

# Educational Spaces for the Blind: the Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho (1888-1996)

## ABSTRACT

Following several countries in Europe and America in the late 18th and 19th centuries, Portugal also had its first school for blind students in 1888. The boarding school Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho was a project founded by Associação Promotora para o Ensino dos Cegos that resulted in a very interesting building, with a unique personality. Based on original plans, institutional reports, interviews and photographs, we will emphasize the lived space that defined this school over the planned space and its contribution to the “black box of schooling” and to the history of education of the blind. The collection of sources allowed us a viewpoint both from inside and outside the classroom, informed by first-person accounts and the analysis of the specific materiality. We analyze the original building plan of 1910, its main changes in 1969/1970, and present these spatial lived problematics in light of the theme of blindness and education. It is not possible to understand the historical evolution of the spatial dimension apart from the action that takes place within. Therefore, the experience of architecture is dynamic both in time and space. We conclude our writing by proposing new lines of research to explore the organic relationship between space, pedagogy and subjects.

**Keywords:** Blindness education, School architecture, Materiality, Biographies, Lived space.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“L’Espace habité transcende l’espace géométrique”  
(Gaston Bachelard, 1970, p. 58)

Following the pedagogic movements, both in Europe and America, for the foundation of schools for blind students, the Asilo-escola António Feliciano was the first Portuguese similar institution, and it was founded in 1888.

The name of the school is based on the life and work of António Feliciano de Castilho (1800-1875) (Manique, 2022). This school's building functioned between 1912 and 1996. The original plan dates from 1910, and the building underwent several renovations, namely in 1962, 1969 and 1975. These plans were fundamental sources for our article to understand how the space was successively intended for both lodging and educating blind students. As there are few studies about Portuguese institutions for the education of the blind, we aim to contribute to the history of the education of the blind in Portugal and its school spaces in general.

In addition to understanding the space as planned, buildings can be thought of as narratives, meaning a developing story (Burke, 2019; Markus, 1993). In this sense, and working with the memory of everyday school life (Rasmussen, 2010), we used the concept of lived space, which emphasises how the memory of the school life of blind students intertwines with matter and space (Berti et al., 2018; Tuan, 1977).

Our research focused on what was performed in classrooms and, broadly, what happened in the everyday life of the boarding school, particularly between 1940 and 1990. By doing it through detailed semi-structured interviews with former teachers and students and complemented with the analysis of photographs, we also aim to contribute with knowledge about the "black box of schooling", namely that of Portuguese blind students (Braster et al., 2011).

Our object of analysis is, therefore, the lived space intertwined with the planned space. As Lisa Rosén Rasmussen (2010) describes, there are several studies on life at school based on materiality and the visual approach. In addition, they are mostly dominated by a teacher's perspective. Thus, she looked for the pupil's testimonies and "the texture that characterizes everyday school life" (Rasmussen, 2010, s. p.).

To this end, we ask: what do the building plans tell us about the various spaces' purposes for educating the blind? How do students remember their school's spaces, materials and life? How do these two, the planned and lived space, connect? The building plans and the personal memories of former students allow us to: 1) understand how space and practices intertwined on what concerns school materiality, classroom layout, educational technologies, pedagogic work organisation, teacher/student interaction, daily routines, and school rituals; and 2) know the lived space in its classroom and building dynamics, social exchanges and daily uses. Altogether, they enable unpacking the "black box of schooling".

## 1.1 EARLIER RESEARCH

Recent scientific literature is not profuse on schools for the blind, particularly those that highlight the lived school space. The examples we found are monographs that only partially approach some details of school architecture. However, two works deserve particular attention: the research of both Amanda Bergen (2007), who works on the nineteenth century systems of education of blind and deaf children and Sun-Young Park (2020), who is specialized in nineteenth century architecture and its relation with medical history.

In Portugal, recent scientific works on schools for the blind are also scarce and vacant of the approach that drives us: the knowledge of the everyday school past and its materiality.

This effort, we think, opens new research paths to compared history with the case studies existent abroad. Considering that the analysis is founded on the idea that space as a lived dimension is both a material and a mental construct (Berti et al., 2018), we assume that the information gathered – as explained below – could be the lever to fruitful future comparisons.

Just over a decade ago, Herman et al. (2011) stated that it was not exceptional to assume the school space as an object of study in the field of the history of education. Furthermore, they highlighted that in previous decades, the theme had been (re)discovered by both social sciences and historiography and that interest resulted in diverse approaches to the spatial dimension (Herman et al., 2011).

If the research of the last decades (re)discovered the spatial dimension, diversified approaches and increasingly valued the relationship between space and human action, then it makes sense to speak of “spatial return” instead of “spatial turn” (Herman et al., 2011, p. 243). In the same sense, Herman and Tondeur used the expression “The (re)turn to school architecture”, registering, particularly in the last decade, the interest of researchers from different fields in the materialities and spatialities of schooling (Herman & Tondeur, 2021, p. 683). In this way, the idea of continuity, not rupture, prevails.

For our research, it is important to quote Thomas Markus (1993), to highlight the mentioned continuity and to emphasize the following idea: “Buildings are treated as art, technical or investment objects. Rarely as social objects” (p. xix). Thus, a building should be considered a narrative. The same idea is reinforced by Catherine Burke (2019):

School buildings stir the emotions and are hardly ever viewed or experienced as neutral containers. They are embodied memories in brick. They are remembered for good and ill. Take a sensory tour around and through a school building from your own memories. The smell, the feel, the taste, the sound, the rhythms of school day soon become apparent. (pp. 31-32)

As such, physical spaces do not exist “in a social vacuum, somehow separate from the action that happens ‘in them’” (Kraftl et al., 2022, p. 453). Such is the thought of Antonio Viñao (2004), as he establishes the concepts of space and place. The former is conceived or imagined; the latter is the result of the occupation or use by humans and, therefore, is built (Viñao, 2004).

From the decade of 2010 onwards, although there was a growing interest in approaches that focus on the sociomateriality of schooling, the tendency remained on an analytic glance at the classroom that did not consider the action inside its walls. Therefore, as Herman and Tondeur (2021) referred, it made sense to look at the classrooms as “black boxes” that requested to be opened and unveiled.

One of the promising research paths for inquiring into the spatiality and the sociomateriality of schooling was the one founded on classroom biographies (Herman & Tondeur, 2021; Rasmussen, 2012). In fact, oral history

is important to understand the material and sensuous dimensions of school life, i.e. the feelings and affective responses (the living space) that contribute to the living history of a school building (Clark, 2010). We highlight the importance of biographies – mainly the value of memory of everyday school life. We also follow the research of Rosén Rasmussen (2012) on the relevance of materiality for the memory processes, especially for the universe of a school for blind and low-vision children.

