

# Rethinking Spaces: A Critical Exploration of 'Living in Lisboa'

*In 'Living in Lisboa', the transformation of urban space metaphorically mirrors Lisbon's housing challenges, triggering a pressing thought: Can architecture alone navigate the city's complex socio-economic maze and foster real change?*



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Entering the "Living in Lisboa" exhibition at the rather hidden Centro de Arquitetura - Garagem Sul, one is immediately captivated by the transformation of a mere parking garage into a thought-provoking architectural space. This metamorphosis serves as a potent symbol of Lisbon's urban evolution and the latent lack of space, intertwining the city's challenge to repurpose its physical and conceptual spaces. At the same time, it is an expression of the importance that architecture is given in society - or the lack thereof.

The dominant use of wood in the exhibition design, innovative yet raw, suggests themes of sustainability and adaptability - key in contemporary urban development. However, this choice raises critical questions about its efficacy and durability amidst the acute housing crisis in Lisbon - durability in a dual sense.

Set in a culturally loaded part of Lisbon, the exhibition endeavors to encapsulate the city's complex housing dilemma, oscillating between the necessity for affordable living spaces and the preservation of historical heritage. Yet, it quickly prompts contemplation about its approach's inclusivity - whether it resonates beyond the architectural community to a more diverse audience.

The exhibition aims to navigate these intricate urban narratives, promising insights into architectural solutions for the city's housing challenges. However, its true success is dependent upon bridging the professional architectural critique with the broader public's perception of these urgent urban issues, a task that requires more than mere aesthetic appeal.

To grasp the essence of "Living in Lisboa," one must dive into Lisbon's housing landscape, where architectural evolution is deeply entangled with socio-economic disparities. The city, once a melting pot of diverse architectural styles and cultures, now grapples with soaring housing prices, propelled by tourism and foreign investment. This persistent trend highlights a widening gulf between the availability of affordable housing and the intensifying market demands, spotlighting issues of social inequality.

"Living in Lisboa" emerges at a pivotal juncture, seeking to investigate the role of architecture in a city besieged by such pressures. The escalating inaccessibility of Lisbon's real estate for its average citizens extends housing concerns beyond architectural confines into the realms of social justice and

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urban sustainability. Thus, it prompts a crucial question: How can architecture contribute constructively to these disparities?

The Centro de Arquitetura - Garagem Sul, in hosting this exhibition, positions itself as a nexus for this critical discourse. More than a celebration of the city's architectural heritage, it aims to become a platform advocating for a redefinition of architects' societal and ethical roles. However, 'Living in Lisboa' seems to hover on the brink of this ambitious goal, potentially falling into the trap of serving more as a stage for self-representation rather than truly igniting a reevaluation and redefinition of the architect's role in addressing the complexities of a sustainable urban future.

### Beyond Wood and Modules: Unveiling the True Essence of 'Living in Lisboa'

The design of "Living in Lisboa," marked by its extensive use of wood and modular structures, makes a statement about architectural philosophy and its application in urban spaces. However, this choice, while aesthetically and environmentally conscious, necessitates a closer examination regarding its relevance to Lisbon's housing crisis. Does this material choice authentically reflect the complex demands and urgencies of urban housing challenges - or is it merely a trendy and symbolically loaded "quick fix"?

The embodiment of adaptability and sustainability hereby potentially represent an idealized vision of architectural solutions, dealing with the more immediate and practical needs of Lisbon's diverse urban population. The juxtaposition between aesthetic appeal and practical utility in architectural design becomes crucial in the context of a housing crisis, where urgency and functionality are of the essence.

Thus, while thoughtfully designed and conceptually engaging, the exhibition spurs vital discussions on the architects' role and responsibility in urban crises. It challenges the audience to reconcile the aesthetic dimensions of architecture with the practical necessities of creating livable, accessible, and sustainable urban spaces.

The presentation of architectural projects and models in "Living in Lisboa," characterized by minimalistic aesthetics, captures attention visually but invites critical reflection on their ability to convey the realities of urban living.

The polished appearance of the stark white models, while elegantly showcasing potential solutions, may inadvertently detach from the tangible vibrancy and complexity inherent in Lisbon's urban landscape. This polished and isolated presentation risks reducing these models to mere theoretical concepts, rather than feasible, relatable living spaces.

