

*Design Research as an Instrument of Empathy and Resilience:
A Case Study in Porto on Reclusion in a Collective House*

Marcela Rosa, University of Porto, Portugal
Teresa Franqueira, University of Aveiro, Portugal
Susana Barreto, University of Porto, Portugal

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Abstract

Considering the reality of international students who were quarantined in Portuguese student halls of residence during the initial confinement period of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in 2020, this article argues for the role of design research as an instrument of empathy to foster resilience in situations of heightened emotional stress such as the reclusion lived during this period. The study is driven by the participant observation of increasing isolation, fear, and emotional distress experienced by international students in confinement in a hall of residence at the University of Porto, Portugal. We base our theoretic discussion on concepts of empathy and sense of belonging, applied to the reality of student halls of residence and international students' experience. We used the ethnographic method, namely participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and capture of images to analyze the testimonies of thirty-six international students interviewed between May and September 2020 about their confinement and welcoming experiences within the residence. Research findings range from a relevant repository of interviews on international students' feelings towards the pandemic period while in halls of residence, the need for resilience in identifying opportunities amid adversity, to a lag in the current welcoming model of the residence. The expected outcomes are to design a prototype of a welcoming program at the University of Porto halls of residence that include but is not limited to a welcome package based on the identified lagging in the current residence welcoming model, literature review, and other case studies on Porto student halls of residence.

Keywords: Design and Welcoming, Empathy, Sense of Belonging, Porto Halls of Residence, COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

This paper is part of ongoing research on the use of design to foster empathy in multicultural contexts. The main purpose of this study is the creation of a pedagogy of interculturality and appreciation of student cultural diversity within University of Porto residences. For this, we are designing a welcome program with practices that encourage integration, interculturality, and the development of a sense of belonging in displaced students, especially international ones.

In this paper, we argue for the role of design research as an instrument of empathy to foster resilience in situations of heightened emotional stress such as the reclusion lived during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic crisis. The main purpose of this study is to analyze the welcoming conditions and quarantine experiences of students within the University of Porto halls of residence, managed by the University of Porto Social Services (SASUP). Students were lodged at this residence prior to the beginning of the pandemic crisis and stayed quarantined there during the emergency state declared in Portugal, from March 18 to May 2nd (Figure 1).

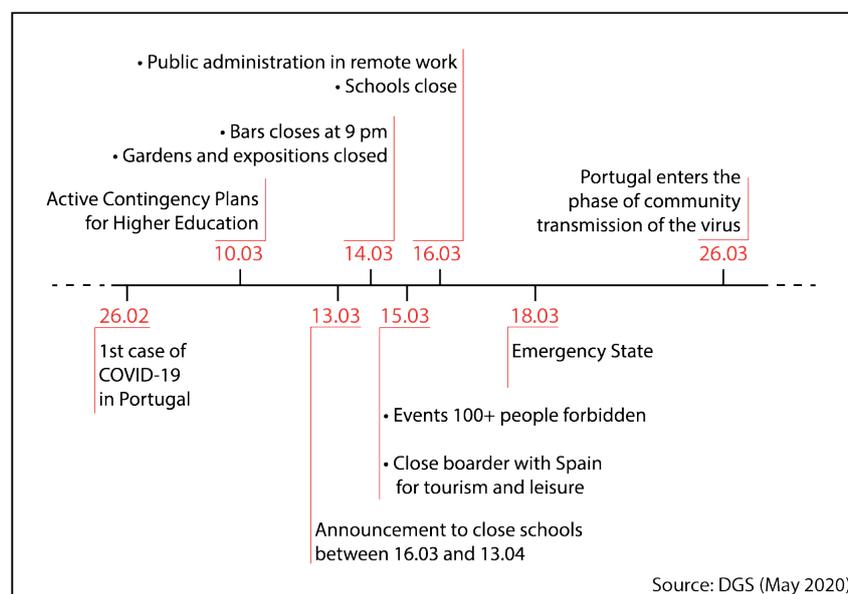


Figure 1: COVID-19 initial phase in Portugal (Source: Rosa & Alvelos, 2022)

The study is driven by the participant observation of increasing isolation, fear, and emotional distress experienced by international students in confinement in a hall of residence at the University of Porto, Portugal. We portray the emotional state of these students during this unusual time and collect their thoughts about life in the residence.