## 1.2 SOURCES AND METHODS

The data collected for this study consists of architectural plans, memoirs, institutional regulations and annual reports, newspaper and magazine reports, photographs, and interviews with former teachers and students.

The architectural plans show how the building was initially planned and subsequently altered and the different intended functions of various spaces. The architect's memoir complements this by providing information on the intentions behind the plans. The institutional regulations and annual reports allow a better understanding of the institutional and organisational life of the Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho, and the Portuguese newspapers confirm its inauguration date. Finally, the photographs and the interviews enable, in different ways, glimpses of the school's life. They do it by showing the spaces, materials and actors as they were registered by the camera and remembered by some of those who were part of the school.

We interviewed students and teachers who were part of the school's life between the 1940s and the 1990s. Ten of the interviewees were blind, the exception being one of the teachers. There were four men and seven women, three teachers and eight students. One entered the institution in the '40s, one in the '50s, 3 in the '60s and 6 in the '70s. The eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or online – due to the pandemic issues – and lasted between 40 and 190 minutes.

As to the interviewees' perspective, some of them were able to offer a straightforward and quick recognition of the school space.

On the other hand, the interviews/biographies allowed us to understand the way how people with low vision or blind build a mental chart of the surrounding space. An author like Gadrat (2019) synthesized that same process:

*L'identification d'un lieu, la construction d'une image mentale [...] se fait donc par petites touches. Les informations auditives s'ajoutent aux informations tactiles et olfactives ainsi qu'à l'imagination et la mémoire qui permettent de compléter et de faire évoluer cette image au fil de l'expérience. (p. 134)*

As to the methodology of analysis, we paid particular attention to the plans of Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho (original plan and some later renovations). Although we considered these sources static, as they planned and regulated spaces at specific moments, their overall analysis shows a building in transformation and the changes in what the different spaces were to be used for. We started with the analysis of the architectural

plans, following the analytical model presented by Antonio Viñao (2004). Thus, in this source's analysis, we had in mind: i) the existence or inexistence of certain spaces; ii) the specialisation of certain spaces and their relative dimensions; iii) the relationship/articulation between diverse functional spaces (Viñao, 2004). It is important to note that the transition from space to place comes from its occupation and use (Berti et al., 2018; Viñao, 2004).

In addition to the architectural plans – the planned space – the interviews were essential to build our narrative as part of the “black box of schooling” we intend to enter, as they are reminiscences of our interviewees' lives at the school. Following Herman and Tondeur's (2021) proposal, we used a biographical approach to acquire the information needed. We always let the interviewees talk at ease about their favourite memories. Also, through the work structure of Kim Wickman and Margaretha Kristoffersson (2018), we directly quoted the interviews as a main source, as also suggested by Herman et al. (2017). The interviews were used as a base to read the architectural plans, especially the renovation of 1969/1970.

The remaining written sources followed a simple text analysis, in which we looked for information that would verify, confront or complement that of the architectural plans and interviews. Finally, the photographs were analysed with the same purpose and are used here to illustrate aspects of the blind students' educational lives.

Methodologically, we cross-examined these diverse sources. Their intertwined interpretation allowed us to understand the planned uses and the lived spaces of the Asylum.

## **2. THE BUILDING OF ASILO-ESCOLA ANTÓNIO FELICIANO DE CASTILHO**

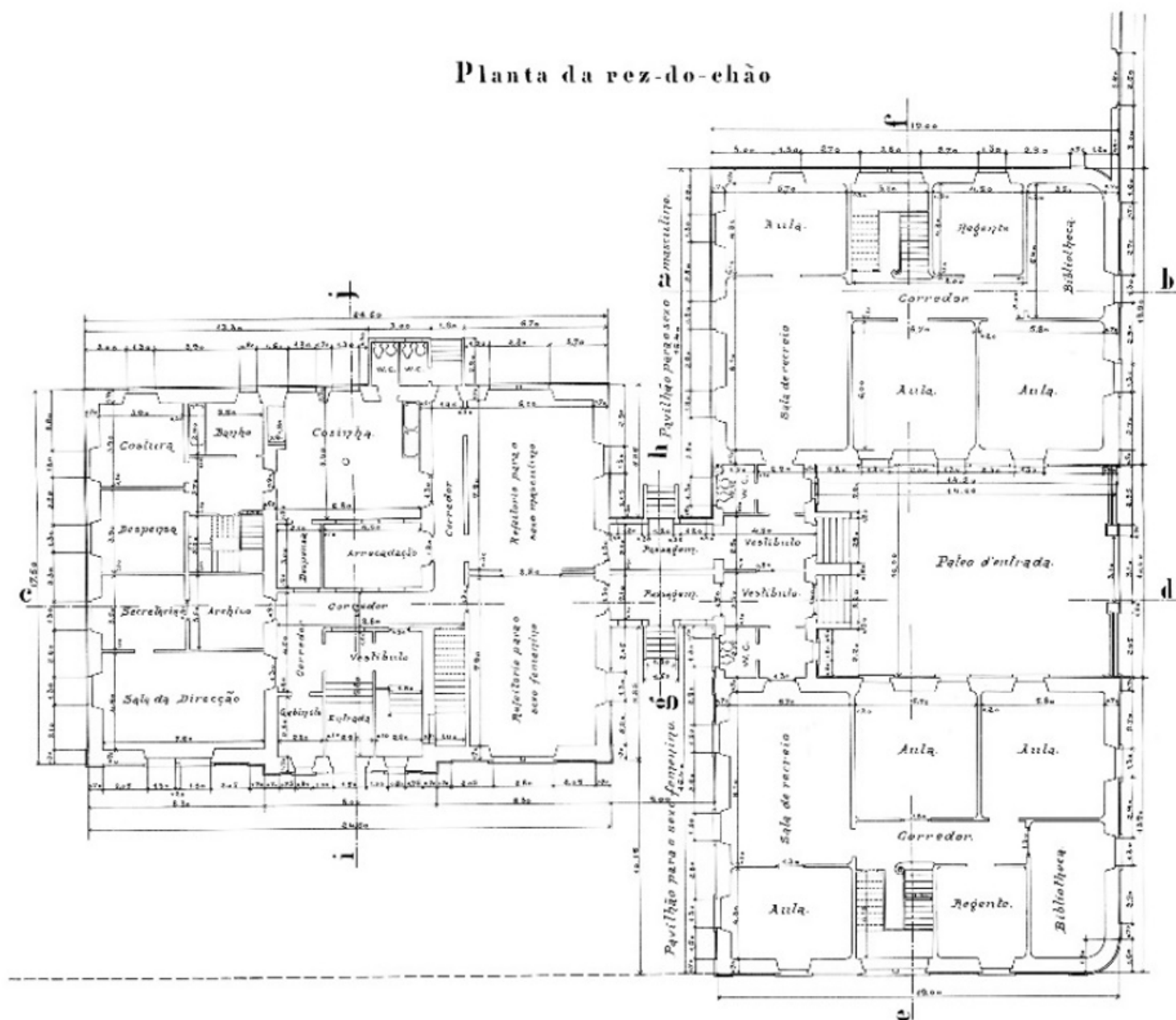
The first Portuguese school for the blind, the Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho, was a boarding school founded on the 12th March 1888 by the Associação Promotora para o Ensino dos Cegos (Estatutos da Associação Promotora do Ensino dos Cegos, 1891) a charity created by Victorina Sigaud Souto, a wealthy benefactor of brasilian origin whose sister was blind (1836-1904). From the Association's constitution, published in 1891, it was an “instruction and beneficence society” to promote “the teaching and support of the blind of both sexes, minors or adults, creating schools or asylums for those purposes” (Estatutos da Associação Promotora do Ensino dos Cegos, 1891, p. 2).

