

PORTUGUESE DROP OUT DESIGN AND THE QUESTION OF LONGEVITY

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Sixty years ago, the West witnessed a major social crisis. Financial hardship, the Vietnam War, extreme weather events, and global decolonial struggles led to a widespread



disdain for the status quo. The frustration culminated in a generation of Americans and Europeans desiring social revolution. Many chose to 'drop out' of society, and move to the countryside, a movement named after the first hippie commune: Drop City, founded in 1960 near Trinidad, Colorado. The following decade saw (often) privileged and (usually) ideological young people leave their hometowns and families to try to build self-sustainable communities in the countryside. Today, socioeconomic, ecological, and housing crises are once again creating a rural, ecologically focused dropout movement in the West: an off-grid movement for which Portugal has become a top destination with promises of cheap(er) rural land, good weather, easy living, and a reputation for welcoming alternative lifestyles.

Since the 1970s, Portugal has seen 80% of its rural population

migrate to cities or abroad,¹ making non-coastal land relatively cheap² – especially for people from wealthier countries in North America and northern Europe. But it is not only foreigners who drop out in Portugal. The country's recent economic focus on tourism and the rapid gentrification that has followed have exacerbated a housing crisis that began with the economic crash of 2008. Since 2015, rental prices have increased by at least 65%, making the average age at which young people leave their parental home 33.6 years old, the highest in the EU.³ As the disparity between salaries and the cost of living grows, many young Portuguese people look for alternative modes of survival: buying land through collectively acquired loans and benefits, or taking over the unused or even burnt-lands of grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

These various trends combined have led to a diverse

and fractured dropout movement, often closer in meaning to that of the original inhabitants. Drop City saw themselves rather than the term "dropping out" has come to be used colloquially to mean a complete drop out of society. In fact, the very name of Drop City comes from the art experiments of two of the project's founders, Gene Bernofsky and Clark Richert, from their time as art students in New York City. Placing everyday but out-of-context objects on the street (often dropping them down by tying them to a rope), they would watch how passers-by would interact with the objects, laughing at the unexpected encounters.⁴ With Drop City, they became the alien objects as subjects of the experiment: a socio-artistic experiment that was meant to prompt reconsideration of how we relate to the life that surrounds us. In Portugal, many projects seem to possess a similar idea in order to prompt a reconsideration of our way of life – even if they differ widely from one another. Going around the various formal and informal projects, I have found wealthy expats looking for comfort but with an openness to regeneration, wanting to give back; eco-warriors and activists with a strong belief in the need to

change the world; dreamy young people looking to get out of the rat race and find a spot for themselves, perhaps in a container on a small piece of land; travelers looking for a place to settle; and young cultural workers or artists no longer able to make it in the city with the impossibility of rents or in a survivalist view of the current state of affairs.

Something that unites these communities is a shared concern for how to design their way of living together. Across conversations with droppers in Portugal three core texts come up time and time again: Lloyd Khan's *Shelter* (1973), James Priest's *Sociocracy 3.0* (latest version: 2024), and Bill Mollison's *Introduction to Permaculture* (1994).⁵ Khan's classic contains DIY guides on how to build your own shelter explaining the weaknesses and strengths of each one, Priest's *Sociocracy* is an organizational model aimed at helping people self-organize and draws out community design tools, and Mollison's book covers the basics of permaculture – agricultural systems meant to be ecologically sustainable and self-sufficient. In other words, three design readings: one for the house, one for the community, and one for the land. Designing dropping (out) is, it seems, not just a question of designing buildings and gardens: it encompasses also designing culture, how we live together as humans, and more-than-humans. Some projects see their cultural design aim as avoiding interhuman conflict and finding healing, such as the Tamera project in the Algarve. Others, such as the



Evgenia Emets, Eternal Forest: Being Land, site-specific installation and art experience (2023). Photo: Alexandra Azinheira.



Visualization of natural swimming pool designed by Maurício Umehann (Fractal | RefTech).



Evgenia Emets, Eternal Forest: Forest Time, art experience and trail (2022). Photo: Charlotte Eckebus.



Nebraska style strawbale house under construction with clay and lime plaster from the land on family-owned unused land near Anísio, Portugal



Bannkorb. Provenance: Hans-Günther Brockmann's collection, Germany. Apian (Aladin Borioli, Ellen Lapper) 2023.