The incorporation of tear-off sheets or "take-home architecture" adds an interactive dimension but seems primarily oriented towards an audience already engaged in architectural discourse. This facet of the exhibition misses an opportunity to engage more broadly with the general public, especially those directly impacted by housing issues. It raises the question of how architectural exhibitions can bridge the gap between professional discourse and public involvement, fostering a more inclusive and participatory dialogue about urban development.

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While the models and sheets provide valuable insights, they also highlight a broader challenge within architectural exhibitions: the effective translation of complex urban realities into accessible and engaging formats for a wider audience. The exhibition's reliance on conventional display methods, albeit with attempts at interactivity, underscores the need for innovative strategies that can convey the layered and dynamic nature of urban housing issues to a diverse and inclusive audience.

In "Living in Lisboa," architecture's role in urban development is central, provoking critical reflection. The exhibition portrays architects as potential shapers of societal landscapes, yet a deeper examination reveals the limitations of this role in Lisbon's complex urban fabric. For example, projects like Bairro da Boavista by Alexandre Saraiva Dias, Luís Spranger, and Bruno Silvestre, despite their innovative design, prompt questions about their scalability and adaptability in addressing the broader housing crisis in the city.

These projects, while forward-thinking, raise a fundamental question: Can architectural solutions significantly influence the socio-economic trajectory of a metropolis like Lisbon, entangled in intricate economic, political, and social dynamics? The role of architects, significant as it is, appears constrained when faced with larger market forces and regulatory frameworks,



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underscoring the need for an integrated approach where architectural innovation aligns with practical urban necessities.

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Thus, while "Living in Lisboa" commendably highlights architects' responses to housing challenges, it also emphasizes the importance of collaborative, multidisciplinary strategies. Meaningful urban transformation, the exhibition unintentionally suggests, emerges not from architectural ingenuity alone but from concerted efforts involving diverse stakeholders, including community voices, policymakers, and various experts. This collaborative approach is key to crafting solutions that are not only architecturally sound but also socially and economically viable, resonating with the diverse needs of Lisbon's residents.

The inclusion of video content in "Living in Lisboa" introduces a dynamic element, contrasting strikingly with the static architectural models and plans. These videos, vividly depicting the diverse lives of Lisbon's residents, bridge the gap between abstract architectural concepts and the tangible human experiences of the intended projects. They provide an immediate, emotionally resonant insight into the realities of urban living in Lisbon, capturing the city's vibrancy in a way that static models cannot.

However, this effective use of video content also underscores a significant disparity in the exhibition's approach. While providing valuable insights into the real-life implications of housing issues, the videos expose a disconnect between theoretical architectural representations and the lived experiences of the citizens. This discrepancy highlights a broader challenge within architectural exhibitions: the difficulty of translating conceptual designs into representations that genuinely resonate with the human aspects of urban development.

The emotive power of these videos suggests untapped potential for more interactive and engaging exhibition formats. They point towards a need for methods that not only inform but also involve visitors in a deeper, more participatory discourse about urban living. Thus, while adding narrative depth, these videos at the same time serve as a subtle critique of the exhibition's limitations in fully portraying the nuanced realities of Lisbon's housing crisis. They underscore the importance of incorporating elements that can more effectively communicate the human dimension of architectural solutions to a diverse audience, ensuring a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities in urban housing.

Though a commendable initiative in showcasing architectural responses to Lisbon's housing crisis, the exhibition confronts certain limitations in its outreach and presentation. The exhibition's aesthetic, dominated by sleek, minimalistic models and an innovative spatial design, occasionally seems disconnected from the tangible, often harsh, realities of urban housing challenges it seeks to address.

While it effectively spotlights architectural ingenuity, the exhibition could further its impact by fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive dialogue, engaging a diverse audience beyond the architectural community. Adopting more immersive and interactive approaches, perhaps incorporating virtual or augmented reality experiences and interactive design tools, that allow visitors to envision themselves within the proposed spaces, could do the trick. It could lead to a more holistic understanding of the projects and their potential impact on everyday urban living.

The act of the exhibition as a reflective lens on both the housing challenges of the city and the architectural profession at large are somewhat accidentally, but - to give Marta Sequeira credit - no less effective. It invites a reevaluation of how architects can push a more collaborative approach that involves communities, policymakers, and a broader spectrum of stakeholders.

Future exhibitions should strive not only to display innovative designs but also to ignite a deeper, more inclusive discourse on the future of urban living. Emphasizing participatory design processes and community engagement could bridge the gap between professional architectural practices and public needs, leading to solutions that are not only architecturally sound but also socially responsive and inclusive.