In the first years, two buildings in Lisbon were used to shelter the students. However, the plan for a proper building by the architect and benefactor associate of the Asylum Leopoldo Bessone Mauritty (b. 1864-?) was encouraged by the donation of some valuable land property in the new Lisbon area of Campo de Ourique by two rich in assets and charitable sisters, D. Maria Adelaide do Prado Rodrigues and D. Maria José do Prado Rodrigues. It was located in Campo de Ourique, a developing area of the capital at the time. The new building was planned in 1910 and inaugurated in 1912.

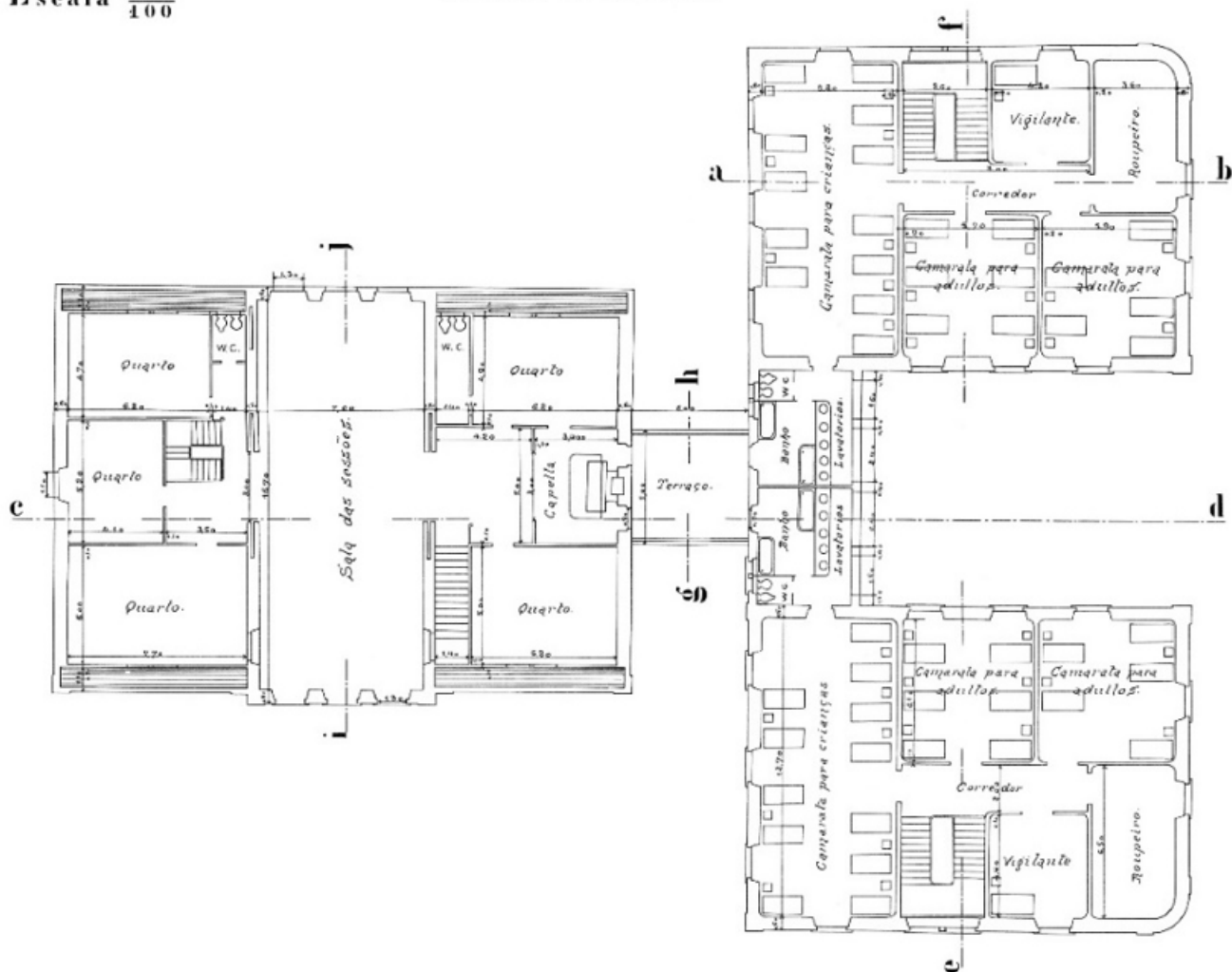
The plans for the Asylum allow a reading of the architect's intentions for a draft composed of three areas, absolutely symmetrical towards a central axis and developed on two floors (Figures 1 and 2).

**Figure 1:**

*Ground floor plan of Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho, 1910*



Source: Archive of Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Work 21554, Process 2231.

**Figure 2:***First floor plan of Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho, 1910***Escala**  $\frac{1}{100}$ **Planta do 1º andar**

Source: Archive of Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Work 21554, Process 2231.

Essentially, the ground floor of the main building was destined for administrative services (director's quarters, archive and offices), kitchen and refectories. The upper floor was destined for the employees' quarters, the session room, also meant for music lessons, and the chapel. On what concerned the spaces on each side of the main building, the ground floor was meant for teaching activities and the first floor was destined for both children and adult dormitories, as it was a boarding school. Moreover, the rigorous symmetry of the building had a clear intention of defining two equal wings, one for each gender.

As to the specificities of the building and furniture, the architect's memoir of 1910 shows his concern with the safety of the blind students when he mentions that the panelling ought to be rounded and the stairs should have

no more than a certain width so that the children could grab the bannisters from both sides.