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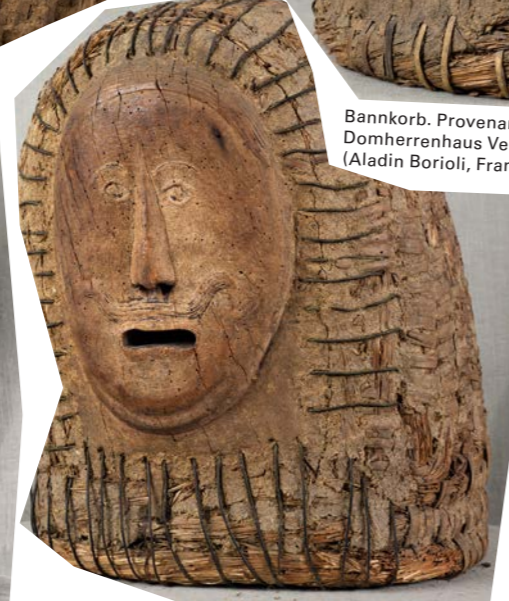
Bannkorb. Provenance: Historisches Museum Domherrenhaus Verden, Germany. Apian (Aladin Borioli, Françoise Borioli) 2023.



Bannkorb. Provenance: Hans-Günther Brockmann's collection, Germany. Apian (Aladin Borioli, Ellen Lapper) 2023.



Bannkorb. Provenance: Heimatbund Museum Soltau, Germany. Apian (Aladin Borioli) 2023.



Bannkorb. Provenance: Institut für Bienekunde Celle, Germany. Apian (Aladin Borioli, Françoise Borioli) 2023.

1 China Miéville, *The Scar* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 2002)
 2 Thomas D. Seeley, *Honeybee Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 43–44.
 3 Skep beekeeping, also known as "swarm beekeeping," is a particular practice of keeping bees in straw inverted baskets typical of central Europe with a strong tradition in northern Germany
 4 These people were key participants in this study on Bannkörbe.
 5 Ellen Lapper and Aladin Borioli, "Hives 2400 B.C.E.–1852 C.E.," in *Hives 2400 B.C.E.–1852 C.E.* (Paris: RVB Books, 2022 [2020]), 1.
 6 Irmgard Jung-Hoffmann, "Bienenkörbe," in *Bienenbäume, Figurenstöcke und Bannkörbe* (Berlin: Fördererkreis der naturwissenschaftlichen Museen Berlins e.V., 1993), 101.
 7 Forest beekeeping is the practice of keeping bees within artificial habitats, closely mimicking wild bee nests. This practice was widespread in Europe from the Middle Ages to the mid-19th century, mostly in central Europe up to Russia, among Slavic, Baltic, and Finno-Ugric peoples. See Marian Jeliński, "Bienenbäume und Klotzbeuten im östlichen Mitteleuropa," in *Bienenbäume, Figurenstöcke und Bannkörbe*, 15.
 8 Irmgard Jung-Hoffmann, "Von der Klotzbeute zum Figurenstock," in *Bienenbäume, Figurenstöcke und Bannkörbe*, 47.
 9 Von Hermann Geffcken, "Bannkörbe," in *Bienenbäume, Figurenstöcke und Bannkörbe*, 105.
 10 Ibid.
 11 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 84.
 12 Wikipedia contributors, "Mascaron (architecture)," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, accessed September 21, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mascaron_\(architecture\)&oldid=1176159071](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mascaron_(architecture)&oldid=1176159071)
 13 Dominique Cordelier, "Le mascaron au XVIe siècle, une 'bizarrerie,' in *Masques mascarades mascarons* (Paris: Louvre éditions, 2014), 147–49.
 14 Ibid, 150.
 15 André Breton, *Formes de l'art: L'art magique* (Paris: Club français de l'art, 1957), 27.
 16 Eva Crane, "The World's Beekeeping—Past and Present," in *The Hive and the Honeybee*, ed. R. A. Grout (Hamilton, IL: Dadant & Sons, 1975), 1–10.

Idanha-a-Vida project in Castelo Branco, are focused on how to allow the more-than-human to flourish by regenerating the land. Yet, others aim to design anti-capitalist, horizontal structures between humans.