Method

The method of this study is a combination of literature review and fieldwork, with the aid of semi-structured in-depth and in-person interviews as the main resource (respecting the physical distancing guidelines), but also participant observation, field diary, autoethnography, and multimedia records. Data were collected over a year between November 2019 and September 2020 and interviews were held between May and September 2020, ergo during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Thirty-six international students living and confined in one residence of the University of Porto residence hall were interviewed, 18 male and eighteen female from thirteen nationalities. Interviews had twenty-two original questions, and more

were included according to the statements of the participants, in an informal conversation that lasted between 30 min and 2 hours in length. This paper analyses the scope of seven of them. Respondents are not identified to comply with data protection policies in Portugal.

Data analysis

This section presents the answers of the students to the following questions: 1) Do you feel at home at the residence? 2) Do you feel welcomed at the residence? 3) Do you feel the space, the residence's structure, is welcoming? 4) What would you improve in the residence? 5) How was this period of isolation during the quarantine for you? 6) Do you feel you received the necessary support from SASUP? And 7) Do you feel SASUP's communication with the residents is sufficient?

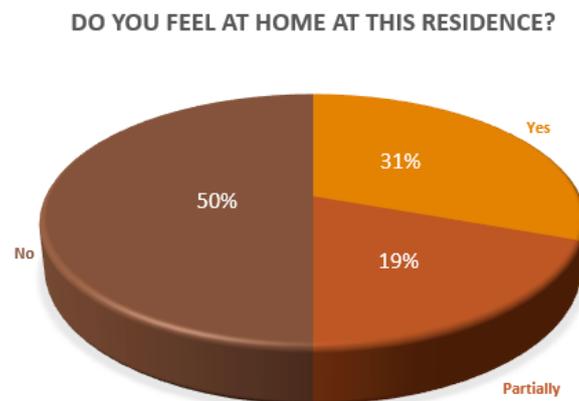


Figure 2: Question 1: Do you feel at home at this residence?

50% of the resident population does not feel at home, and 19% stated they feel 'at ease', mainly because of the people they live with, but not at home, ergo only 31% of the students stated to feel at home. Some students linked the feeling at home directly with the people, explaining: "Feeling at home depends on the people that you're living with. So, feeling at home is so tricky and I think it depends on the people."

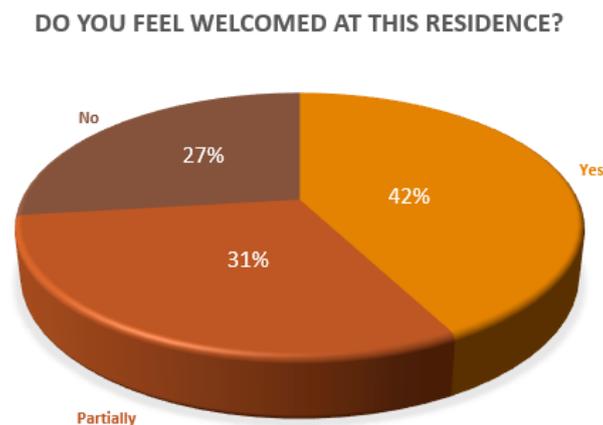


Figure 3: Question 2: Do you feel welcomed at the residence?

42% of students answered they felt welcomed both by the space and people. 31% felt welcomed by their fellow neighbors and 27% answered they don't feel welcomed at the residence, providing statements like "there is no one to welcome, how would I feel

welcomed?”, “who is here to give you that kind of welcome in the residence?” and “I feel in a professional environment where I came to achieve a goal and leave. It’s not an environment where I feel good”.