It is most probable that Leopoldo Bessone Maurity had inspired his work closely on the projects of the Spanish architect, archaeologist and restorer Ricardo Velázquez Bosco (1843-1923) (Moure Pazos, 2011). We refer to the Colegio de Sordomudos y Ciegos de Moncloa (1887) and the Escuela de Sordomudos y Ciegos de Santiago de Compostela (1905). Prominently in all of them (including the project of the Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho) was the choice of the “T” system on the disposition of the buildings.

A detailed analysis of the Asylum’s plan (cf. Figures 1 and 2) allowed us to verify the lack of functional spaces, which are usually part of projects of this nature. We highlight, in particular, the absence of an infirmary and a medical cabinet, of spaces reserved for workshops, handcrafts and gymnastic exercise. In the project drawn by Leopoldo Bessone Maurity, classrooms were given special relevance (three on each side of the building, on the ground floor). On the other hand, on that same floor, the presence of the library emerges – an important required space of support to both teaching and learning, namely in an institution intended to teach blind students, thus requiring the production and dissemination of Braille books. It is very interesting to notice that, near the library, we found the space meant for the regent, also very close to two classrooms. Still on the ground floor, we should highlight the existence of an inner playground of considerable dimensions.

On the first floor of the central building was the “session room” (Archive of Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Work 21554. Process 2231), a very large and versatile space, conceived for the teaching of music – particularly important at the time in a school for blind students (Luce su Luce. L’impegno della solidarietà dalla carità alla scienza, 2003). On that same floor, a small chapel could be found, pointing out the importance of religious teaching and practice.

One could observe an unambitious architectonic scheme, too focused on “literary education” (classroom-based pedagogy) and opposite to what was mentioned in the quoted 1899 Regulation. In that text, vocational teaching and gymnastics had their importance, as well as handcrafts. The absence of specialized spaces for the development of those activities, amongst others, was probably due to financial restrictions. Even the work of the architect would have likely been pro bono. He was the 1236 benemerit associate and brother of one of the secretaries of the institution. (Asylo-Escola Antonio Feliciano de Castilho. Relatorio e Contas da Gerencia do anno económico de 1895-1896, Imprensa Nacional, 1896)

The description of the school life in the building presented in this work is mainly based on the folding of the set of interviews already mentioned and the plans and memoirs of the building of Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho. It is important to remember that the interviewees’ lives at the asylum span between 1940 and 1990. However, they mainly focused on experiences and activities between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. In line with these details, it is relevant to consider that besides the plan, drawn in 1910, from which we have a written memoir, we also have notice of building renovations. A plan from 1959 (meant for changes that did not occur) states the non-existence of great adaptations, constructions or changes on the space

assignments, with the exception of the building of an ophthalmological clinic, in 1934. It is, however, essential to refer to the renovations that the building underwent in the 1960s. In that decade, there were new imperatives on the social function of the asylum and on the orientation/formation of the students.

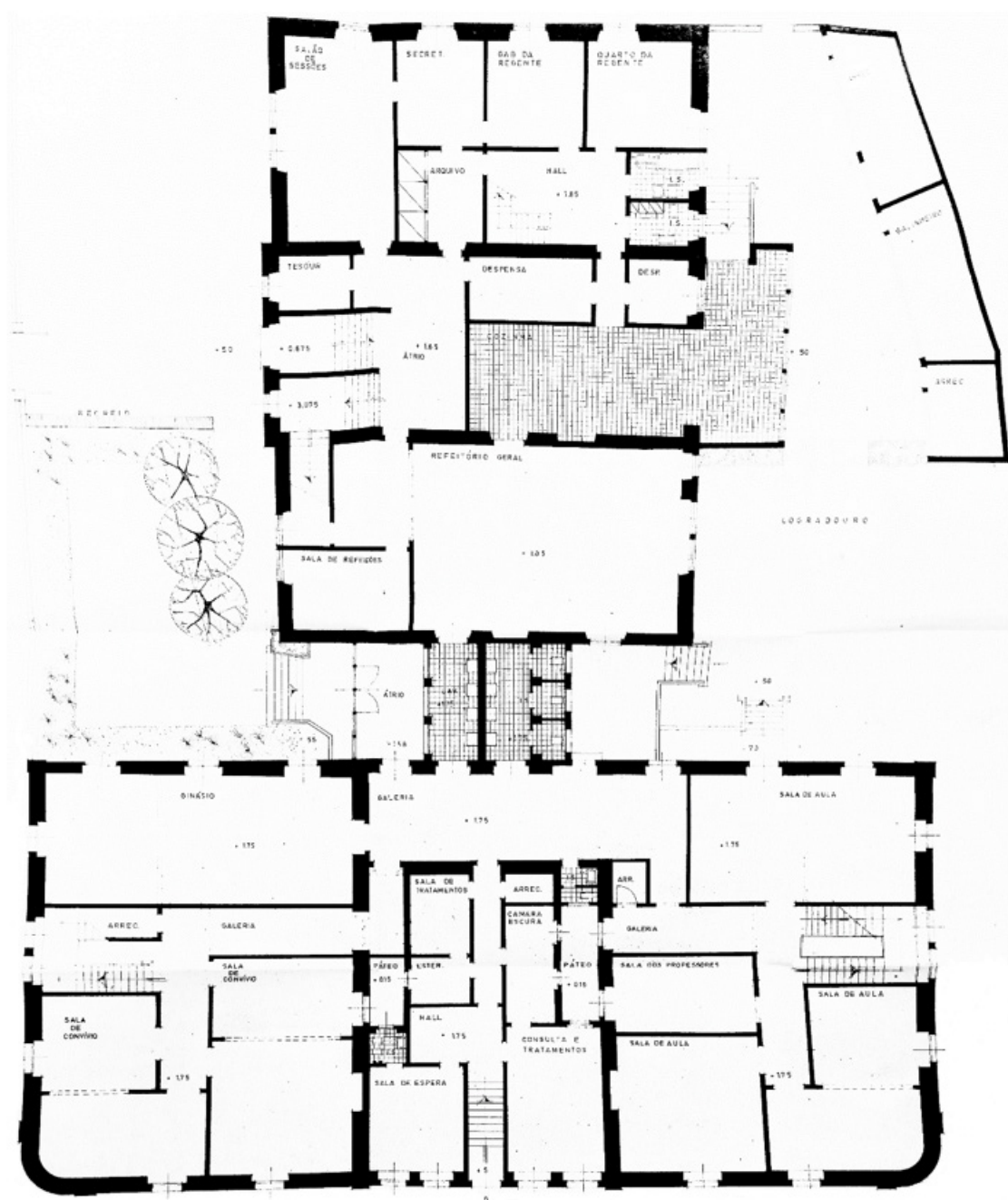
There was a greater opening to the outside and the existence of a younger and specialized group of teachers, some of them sighted (Interview 4, 20-12-2021 [from 1966 to 1975]). Thus, the need to expand some spaces and induce greater expertise. Generically, “on the ground floor, a new distribution of the rooms was made, expanding those which needed more area and decreasing the others” (Archive of Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Work 21554, process 24898/962, s. p.). In 1962, the session room was expanded into a main hall (Archive of Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Work 21554, process 24898/962). The interventions of that year seem to be related to the fact that the female students started to attend high school in regular schools, therefore having the need for study rooms (Interview 7, 01-06-2022 [from 1955 to 1966]).