Another uniting factor is the fact that the more-than-human designs these communities: growth cycles, weather, and resources design the habits, tasks, and interactions of the human community. Inhabitants are further allied in the common struggle against capitalist-driven ecocide that threatens their potential for survival. These include extractivist plans of lithium mining in the North and Center of Portugal, which, if allowed to happen, would pollute the water system of most of the country;⁶ the nationwide monoculture plantations of pine and eucalyptus that are the cause of annual forest fire threats;⁷ and the rapid desertification that make ecologically sustainable farming a struggle.⁸ The pervasiveness of these struggles, coupled with the crises that forced the droppers to drop out in the first place, makes imagining longevity incredibly difficult. One site of interest here is a purely art-driven project: Eternal Forest.⁹ Conceived as a dream of 1,000 forest sanctuaries for 1,000 years by artist

and poet Evgenia Emets, Eternal Forest is an international project that collaborates with privately or publicly owned land. Ecoventionist and regenerative, it poses the question of how we can imagine time differently, bridging the human and more-than-human perception and life. Can we even imagine 1,000 years? And how do we design a project with that kind of temporality? For a forest, a thousand years is just the beginning – for humans, it feels like an eternity. So far, the project is in the development stage with several municipalities, ecovillages, and sanctuaries in Portugal, France, and the US, committed to creating their own pockets of eternal forest ranging from 5 to 25 hectares in size. Just as importantly, however, are the exhibitions and art trails that Emets creates. The latest being realized in Monsanto in Lisbon (2023), where the public was invited to reimagine their relationship with the forest to hear its dream of eternity.

Without this switch to long-term imagining that Emets proposes, the ecologically driven dropout projects become a threat to the local ecology, too. A 2023 article on *Medium* by Andrew Theophilou, who spent a decade living off grid himself, criticized the Portuguese dropout communities for the repercussions that their lack of longevity has on the socioecological matrix of the Portuguese countryside. Seeing many villages as gentrified by an increase of people with greater financial means, Theophilou claims that many of the pioneering dropouts “are ill-prepared for the harsh reality they wake up to after the initial honeymoon period is over. [As their] inexperienced attempts at growing their own organic vegetables [failed] environmental ethics go straight out the window.” Having urbanized previously rural land, legally or illegally, they end up selling their properties to less ecologically minded foreigners. At a macro level, many projects thereby end up

repopulating previously poor and depopulated but self-sustainable villages with wealthy foreigners which means that “[l]arge swaths of countryside are being re-populated and built up in ways which are already making impossible demands on the area’s natural resources.”¹⁰

So, how can you assure sustainability in something experimental at its core? According to regenerative community designer and permaculture teacher Maurício Umann from Fractal | ReTech, the answer lies in how well you execute the design.¹¹ For him, this is done by first defining the human community’s dream, their higher purpose and end goal beyond the short-term, as this is what allows the possibility of longevity: “However, you can’t go straight to what you want, that’s when you fail,” he explains. “Instead, you need to observe the patterns in nature and in the humans, and then you can make your design based on these existing patterns and resources. But you should always start with a dream.”

To understand how Umann works, I sat down with him to design a hypothetical dropout community with the dream of living together harmoniously and fully off the land (although according to him,

the maximum self-sustainability is 80%). First, we defined the available resources: monetary, natural, and spatial. As we began to draw the design, it became clear that the only way to make this project sustainable was for the initial €50K financial investment to go towards turning the available natural and labor resources into sellable products such as, for example, baking sourdough that could be sold to cafés in the city. Sitting down with Umann in this process, I saw his 20+ years of teaching permaculture shine through: Just as permaculture teaches us to observe nature’s patterns to figure out the flow of water and the possible resources, so he observes the dreams, wishes and possibilities of the community through a participatory methodology: “If you get an experienced designer for your community, you will ultimately save significant resources. Especially with nature-based design, since it assures the use of all the resources you have in terms of time, money, labor, and material – all in consideration of nature’s cycles,” Umann tells me. For him, nature-based design means giving space for things to change, for evolution and allow space for flexibility that considers “both the resources you have and need today, and the ones you might need in the future. Perhaps people will have children and need a bigger space – that means you need to have enough space around the houses to be able to expand them without getting too close to the food forest.”

This question of how we can think, dream, and design for the long term seems to haunt the Portuguese dropout communities – but it is also what makes them most inspiring artistic experiments in the first place. As current ecological disasters make the climate harsher every year with changing seasonal cycles, the promise of the Portuguese countryside’s ease seems far from reality. The very socioeconomic and

ecologic crises that created the current dropout movement in the first place threaten its possibility of dreaming on the more-than-human, long-term timeline – the eternal timeline, as Emets poses. Ultimately, designing for the long term requires a belief in the longevity not only of one’s own dropping projects but also of the Earth, perhaps even beyond capitalism and human survival.