DO YOU FEEL THE SPACE, THE STRUCTURE OF THE RESIDENCE ITSELF, IS WELCOMING?

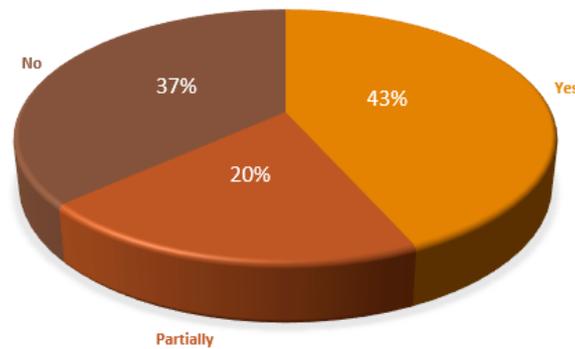


Figure 4: Question 3: Do you feel the space is welcoming?

43% of the students feel welcomed by the space, 20% feel partially welcomed, liking their rooms but missing the existence of living spaces to connect with other residents and 37% don’t feel the space is welcoming. Some statements were “I like it, but you don’t feel at home and you don’t feel welcomed. I just like it.”, “It’s welcoming in your room, on your balcony, in those kinds of places, but it’s welcoming to stay not to connect” and even it “Looks like a psychiatric hospital”.

WHAT WOULD YOU IMPROVE IN THE RESIDENCE

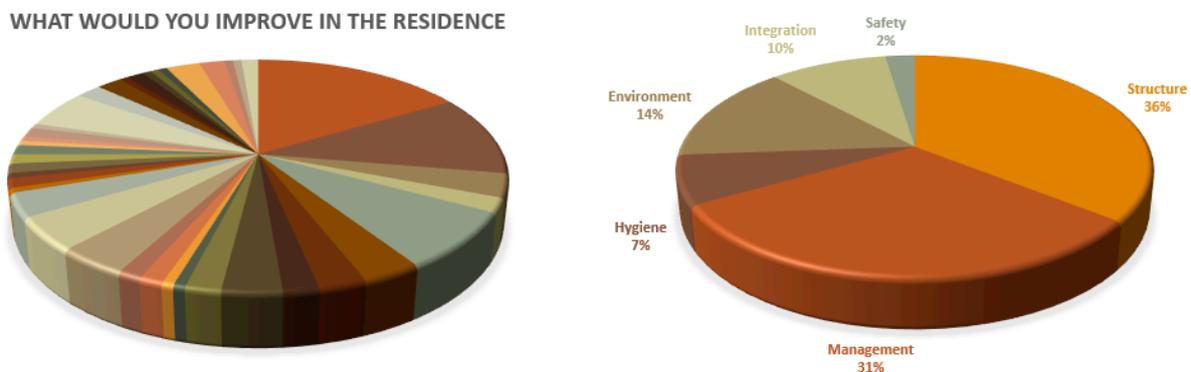


Figure 5: Question 4: What would you improve in the residence?

Since this was an open question there were many different answers, so we categorize them into six groups, as described in Table 1: Structure (36%), Management (31%), Environment (14%), Integration (10%), Hygiene (7%) and Safety (2%).

Structure	Management	Environment	Integration	Hygiene	Safety
16% Kitchen 11% Living área 8% Segregation 5% Laundry 4% Space to exercise 3% Bedroom sizes 3% Garden 3% Building structure 3% Internet 2% Maintainance 1% Library 1% Electric wires 1% Acoustic isolation 1% Close skylight 1% Paved path to FLUP	3% SASUP Assistance 2% Staff training 2% SASUP communication 2% Rules equality and compliance 1% Bedroom distribution 1% Sensibilization of collective living 1% Visitation rules 1% Suggestions 1% Staff overload 1% Abandoned bicycles	2% Environment colors (floor, walls) 2% Chairs 1% Room furniture 1% Move room furniture 1% Room lighting 1% Signaling	5% Integration 1% Entertainment 1% Shared kitchen supplies 1% Student body representation	3% Cleaning service 1% Mold 1% Insects	2% Security
36%	31%	14%	10%	7%	2%