But it was mainly in 1969/1970 that a deep change in the building space design occurred (Figures 3 to 6). Partly, the works of 1969/1970 are associated with the return of the boys. This change is documented in some specific areas’ designations. For instance, “general refectory” instead of “refectory (females)” (cf. Figures 3 and 4). The comparison between the carried-out plan and the proposed renovation enlightens the whole process.



**Figure 4:**

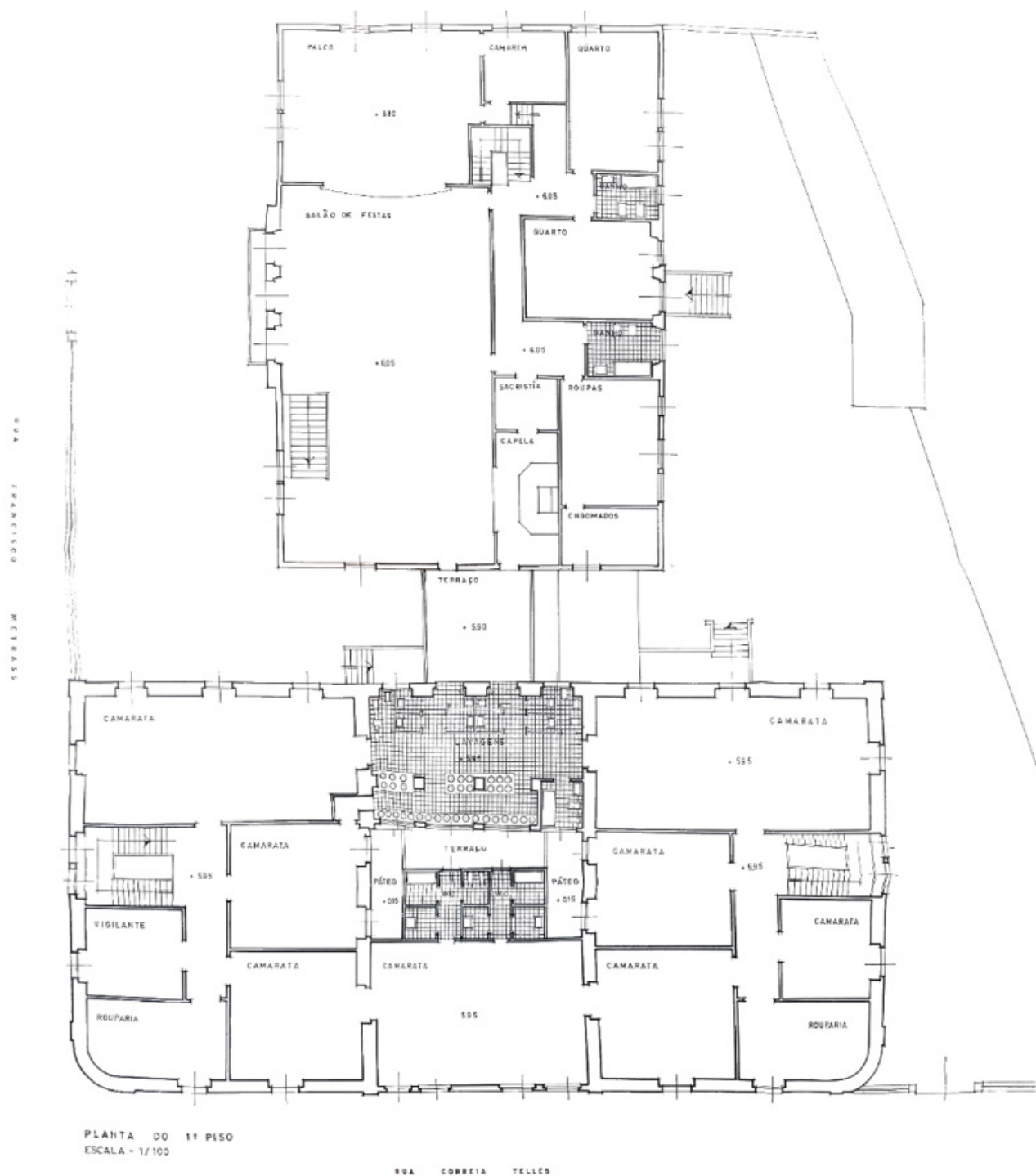
*Ground floor plan of Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho  
(renovation project, February 1969)*



Source: Archive of Ministério do Trabalho, Direção-Geral da Assistência, PT/SGMTSSS/DGA/MDA.

**Figure 5:**

*First floor plan of Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho  
(study, February 1969)*



Source: Archive of Ministério do Trabalho, Direção-Geral da Assistência, PT/SGMTSSS/DGA/MDA.



19-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1977 and Interview 1, 21-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1976]]. There are also references in the interviews to the existence of gymnastics classes on the first floor of the building, in the assembly room.

Therefore, two autonomous areas were clearly differentiated: one was meant for classroom-based activities (Interview 8, 19-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1977]), with direct supervision of the teachers; another one for more unrestrained activities and games, supervised by vigilant staff. One of the interviewees mentions that on the ground floor, after the 25th April 1974 – the date of a Portuguese Revolution that abolished a long period of decades of dictatorship, opening a democratic way of living – a bowling alley was set (Interview 1, 21-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1976]).

Likewise, it was interesting to perceive the circumscription of a gallery (situated precisely between the two mentioned building sides and with access to the refectories); it was a crossing space, a multipurpose area called “the Yellow Room” (Interview 7, 01-06-2022 [from 1955 to 1966]), meant to welcome Sunday guests (Interview 4, 20-12-2021 [from 1966 to 1975]), as well as to reading and musical enjoyment (Interview 9, 02-11-2021 [from 1969 to 1975]). The name has to do with the colour of its walls. It is possible that the “Yellow Room” has existed since the works of 1962. To be noted that the central area contained a series of spaces intended for the students’ medical assistance, enlarging the resources of 1934. This space had a waiting room and also welcomed visitors.