- 1 This has resulted in less than 20% of Portugal’s inhabitants living in the interior regions. See Maria Antónia Almeida, “The use of rural areas in Portugal: Historical perspective and the new trends”, *Revista Galega de Economía* 29 (2020): 1–17.
- 2 Idealista search: “land plots of buildable land for sale” in drawn inland area north of Santarém ranging from €1,000 for 1,000 sqm to €3,500 for 1,700 sqm depending on location. www.idealista.pt/en/areas/comprar-terrenos/com-terreno-urbanizavel/ (Accessed May 26 2024)
- 3 Catarina Demony, Patricia Vicente Rua and Sergio Goncalves, “Young Portuguese defer dreams as housing crisis bites,” *Reuters* (26 March 2023).
- 4 As Gene Bernofsky puts it, “Clark and I defined our art as ‘droppings’. We weren’t artists, we were ‘droppers’. ... We thought we had invented a whole new approach to making things. ... Once we set up an ironing board with an iron and a shirt on the street and then stuck the plug into the slots of a parking meter. People would come by, and some would stop, and try to iron the shirt, and laugh, and have a good time.” See Mark Matthews, *Droppers: America’s First Hippie Commune* (Oakhoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010): p. 40.
- 5 Lloyd Khan, *Shelter I* (Shelter Publications, 1973); Bernhard Bockelbrink, James Priest, and Liliana David *Sociocracy 3.0* (eBook) and patterns.sociocracy30.org; Bill Mollison with Remy Mia Slay, *Introduction to Permaculture* (Tagari Publications, 1994).
- 6 With the so-called ‘green transition’ and the EU’s desire not to rely on Chinese-owned lithium mining, several companies have been prospecting for lithium in Portugal, Czechia, Serbia, and Germany. Lithium mining, often referred to as “white oil,” is a temporary solution that is based more on speculation than on real change, which ultimately brings long-term ecological destruction for short-term perceived change. In Portugal, resistance to lithium mining is very strong, centred on the planned open pit mine in Barroso.
- 7 Either owned directly by paper companies such as Navigator or in private hands through contract deals, the last two decades have seen mass plantation of pine and eucalyptus which have been the cause of raging forest fires across the country.
- 8 As well as other ‘productive’ cultures, including avocados. In recent years, the plantation of these monocultures, forest fires, over-fertilization and erosion have led to much of Portugal’s land undergoing a desertification process often with natural water resources ending somewhere between June and July. Climate change has only made matters worse, with summers becoming increasingly hot. In resistance to this actively felt threat to our lives, many projects see regeneration, i.e. bringing back the water and creating planting systems that keep the water in the ecosystem for as long as possible – as the basis of their survival.
- 9 Evgenia Emets, *Eternal Forest* (2017-ongoing). The project believes, “Community plays a key role in being the guardians of the forest, creating a legacy for the coming generations through an emerging culture of living in harmony with nature. We believe that if this culture is established, Eternal Forests will last for 1000 years and more.” See more on eternalforest.earth.
- 10 Andrew Theophilou, “The Ecological Impact of Migration in Rural Portugal,” *Medium* (17 September 2023).
- 11 Maurício Umann, Fractal | ReTech / Regenerative Systems Design Studio: [linkedin.com/in/maur%C3%ADcio-umann-405b647b](https://www.linkedin.com/in/maur%C3%ADcio-umann-405b647b). Quoted below from a conversation on 04.08.2024.

CASA TEJIDA

Weaving Community, Architecture, and the Environment.

Juan Chacón (zuloark) & Santiago Pradilla (Palafito)



