

# WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis  
A collective work by CES



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Centro de Estudos Sociais  
Universidade de Coimbra



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# SPATIAL INEQUALITIES ON AN URBAN SCALE

Eliana Sousa Santos

Certain testimonies from the past have become particularly relevant in light of the current global pandemic. In “Stocktaking Architecture: Tradition/Technology” (1960), the architectural historian Reyner Banham (1922-1988) proposed a new definition of architecture, one not limited to buildings but capable of creating what he called “fit environments” for human activities. To illustrate what architecture could be within that broad definition, Banham explains that a lake infected with a virus could be transformed into a fit environment if everyone who visits it is inoculated against the infection, in which case the vaccine would be an “architectural” device – since it would enable the transformation of a threatening place into a public space. Banham wrote this piece a few years after the discovery and production of the polio vaccine, a disease that haunted the imagination of the first half of the 20th century. Like the current COVID-19 pandemic, polio was a disease that highlighted the spatial inequalities mainly affecting the most vulnerable populations, for whom the vaccine, disseminated from 1955 onwards, provided the freedom to walk in the park or swim in a public pool.

In recent years, we have witnessed the way in which the dynamics of investment transformed the urban fabric of cities. The recent redevelopment and redesign of public spaces in cities occurred in parallel with the overvaluation of house prices, which caused areas of overvalued housing to have access to more and better public spaces and facilities, thereby

intensifying spatial inequalities on an urban scale.

In the current context of the global pandemic, inequalities at all levels have become increasingly apparent. In similar fashion, then, when access to public spaces became restricted, access to gardens, beaches, swimming pools, and other facilities fundamental to physical and mental health was also limited to private property. Even as we return to normal activities, the scarcity of public spaces of quality in certain urban areas reflects the structural inequalities of society.

As has been happening over the last decades, we can expect that, in the near future, new zoonotic viruses will emerge with transmission principles similar to those that caused the current pandemic. In order to overcome them, it is essential that we establish a network of necessarily redundant solutions, to allow public spaces to be used freely. These solutions entail the creation of more and better public spaces, accessible to the largest number of people possible, as well as the redesigning of existing ones, so that they can be used with safety. Similarly, and following Banham’s thinking, these constructed structures must be complemented by the creation, production and dissemination of new personal protective equipment, as well as treatments and vaccines – the other “architectural” devices that can transform a hostile space into a fit environment.