On the first floor, the assembly room did not undergo any changes and kept the religious space functionality (chapel and sacristy). But some spaces were specialized into new functions, such as crafts and “Daily life activities” (Interview 9, 02-11-2021 [from 1969 to 1975]), with a kitchen; it indicated a new orientation on the training of the young students, aiming to give them more autonomy and, consequently, more possibility of social integration. Moreover, it bears noticing the existence of a large room for crafts and two classrooms, as well as a study room near the assembly room. Throughout the decade of 1970, a growing investment on the social component of education of the boarding school can be observed, as an interviewee narrates: “The social part, the part [...] general of life as going out shopping, I don’t know, going to the market, going to a coffee shop, why not? I mean, all that experience enlarged” (Interview 8, 19-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1977], p. 2).

Therefore, in 1969, the institution tried to answer to new solicitations, as follows: i) more students (as the boys were returning to the school), meaning more classrooms and the reorganisation of the dormitories; ii) a different pedagogic orientation, whose most visible aspect is the promotion of Daily Life Activities, without forgetting the importance of crafts and leisure activities. Consequently, a greater specialisation of spaces was noticeable.

### 3. NARRATIVES OF EDUCATION SPACES AND MATERIALITY

In the words of Kim Nielsen (2012) “Disability is not the story of someone else” (p. xiii). The students we refer to are students just as the non-blind ones are. Their blindness only means that they use mostly other senses besides the usual vision-centric cultural imposition to access information.

As the school was prepared and dedicated to empowering blind students, we assumed that the material landscape was vaster than the commonly quoted for any other school. We do not speak only of school architecture, classroom furniture, spatial organisation, and learning tools, as referred to by Tondeur et al. (2017). We refer to the dormitory, the dining hall, the social rooms and the recreation spaces. In all those worlds occurred several learning processes and constant social innuendos.

Due to the interaction of space and students as part of the school definition, we had to consider that the specificity of a school made for blind students had a sociological consequence. As S. E. Smith (2020) notes: “a communal belonging, a deep rightness that comes from not having to explain or justify your existence” (p. 272).

The specificity of contact with information through hearing and touch by the students, materiality was as important as space itself. Not only was the materiality of the home inside the boarding school prepared to welcome blind students, but the school materials were also specific to blind or low-sighted students. In that sense, they are important to understand “the material and sensuous dimensions of school life” (Rasmussen, 2012, p. 115).

When we focus on the classroom, one of the fundamental issues is the difference between blind and low-sighted students. Thus, it is a question that determines the arrangement of classroom furniture as well as the use of educational technologies:

We had the desks turned towards each other; there was no back row because some of us saw a little bit (low-visioned); then, the low-visioned sat at the front and the blind stayed behind them, so that they [the former] could see the blackboard, although they didn't use the blackboard much [...] Then they put the low-visioned near the windows, I remember that classroom [...] I remember that the teacher had the desk in a corner... not in the middle of the classroom, it was in a corner. We were not a big class; we were 9 or 10 at most. (Interview 10, 13-01-2022 [from 1968 to 1976], p. 5)

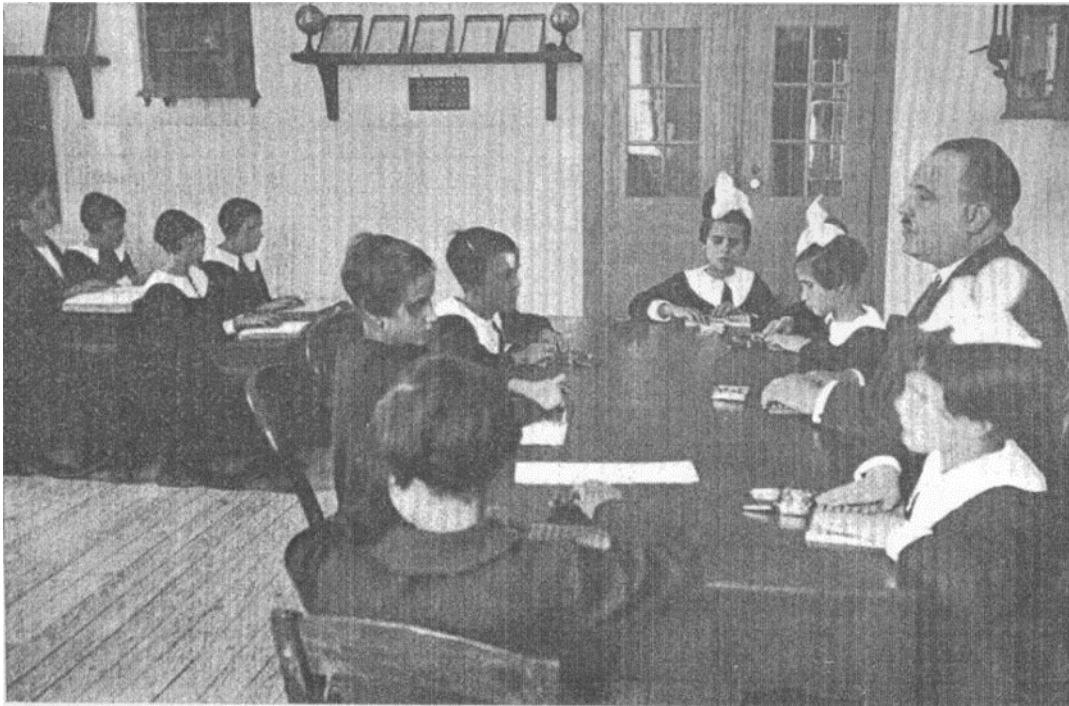
Our classes were small. In my classroom, I believe we were eight students. The tables were generally organized by the direction of the light [...] The teacher had a desk at the back, but there was never much on it. She walked around us. (Interview 5, 06-12-2021 [from 1971 to 1976], p. 13)

By these quotes, we conclude that materiality plays a very important role in the memory process (Rasmussen, 2012). This is relevant in particular to blind students.

The interviews also allowed us to state that few students constituted the classes. On the other hand, the pedagogical intervention of the teachers was highlighted by their proximity to the students. Note, in figure 7, that the teacher's desk is side-lined. We can say that we were in the presence of a dominant student-centred pattern (Cuban, 1993).

**Figure 7:**

*Class of elementary schooling at Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho, 1931*



Source: Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho. Fundada em 1888 (1931).

The camera registered a class of ten female students and a teacher, all of them blind. The teacher was sitting at quite a large desk, around which six female students were also sitting. Three of those appeared to be younger and were wearing big white hair ribbons. They were sitting closer to the teacher, thus allowing better support. Their hands touched what seems to be cubarithms, the arithmetic boards still used for blind students learning. From one side of the classroom, four more female students, seemingly older, sat two by two in inclined double desks. They touched paper, appearing to read Braille or Balu. From their positioning towards the teacher, they looked more autonomous about their work. The relationship of the teacher with the younger ones, more dependent, implies a tactile contact, even with the objects they were manipulating, highlighting the relevance of their learning tools. With the older students, the contact would be more vocal.