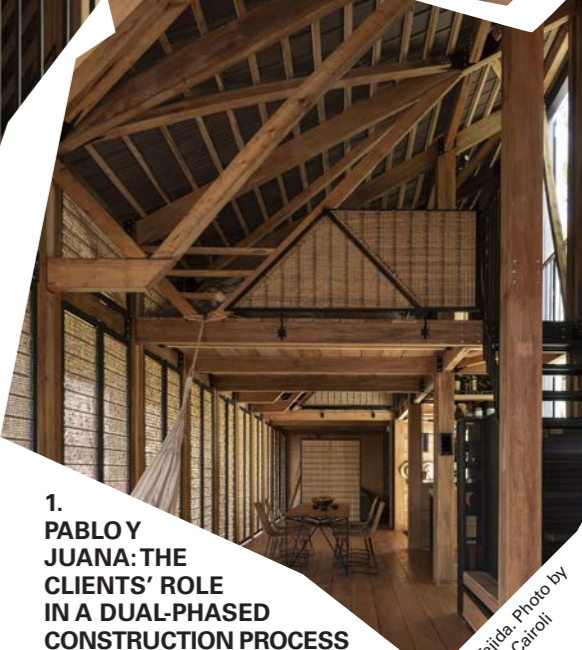
Casa Tejida. Photo by Federico Cairoli



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Casa Tejida. Photo by Federico Cairoli



Casa Tejida. Photo by Federico Cairoli

What does it mean to be at home? Where does the house truly end? Wandering through Casa Tejida, Spanish for Woven House, you immediately become aware of the importance of light as you

are never entirely inside; you are always a bit outside. The house is an invitation to live differently: whether upstairs or downstairs, in the open or enclosed, in the coffee fields, or among the magic of orchids, ferns, and bamboo it becomes a wonderful way experience the landscape and enjoy the countryside from the comfort of home day or night.

We understand architecture as a form of mediation. The architectural process of Casa Tejida was shaped by a collective 1:1 mediation process between us and the agents of the surrounding ecosystem: the local community, neighbors, construction professionals, prevailing traditions, available materials, and economic relationships as well as the natural environment, wildlife, and other living organisms. Through this network emerged the single-family housing project we had the pleasure of developing and building together. Design decisions emerged organically by learning, interacting, and living together on-site. Our methodology also involved developing flexible frameworks that were adaptable and open to change during the design and construction process. In the case of Casa Tejida, the modular design of the building’s structure combined with being deeply involved with the construction site and its surroundings were the main elements that allowed us to set this framework.

It became clear early on that the project itself would be a learning process for all those involved as we synthesized different and diverse forms of knowledge. Accordingly, this article spotlights

seven stories from those engaged in the process and how they contributed to the design decisions made. In this article, we capture the personal narratives of those who shaped Casa Tejida and reveal how their stories and insights directly influenced design decisions. Similarly, we have constructed this documentation in a way that parallels how the site of Casa Tejida influenced our process; mirroring the interactions we had with others. This text was sent out to various writers, architects, friends, and the editors of VOLUME, and through their feedback the text has been fleshed out for a detailed and responsive form of storytelling.

PARADISE NOCAIMA

There are many so-called paradises in the world, and can be considered one of them. Situated in the municipality of Nocaima in Cundinamarca, Colombia, paradise is just one and a half hours from Bogotá by car. It is a rural village with a dispersed population that consists of approximately 20 families nestled along an unpaved mountain path renowned for its difficult accessibility. Due to its secluded nature, resources in La Vereda Fical are scarce, making the resources each family produces extremely valuable to the community: From the products from their orchards (coffee, sugarcane, etc.) to transportation methods and building skills, resources are shared to sustain the community.

Until very recently, La Vereda Fical remained relatively inaccessible, due to its rugged and wild topography, becoming especially isolated during rainy days. These elements, along with the temperate tropical climate of the area, have shaped this hillside community making it an incredible place full of life and biodiversity, typical of Andean landscapes of medium altitude and warmer climates. Colombia is listed as one of the world’s “megadiverse” countries, hosting close to 10% of the planet’s biodiversity. Worldwide, it ranks first in bird and orchid species diversity and second in plants, butterflies, freshwater fishes, and amphibians¹. La Vereda Fical is living proof of this. It is in this remarkable context that the project of Casa Tejida takes place.

1. PABLO Y JUANA: THE CLIENTS’ ROLE IN A DUAL-PHASED CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

Pablo and Juana decided to invest in a rural location where they could grow coffee and allow their 4-year-old daughter to be in touch with nature. Aware of limitations their budget imposed, they decided to purchase land in an unfamiliar and remote area where they could build a house. They had dreamed of a house with multiple bedrooms, bathrooms, terraces, and a generous amount of communal space. However, motivated by the need to stay within budget, they quickly accepted that it should be a smaller project. The clients, both intelligent and sensitive, embraced the concept of building less, and the vision swiftly evolved from being driven by financial considerations to becoming a manifesto on sustainability; the challenge of rethinking living habits, and the task of reevaluating what they actually need to live together with the surrounding community and ecosystem.