Table 1: Question 4 answers stratification

The main item students would change was the kitchen facilities (16%) suggesting to add a proper exhaust fan, more machines such as stoves and fridges and adding an oven that does not exist at the moment, also making it open 24h (currently opening hours are from 6h to 23h) and creating more kitchens (currently there's one kitchen for 6 floors and 39 bedrooms – students have suggested putting one in every floor, as it is in the other blocks that lodge Portuguese students).

The second most asked improvement was to create living areas (11%) to connect with other students, play games, relax and watch television without noise problems, with special mention to being able to do so after 23h. About this matter, one student has said:

When someone arrives at a place, they must have a space like the courts, a space in the center. Here you arrive directly to the residence, you don't see people, you don't live together, anything. If people want to be together they have to leave [the residence]. People don't know who they live with. In fact, people who live on the other side don't know who there is

The third most quoted change was ending segregation (8%) which refers to the separation of Portuguese and international students in different areas of the residence building. Students feel strongly about this matter. One student stated:

As we all contribute and make improvements in the residence, they should work on this oppression and try to integrate all the students. There shouldn't be divisions. Just

put everyone, citizens or international students, we have to mingle, so we could learn more of the Portuguese culture and traditions. Portugal is a great country and some of us will always want to learn from the Portuguese, so I think this would be what I want them to improve. We should try to merge all the students, couldn't be separations.

Another student has spoken:

...so taking down polarization of the residence would be very very good, not to the international students alone but to the local people as well, for the national students, because they'll go home and talk to their parents about the kind of things they learned from me or any other international student. And I would too, a similar thing would happen to me. You go to class together, so if you can't be in the same residence with them why do you go to class together? You talk to them in class, this should happen in the residence as well. So if the school is not with that kind of polarization then the residence should do the same. It would help international and local students to learn from each other. It's better to learn than to stay away from people

This item is directly linked with the next brought-up issue: integration (5%) where students have expressed the desire to have more entertainment options, share kitchen supplies, take care of a community garden together, and have student representation to voice students' needs to the management, among other activities. One student said:

I think integration is very important. Especially when we notice there are people who find it more difficult to integrate, I think it's a function of the house to do this and of the people who are in it. I think it's important. Because most, almost all, are not from Porto, all are from abroad even if not from outside the country, and this moment of feeling at home helps, even for the studies we are doing here, the psychological issue is very important for a positive result in the studies and this happens a lot with integration. This integration is linked to the issue of reception, the issue of encouraging study, and the friendships that we can make here and outside, it is linked to the closest social relationships, which help a lot in all aspects of our lives. This is very important for our complete development as a being.

Subsequently, we asked the students how was the period of quarantine and isolation in the residence during the COVID-19 pandemic's initial phase, and based on their answers we created a word cloud to portray this moment (Figure 5). The most quoted words were 'difficult', 'isolation', 'alone', 'not easy' and 'bedroom', since for these students quarantine was mainly in their bedrooms, since shared areas of the residence were to be avoided.

September, and I live with a colleague who works [outside]. SASUP could have done more, even if it was conditionally, it could have acted faster.