**Figure 8:**

*Class of elementary schooling at Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho, 1943*



Source: *Vida Mundial Ilustrada*, no. 88, 21st January 1943.

Figure 8 shows a scene of structured teaching, with blind female students of similar ages learning their first letters. Here, we considered relevant to highlight the spatial organisation and material disposition of the classroom that allowed the constitution of small groups, working with some autonomy, therefore in a more individualized teaching system, in which the blind teacher carries out an important pedagogical role.

As we analysed the interviews, we perceived the distinction of the use of materiality between blind and low-visioned students: slate and stylus (both for systems Braille and Balu) or Braille writing machine for the blind students; the magnifier, the use of enlarged characters and thick felt pen, for the low-visioned students (Interview 11, 22-11-2021 [from 1941 to ?]). The blackboard (although present) was not a needful technology, as follows:

The blackboard was not the most used material. Sometimes we went to the blackboard but then, the blackboard didn't make much sense because, most of the times, we could not see it. When the teacher wanted us to copy something she would write so that we copied it directly. We did not have the vision for that. (Interview 5, 06-12-2021 [from 1971 to 1976], p.15)

Contrariwise, the relevance of other learning tools and the normativity of learning through touch and hearing is very well defined on the recount of one of the interviewees, who underlines the emotional effect caused by premiering of a

Perkins Braille writing machine that had arrived from the United States for the three colleagues and I that had that privilege. Our classroom, all in our classroom, teacher Margarida's, the privilege of opening the box and taking out a new Perkins machine [...] to take out that Perkins machine made me value things a lot and appreciate, well, I can't describe it, I can't describe it... I think it was a huge sensation. (Interview 8, 19-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1977], p. 2)

In the post-revolutionary period of 1974, several relevant changes were witnessed in the pedagogical orientation of the Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho. In our understanding, the change of paradigm was particularly important towards the classroom, as the graded school model fell into disuse. Its essence was the accurate grading and continuous assessment process of the students towards the formation of uniform classes (Silva, 2008).

According to a teacher who entered the institution precisely in 1974, the Freinet methodology was adopted: "the children were very active, very participatory, given the time, evidently" (Interview 6, 03-02-2022 [from 1974 to 2000], p. 6). The students formed groups on "affinities" and "not by schooling grades", to use the words of the same teacher (Interview 6, 03-02-2022 [from 1974 to 2000], p. 6). She explains: "we had kids aged fourteen that were learning to read and had others with seven or eight that already knew how to do it" (Interview 6, 03-02-2022 [from 1974 to 2000], p. 6).

All the materials used in classrooms were specific to the use of blind and low-sighted students and teachers. In fact, our interviewees mention in detail the materiality in class. Both students and teachers mention the Braille and Balu embossed writing systems and music teaching, namely piano and violin (Interview 6, 03-02-2022 [from 1974 to 2000]). We have the memories of three students referring to the use of slate and stylus, magnifiers, thick ballpoint, regular books, Braille books, metallic and plastic cubarithms, Braille typewriter, embossed maps and a skeleton. (Interview 4, 20-12-2021 [from 1966 to 1975]; Interview 9, 02-11-2021 [from 1969-1975]; Interview 10, 13-01-2022 [from 1968 to 1976])

Finally, six students highlighted the availability of radio and TV, the use of musical instruments and several games and toys (Interview 1, 21-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1976]; Interview 2, 07-01-2022 [1976 to ?]; Interview 3, 26-01-2022 [1975-1986]; Interview 5, 06-12-2021 [1971-1976]; Interview 6, 03-02-2022 [from 1974-2000]; Interview 8, 19-01-2022 [from 1971-1977]). In the classroom, the double desktops were changed to single tables. The use of Braille books, the Braille Dymo labeller and the Braille typewriter became systematic. Nevertheless, the regular typewriter was still in use. Some embalmed animals were also at the disposition of the students.

Music teaching was associated with blindness since early times and the tradition of pursuing a musical career for a blind person was very strong (Willoughby, 2007). As such, in the great hall of the Asylum, there were pianos, harmonicas, organs and other instruments. There were always music teachers at the institution, most of them blind, and some having been former students. The existence of braille scores was also mentioned (Interview 11,

22-11-2021 [from 1941 to ?]) and is visible in photographic documents from the institution's early years, as shown in figure 9.

**Figure 9:**

*A small orchestra composed of young and elder male students plays in the garden. On their side, a female students' chorus reads from braille scores*



Source: Serões, June 1906, no 12, p. 486.

Finally, the workshop was also a constant at the school. In the building changes of 1969/1970, arrangements were made to clear specific spaces for working with wood, clay and other materials. The female students were taught crochet and knitting, as well as other sewing and embroidery skills, some of them very intricate, such as bobbin lace (Interview 5, 06-12-2021 [from 1971-1976]).

As a boarding school, Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho (Amado, 2007) had several household characteristics in addition to the school-like spaces. On the architectural memoir from 1910 (Archive of Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Work 21554, Process 2231), the description is very clear as to the intertwining of the school and living areas. During the time of exclusive female's education, the dormitories were arranged by ages. Afterwards, a rearrangement of the space turned one of them into rooms for teachers or for older students.

One of the most quoted changes in the late '60s/early '70s was the change of the room's furniture from iron to wood, which very much pleased the students. Nearby, the lavatory rooms also suffered renovations in the '70s, having had all their structure changed, with private showers added to the traditional common bathtub. There were rooms for the monitors on the same level.

Both the dormitory and kitchen/refectory areas were used as informal classrooms intended to teach the blind students how to cope with daily life chores. To make the beds, clean and arrange one's clothes and possessions, to sew and cook – for the female students, and set the table and eat properly, were all socially required skills.

Some of our interviews are particularly important, as they describe the relationship between the students and the daily space of the boarding school, such as:

We talked with colleagues who were already there, who had come previously. All was shown... If I remember correctly, they showed me all the space, the rooms, the dormitories. (Interview 1, 21-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1976], p. 2)

It was a true school, where the building did not cause us any problems. We, as I said yesterday in our talk, most people, the majority, got along easily within the school because the school was sort of geometric [...] Because the houses were like that at that time, those corridors and then rooms on each side. Therefore, it presented no difficulties. Although we did not see, got along very fast in that house. (Interview 7, 01-06-2022 [from 1955 to 1966], p. 1)

The recreation rooms were, in particular, the "Yellow Room" and the "Bowling Room" (Interview 1, 19-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1976]). In the garden, free space was at the students' disposal, and a skating rink that proved very popular was built in the '70s.

The Assembly room on the first floor was large and had a stage, as shown in figure 10. It was where music lessons took place and where most of the festivities happened (Archive of Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Work 21554, Process 2231). It was also open to the public on some occasions during the school year.

