

Twitter Thread by Aitor Hernández-Morales



Aitor Hernández-Morales

[@aitorehm](#)



Portugal is famous for its mild climate and sunny beaches, but each year hundreds of people freeze to death and millions struggle to survive frigid winter weather.

Here's a quick thread based on my [@POLITICOEurope](#) story on Portuguese energy poverty

When I lived in Lisbon my friends and I joked that although the Portuguese were famous for melancholia, uncharacteristic (and unrealistic) optimism defined their approach to thermal insulation: homes seemed to be built as if the weather was expected to be perfect year-round.

While the weather is, indeed, really great for most of the year, it can also be really awful sometimes. In the Summer temperatures can shoot up to truly unbearable levels for weeks on end, and in the Winter the icy humidity can easily make you feel like you're freezing 24/7.

This reality is a huge problem precisely because so many Portuguese people live in homes that don't have the capacity to shelter them from the heat when temperatures rise and the cold when they drop. And that means that every year that means people die because of the weather.

This issue can be traced back to the rural exodus that took place during the second half of the XX century, when millions fled the interior to seek better futures either outside the country — immigrating to France, Germany and Luxembourg — or in cities like Lisbon and Porto.

Prior to that period, Salazar's Estado Novo dictatorship had attempted to come up with a robust, iconic style for the regime — the "Estilo Português Suave," which mixed elements of classic Portuguese architecture with art deco simplicity — and a somewhat orderly plan...

...to expand the country's major cities. Urban planners and architects like Duarte Pacheco, João Faria da Costa, Paulino Montez and others led on urban housing projects that were actually quite progressive for the period...

...and a source of national pride.

'The Crown' fans will recall Queen Elizabeth's visit to Lisbon in S02E03; when the real event took place Portuguese authorities took her to see the Restelo housing estate, which they showed off as a symbol of modernity.

<https://t.co/rzU3zjwA5W>

The problem, of course, was that even in the best of times the Estado Novo's public housing problems couldn't keep up with demand, and there was no shortage of native-born city dwellers living packed together in less than ideal conditions.

The arrival of thousands of people from the rural interior in the 1960s, and the return of additional thousands from the former colonies in Africa after the Portuguese empire collapsed in 1974, made that situation much, much worse.

As a result, the pressure to build, build, at any cost build went through the roof, and projects of all sorts were greenlit without any particular attention to technical or aesthetic criteria, making for a pretty dramatic break with what had been attempted before.

Because the creation of new housing stock was considered to be the priority, Portugal effectively avoided creating any requirements that might limit that growth, and as a result the country didn't get around to establishing minimal thermal requirements for buildings until 1990.

So to this day, an immense number of Portuguese folk live in homes that were built haphazardly without any sort of proper defense against the elements. It's little surprise that nearly one-fifth of Portugal's 10 million citizens admit to being unable to keep their homes warm.

That misery is made worse by Portugal's high electricity prices and very low average monthly salaries. [@JoaoPGouveia](#), lead researcher at Nova University Lisbon's Center for Environmental and Sustainability Research, told me warmth is a luxury many Portuguese simply can't afford.

Brussels has set its sights on improving the lives of the 34 million Europeans who can't afford to adequately heat their homes through a number of initiatives including its Renovation Wave Strategy, which features measures aimed at tackling energy poverty.

In Portugal, PM António Costa's government has also rolled out schemes that discount the low-income resident's energy bills, and Energy Secretary [@Joaogalamba](#) recently announced plans to invest €300 million a year in boosting building insulation throughout the country.

But is that enough to make a difference?

Experts I spoke to said no, pointing out that most citizens don't have the money to take advantage of schemes that require beneficiaries to put at least some cash up needed to fund costly renovations.

Many expressed concerns that that aid would mainly be accessible to speculators who revamp buildings in order to turn them into luxury apartments or AirBnb's, deepening the divide between locals surviving in miserable conditions and foreigners living the high life in Portugal.

The experts I spoke to coincided in saying that, moving forward, attention needed to be paid so as to ensure that the homes being built now are energy efficient. To that end, many could actually ensure a more sustainable future by looking to Portugal's architecture heritage.

For centuries the Portuguese figured out natural ways to adapt to the weather. Just in the Alentejo you find improvised "sustainable" urban planning solutions like the ones in Évora, where the narrow streets protect residents from winter winds and harsh summer suns.

Likewise, the homes in that region are traditionally low, with thick walls and small windows to keep in the heat in the winter and keep the interior cool in the summer.

No one is suggesting that all the buildings that went up from 1960 to 1990 be torn down and replaced with traditional regional houses, but it's clear that the empirical knowledge gathered by generations of regional builders was largely ignored during the past decades.

Those past methods for dealing with the territory and climate can be useful as the country takes on the gargantuan mission of guaranteeing its citizens' basic living conditions in the future.

Good afternoon.

<https://t.co/zTx21Yrr3M>