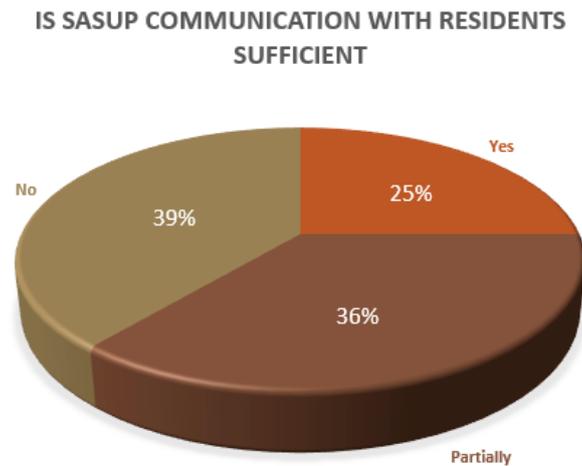


Figure 8: Question 7: Do you feel SASUP’s communication with the residents is sufficient?

For the final question, we asked if the students felt SASUP communication was sufficient, to which 25% replied yes, 36% partially, saying communication through email is very fast and efficient, but not enough, and 39% replied no, stating communication should include more than just notices, asking about students’ experiences, considering their opinions, and opening dialogues instead of only informing the decisions reached by management. One student said, “When there is a situation, we have to talk in the WhatsApp group, and we have to send an email. It’s much more up to us wanting to solve something. Usually, we initiate the communication.”. Another student was very unhappy and justified it:

Awful. It's not enough, it's not good. Nothing changes, it's always the same thing, we're always looking for information, we want to solve things. It is very simple sometimes to solve things here at the residence if we start to communicate here, but communication beyond SASUP is never the same, they make it very difficult, the bureaucracy is very large. Like it or not, we pay for it here, you know.

Discussion

We have analyzed students’ responses regarding the residence in aspects such as their welcoming experience, physical accommodation, management, and communication, including a portrayal of the confinement period lived during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic crisis.

Rosa & Alvelos (2022) have illustrated the impact of different communication techniques on this residence and discussed adequate communication strategies in student halls of residence. And, although this paper will not focus on students’ living conditions, we agree with Margolin & Margolin (2002:26) that “Inadequate or inferior physical surroundings and products can affect the safety, social opportunity, stress level, sense of belonging, self-esteem, or even physical health of a person or persons in a community.”. In the interviews, students related cases of anemia and depression developed due to the residence facilities, and this analysis should be further developed. Perhaps this could even be an opportunity to advance research in a way where designers “could participate in a team process with human

service professionals (...), particularly the designer's involvement in the physical/spatial domain" (Margolin & Margolin, 2002:27).

The low index of students that feel at home (31%) and welcomed (42%) at the residence indicates there is room for improvement. 50% of the international students interviewed do not feel at home, and if we add the 19% that stated to feel 'at ease' because of fellow residents this sum up to an overwhelming index.

Some students linked staff training directly to the impossibility of feeling at home, arguing there was not possible to do so when there is a lack of privacy and control over their bedrooms – their homes: staff could enter at any given time of the day, without the proper authorization to clean the place, and they feel staff would comment about the particularities of their bedrooms with others. Other aspects that made it difficult were not being able to change room furniture or personalize the bedroom.

Students declared to feel welcomed by their neighbors (31%) and the ones that don't feel welcomed (27%) have expressed missing people on some level. Students have linked feeling at home with the people they live with, which corroborates with Moores & Popadiuk (2011:296) finding that by having comfort and support in their living environment, people can create a type of sanctuary away from the frustrations they might experience in their daily lives.

Currently, students' association with one another is fortuitous, depending directly on students' initiative. Ergo less sociable people may not form connections, as cited in the interviews. This shows the importance of initiatives promoted by the residence administration to integrate such students into the community. Activities promoted by management would benefit the integration between all residents: internationals and Portuguese and help to establish a welcoming intercultural environment.

Once again, our findings comply with Moores & Popadiuk (2011), which emphasize the need for and importance of adequate support from the university community through the international student sojourn: "support within the international student community is valuable and should be fostered. Regular gatherings through the university departments that support international students would help to establish these connections" (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011: 303).

The students' quarantine in the residence, although a portrait of a very specific time with heightened emotional distress, shows the necessity for human support, beyond logistical accommodation aspects and quick response in dealing with residential matters.

