Torrão? In a simple and direct way, it is an archeology where communities can make themselves heard with their own voice. Not in an approach in which we as archaeologists appear as holders of knowledge, not only academic (e.g. what to interpret, how to interpret, etc.), but also procedural (e.g. how to obtain authorizations, how to excavate, how to conserving

the material, how it should be published, etc.), allowing communities to speak only in a paternalistic approach (Moser et al. 2002, 229; Gonzalez-Ruibal et al. 2008, 508). However, it is also not a multivocality approach, where the voice of the community is just one of the many voices that are heard, regardless of whether we agree with them or not (Kiddey 2020, 29). Multivocality is not simply plurality, but is an engagement of different voices emerging together to tell a complete and complex story (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2011: 241).

The community archeology we advocate is one where the “power” relative to archaeological intervention is, in all its components, horizontal (Domanska

2018, 22; Kiddey 2020, 34). Starting with choosing the questions you want to answer, because as Derry (1997, 24) suggested, if the community does not help to prepare the questions, it will probably not be interested in answering them either, but horizontality also in other more practical things such as the interpretation of the results, their publication, their acquisition, or even if the data is interesting to be obtained.

Obviously the archaeologist has his voice. Everyone should have their voice in contributing to the project, but the archaeologist would not be “the voice” here, but rather “a voice”. The archaeologist teaches, but also learns, not in an elitist “we are always learning” approach, but because they are truly open and interested in understanding different (sometimes opposite) perspectives to their own (Moser et al. 2002; Gonzalez-Ruibal 2018) .

Conclusion

There is a certain difficulty for the participants in this project in classifying what we are doing and want to do in the 2nd Torrão as exclusively archaeological. However, we all believe that this is an advantage and not a problem. As C. Barton and G Weston mentioned “archaeology cannot alone create a better future, but through our contributions and the study of the past we can contextualize contemporary repressions in the hope of having a positive impact on the communities in which we are involved” (2024 , 239)

But what do communities gain from this? We could talk about a greater knowledge of one's own identity, a greater knowledge of the recent past of people who lived there and we could even claim that experiences in other places have demonstrated that the use of archeology in children improves their academic performance. However, these would be OUR goals that perhaps the

community does not share with us. What we would really like is for people in the community to identify and define their own objectives and benefits of this archaeological intervention.

So far we believe we are on the right path. The exhibition at the National Museum of Natural History and Science made the inhabitants of the 2nd Torrão (at least some of them) feel that their struggle had not been forgotten. A conversation with the children who participated in the archaeological action, José, Fábio, Helder and Dayane, in the exhibition space, took these children to a different reality, which motivated and excited them simultaneously. The purpose of submitting a Request for Authorization for Archaeological Works is to intervene in the backyards of some of the neighborhood's houses, involving residents directly and debating how important knowledge of its past is for the community.

For now, it is not possible for us to say what community impact these actions of ours will have. As Renata Camargo said on the day this group met for the first time, there is no 2nd Torrão, but several within a neighborhood with its own dynamics where each resident has an identity that is a reflection of the diversity of identities. And that is exactly what the project we are building seeks to reveal. How all these identities are fundamental in the functioning of a community that is forgotten, ignored, afraid, but with legitimate desires for a future.

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Images

Fig. 1 – Military Chart of Portugal Series M888 - Sheet 441-B - Costa da Caparica (Almada)

Fig. 2 – Archaeological action

Fig. 3 – Exhibition poster

Fig. 4 – The 2º Torrão neighborhood

[1] <https://www.cm-almada.pt/conhecimento/arqueologia-industrial/fabrica-da-polvora>

[2] <https://rr.sapo.pt/video/Segundo-torao/2019/03/22/como-nasceu-o-maior-bairro-de-lata-de-almada/200706/>

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