

Agency for collective hallucination

text by Mariana Tilly

If there has ever been an occasion for nostalgia — generated in infancy and buried in consciousness — capable of bringing out glimmering tenderness and incredulity among the ‘90s generation, that occasion is Lisbon’s Expo’98.

What retrospectively feels like a product of collective hallucination started out as an incredibly well-thought-out, thoroughly planned project of the most ridiculous origin.

It was 1989. Two men were in charge of planning the 500-year commemoration of navigator Vasco da Gama’s maritime route to India in 1498, accomplished by sailing around the entire African continent to reach Southeast Asia by sea. The event was to be treated with the utmost respect: it is common sense in the country to mark such dates with pomp due to a severe cultural and historical attachment to achievements of its imperial past¹.

There was still time, the two men thought, to make something extraordinary for this anniversary. The monumental investment fuelled by a hypothetical World Exposition could be a spectacular gateway to celebrate the country’s history and rebrand the city as a European capital primed for a bright future. The economy was improving after an emergency IMF rescue in 1983; the outlook was optimistic and fertile. It was considered, at the time of pitching Lisbon as a location worthy of a World Exposition for 1998, that the funding for such an event in Lisbon could — and should — be used as a pretext for the renovation and improvement of the city; the Government aligned with the ambition of introducing Lisbon as a cosmopolitan, democratic, eco-aware “city on the Atlantic” for the new millennium. The Expo’98 project was developed under the theme *The Oceans — A Heritage for the Future* (the use of language bursting with nuance and juicy promise) reflecting a conscious desire to present the ocean as something to be cherished and preserved rather than rely on its weight as national symbolic property — field of past national glories — taken and dominated centuries ago by figures such as Vasco da Gama.

In January 1995, then Prime-Minister Aníbal Cavaco Silva was accompanied by journalists on a visit to the grounds of East Lisbon. A massive part of the city, once a port area, was being rebuilt. The footage from the visit shows a desolate and grey landscape — the grounds, formerly composed of landfills, were levelled and made into a plain — and the Prime Minister is there to plant the first tree in what is to become 300 hectares of new Lisbon waterfront. In three years, those grey fields will be unrecognisable as the space opens to the public in celebration of Expo’98, and a lot of the space will be for the public indeed (a concept that becomes exotic as years pass). After digging the ground for the planting of the inaugural tree, the Prime Minister speaks about the monumental scale of the project — in the background, tiny pieces of the bridge start to emerge from the river surface. By the time Expo’98 inaugurates, the longest bridge in Europe will seductively connect the East Side to the South Margin of the Tagus river², and the ambitious infrastructure of the Expo endeavour will stand ready and able — a mix of temporary pavilions for participating nations, and permanent architectural and urbanistic interventions that will further serve the city. Cavaco Silva tells the

¹ During the dictatorship (1933-1974) a strict cultural policy was implemented throughout the poverty-stricken country to disseminate national mythologies and narratives with the intention to create a sense of “Portugality”, unity and colonial prosperity. It heavily leaned on the Discoveries period’s events to construct and promote this notion of identity — notorious examples are the advertising of Algarve as tourist destination and the exacerbation of Lisbon as the departure point of brave explorers.

² The largest bridge in Europe was inaugurated by the longest lunch table in Europe; 5 kilometers of Feijoada (traditional Portuguese bean stew) were served to a hungry but joyful crowd of 17000 people.

journalists that Lisbon hasn't seen such an occasion since Marquês de Pombal³ and proceeds to suggest that the bridge be named Vasco da Gama Bridge, after the navigator. The commissioner for the Expo complements the statement by hinting at the desired favourable financial outcomes of the project ("it might pay for itself"); in fact, learning from the cautionary tale of Sevilla'92 Expo, the funding model guaranteed that much of the permanent infrastructure would be assigned to businesses to guarantee future use and the project was expected to raise the land value around the Expo'98 area (which it did. A lot.)

Expo'98 opened to the public on 22 May 1998 featuring 143 participating countries and Gil—a hybrid, vaguely marine-like cartoon—as its unforgettable mascot. During the three months of the Exposition, 10 million visitors experienced the hazy (colourful), histrionic high of Expo's joyful extravagance. Aside from the architectural investment and urban planning of the perimeter, highlights of the event included the midnight water-show *Acqua Matrix*, the Pavilion of Utopia—shaped like a monumental UFO, hosting a multimedia show depicting the story since the beginning of time up to "The New World"—and the Oceania Virtual Reality Pavilion which simulated an immersive submarine trip to explore the underwater ruins of an old Atlantic civilisation. The Portuguese Pavilion, designed by Siza Vieira, recreated the shape of a paper sheet balanced between two vertical slabs.

The ocean theme was truly relentless. Myth and history, inseparable in Portuguese culture, allowed for all sorts of artistic reimaginings in gardens and public art projects seamlessly integrated through every bit of the circuit. After the end of the Exposition, the area was renamed Park of the Nations and the main pavilions and gardens were kept and repurposed, and so a total renovation of a large part of Lisbon was successful; the city grew bigger, and that new part of the city was facing the river, wide and green and beautiful and meant for people. A powerful train station, metro lines, a massive UFO-like concert hall, cultural centre, cable cars leading to the iconic aquarium⁴ that for some reason stands on the river, unbelievable architecture; art around every corner. Every part of the project blew out the proportions of past attempts at urbanism in the country. The success of the infrastructural project, focusing on quality of living and usage of public space, led to the creation of an urban and environmental rehabilitation program founded in 2000, called *Polis*, to fund further renovation of public utility in other regions, carrying on the torch of Expo's modernisation model. And yet, Expo's biggest achievement was the successful national identity campaign it conducted. Taking on the heavy cultural tropes that harmoniously permeate the notion of national identity since *Estado Novo*, it managed to infuse Portugal's violent history—inseparable from the "Discoveries" and its disastrous (and very recent) presence as a colonial power in Africa—with an electrifying positivity and lightness that belonged uniquely to its time. This campaign has itself permeated, often in gross misuse, the subsequent representation of Lisbon as a tourist playground and Golden-Visa playland.

Agenzia concerns the eeriness of revisitation over the following twenty-seven years: we kept going there. Bigger-than-life Gil statues still stand; the water volcanos, covered in colourful mosaics; the loudspeakers on the long ramp leading to the Oceanarium entrance, playing ocean and nature sounds; Amália and Eusébio, the beloved otters named after beloved national figures; the waterfront benches, covered in stripes, and the trees whose roots have since disrupted the ground stones; the long Alameda with towering flags of participating countries; the obsolescent phone booths; the bumper-stickers one still catches in place on rare occasions; the entrance of Expo'98 turned into a shopping centre (Vasco da Gama Shopping Centre); the 360° tower marking the end of the Expo perimeter (Vasco da Gama Tower). From all the agencies required to make Expo'98 happen, only the real-estate ones thrive, continuously advertising luxurious estates in the

³ After a devastating earthquake and fires destroyed most of Lisbon in 1755, Marquês de Pombal took the lead in the reconstruction of the city, implementing rudimentary anti-seismic technology resulting in the signature Lisbon architecture (*Arquitetura Pombalina*) found downtown.

⁴ Europe's biggest aquarium.

vicinity. It is still a fever dream, former space of childhood's treasure troves, stinging like pins to a cushion; allowing for that particular feeling to simmer is to digest that its flaring contradictions might be what keeps us irremediably attached, going back for its artifacts.