One example of the eagerness for human support from these students was the interviews, which lasted approximately two hours in the beginning (May) and thirty minutes in the end (September) when the quarantine was over and students were heading back to 'normal' lives. At that moment interviews were an instrument of empathy to provide comfort and allow students to vent and receive support about their struggles and difficulties. They were also an instrument of resilience allowing this researcher to dive into the research to escape from part of reality and to help students endure that phase of isolation, fear, and insecurity through talk and human connection.

There are various definitions of empathy, but here we consider the summary definition of Cuff et al. (2016: 150) where “Empathy is an emotional response (affective), dependent upon the interaction between trait capacities and state influences” and empathic processes can be “shaped by top-down control processes. The resulting emotion is similar to one’s perception (directly experienced or imagined) and understanding (cognitive empathy) of the stimulus emotion, with recognition that the source of the emotion is not one’s own” (Cuff et al., 2016: 150). This particular aspect can be used to foster empathic experiences among students within the residence.

We don’t intend to blame culprits but to contribute to the improvement of the student community’s well-being in halls of residence. There are challenges for both the student and the university (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011) but students are willing to contribute to improving their living environment and can provide useful feedback for the University about what they want and need. To start, they have a desire for integration within the residence as an extension of the University itself. They want to mingle with national students, learn about their culture and provide insights into their own culture as well.

In this sense and based on the presented evidence we argue it is necessary to implement a welcome program at the University of Porto halls of residence that can address students’ well-being in a broad perspective: welcoming students on their arrival to a new home, offering support through their sojourn, providing opportunities for students to connect, and hearing students’ voice about the services provided and general experience in the residence. Implementing a welcome program can lead to the emergence of a pedagogy of interculturality in the residence, which benefits the students, university, and civic society.

Conclusion

The main findings of this paper include a relevant repository of interviews on international students’ feelings towards the pandemic period while in halls of residence, the need for resilience in identifying opportunities amid adversity, interviews as an instrument of empathy and resilience during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, and the existence of a lag in the current welcoming model of the residence. We also contribute with a case study to the social design field, responding to Margolin & Margolin’s (2002:28-9) call about the “lack of research to demonstrate what a designer can contribute to human welfare” and that “the social design field should have a compendium of case studies (...) that document examples of relevant practice.”

We verified the positive and negative aspects of the residence and students’ perceptions of it. On the positive side, students have gratitude towards the residence, knowledge of bureaucratic impediments to implementing change in the residence, hold affection for part of the staff, have a strong connection with fellow international residents, and have an interest and desire to contribute to change in the residence.

On the negative side, students’ have disclosed having developed or accentuated mental disorders during the quarantine (like anxiety, depression, loneliness, and feeling of giving up), they notice a lag in cultural integration in the residence, and they feel there is a lack of communication between residence management and the residents, and they would like the staff to be trained, having raised different issues regarding staff treatment with students, including difficulties in communication due to language barriers.

Two main problems were identified: 1) The current model of University of Porto residences does not foster student socialization and cultural exchange and 2) it does not comprise students' emotional and psychological needs, existing a lack of human support beyond the logistical aspects.

We also identified students' relief in talking to someone in person during the interviews. The interviews allowed students to connect to someone out of a screen and vent. Between May and July interviews used to last almost 2h and from July to September, when students were back to the 'real world' they used to last around 30 minutes – That is because they didn't feel as strong a need to connect during interviews, since they were back to their non-virtual lives in one sense or another. Interviews were also an instrument of resilience both for this researcher and for the students, to help all of us endure such difficult moments sharing our experiences and finding comfort in each other.

Implications of these findings include future studies about implementing welcoming initiatives to foster student integration, interculturality, and a sense of belonging at selected residences. We also suggest studies on the physical aspects of the residence and how it affects students.

Acknowledgments

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Contact email: marcela.cavalcantir@gmail.com