**Figure 10:**

*Assembly Room with public and a female student on the stage, indicating some sort of celebration, probably mid 40's*



Source: O Século Ilustrado, quoted in Campo de Ourique - True Story in <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1332283700166544> in 2022-09-06.

On one of its sides, there was a small chapel where mass was held every Sunday until the Portuguese Revolution in 1974. The Assembly room was intended to be a social space, besides its pedagogical functions such as music and theatre. In the 1931 report, it is stated:

The several parties promoted in the concert hall of Asilo-Escola had, therefore, not only the purpose of obtaining funds for the institution but also establishing a familiarity between the students and the audience, a familiarity that enhanced the natural joy of most blind young people, that allowed to know their usual way of being and also to highlight that blindness in nothing affects the dispositions of socializing. (Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho. Fundada em 1888, 1931, p. 2)

The interviewees systematically mention an extraordinary memory: the garden surrounding the front of the school building. This space of the Asylum was used for several functions: a football field and park for the bicycles for the boys, and a free area for walking and singing for the female students. Its fence had been filled with panels to preserve the privacy of the students (Interview 9, 02-11-2021 [from 1969 to 1975]; Interview 6, 03-02-2022 [from 1974 to 2000]).

After the Portuguese Revolution, the new generation of teachers, following Freinet pedagogy (Interview 6, 03-02-2022 [from 1974 to 2000]) and wishing the students to feel more within society, had the panels taken down (Interview 9, 02-11-2021 [from 1969 to 1975]). Almost all the favourite memories from both students and teachers are linked to the garden, namely the Linden tree garden, and constitute sensorial memories, from the odour to the tactile dimension of the tree and the hardness of its stem. The loquat tree and the fig tree were quoted several times by both students and teachers. The linden tree, in particular, had an utter relevance in the interviewees' testimonies.

On the inside of the building, free time was an escape from the compulsory routines and allowed the imagination to dominate (Interview 1, 19-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1976]). Several field trips also occurred on a regular basis (Interview 8, 19-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1977]).

The female students mentioned their sitting or walking together, talking and singing, at the recess rooms or in the yard, arm in arm, from one side to the other (Interview 4, 20-12-2021 [from 1966 to 1975]; Interview 7, 06-01-2022, [from 1955 to 1966]). The recess was not seen from the outside and they knew they were isolated (Interview 9, 02-11-2021 [from 1969 to 1975]). As for the boys, they preferred the outside sport activities such as football. There was also a small room under the stairway where the female students studied and talked. Sometimes they had small parties there, asking for food and drinks from a window to the street coffee shop nearby. It was a freedom space (Interview 7, 06-01-2022 [from 1955 to 1966]).

The last extraordinary space we found in the interviews was the one referenced by the imaginative adventures that came from the reading of Enid Blyton's *The Famous Five*, a very popular collection of books available in Braille at the school, that prompted explorations to forbidden areas of the building, such as the basement quarters: "We went on an adventure!" (Interview 8, 19-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1977], p. 12). Here, the environment was the third "teacher" that Tondeur and Herman mention (Herman & Tondeur, 2021). Some interviewees described the stories very vividly and the consequent explorations as good and exciting memories of their time at the school (Interview 7, 06-01-2022 [from 1955 to 1966]; Interview 8, 19-01-2022 [from 1971 to 1977]).

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS

Our research crossed different sources, such as building plans, student and teacher interviews, photographs and institutional reports. From all those, we used mostly the perspective of the students. This allowed us to perceive, in a new light, the lived space intertwined with the planned space. Learning is not only what happens inside the classroom. In fact, the interviewees gave us testimony of a wider learning environment in a school for blind students, where sensory diversity required daily activities practice aiming for an integrated social life and future citizenship (Park, 2020).

Authors such as Lisa Rosén Rasmussen and Herman and Tondeur inspired this idea of mobilizing these students' personal memories and

biographies, not only the teachers' perspectives. Our chosen methodology of intertwining the biographic narratives with the visual sources, namely the institutional plans, contributed to open the "black box of schooling" of Asilo-escola António Feliciano de Castilho and proved to be a new approach to the lived space. In our understanding, this is a research of great importance. On the one hand, it brings to light the lived space in articulation with the planned space for the education of blind students. On the other hand, in doing so, it provides new knowledge and understandings about the experiences of students whose recollection of a building and of their school life rely on senses other than sight.

Our perception is that the school's evolution was due not only to the institutional projects or teachers' guidance but also to the students' use of space and materiality. The renovations made in 1969/1970 by the architect already had in mind the daily needs of the students and their expected use of the new planned space. A pedagogy essentially centred in the classroom (from the building of 1910) was then changed, leading to the increase of the classroom areas that had now more natural light due to the dismantlement of some walls. This showed more care with the teaching of low-visioned children and the rise of a new pedagogy for the blind students (Interview 4, 20-12-2021 [from 1966 to 1975]; Interview 9, 02-11-2021 [from 1969-1975]). Between 1910 and the years of 1969/1970, the school building was thus reinvented towards new pedagogic standards and users' needs.

With the dissemination of convivial spaces, crafts rooms, daily life chores rooms and reading, music and leisure rooms, the learning environment extended beyond the classroom. The building plan evolved, as such, towards a qualification of different spaces. In short, "the classrooms have ceased to function as space-for-everything, in an application of specific didactics to architecture" (Lacombe Montes & Campos Uribe, 2018, p. 14). In a way, one could tell that with the renovations of the late 1960s, a part of the building was "given" to the students, whether for enjoyment and leisure, or to less formal learning.

As we have stated, it was clear for the students the difference between those activities and the pedagogical ones, linked to different physical spaces. It is true, to a point, that the planned space conditioned the life inside the building. However, we consider that, following Antoine Picon (2020) "the concrete experience of architecture is rarely static. It unfolds in time as much as in space, a time saturated with cultural content" (p. 283).

It is also relevant to state that through both visual sources, such as building plans and photographs, and biographic interviews, it was noticeable a personalized teaching system – associated with the specificities of the blind students, less centred in the teacher. Therefore, the students were respected for their individual differences (as in the case of differences required by blindness or low-vision situations). Furthermore, there were activities developed in restricted groups, there was individual support for the students and availability of varied pedagogic materials. We highlight once more that the used materiality was very important to the constitution of the memories of the blind students.

In the end, what other historical sources can be summoned towards a deeper knowledge of the daily educational activity of a school for blind

children? How did gender government, political changes and pedagogic theories manifest themselves through the life of this and other schools for blind students? What unspoken spaces and touchscapes remain for future case studies?

We conclude that architectural planning does not lead to a unique pedagogy, nor is it lasting. As such, the perspective of imagining the school as a “black box” should be explored in its most unpredictable strands, along with the possibility of allowing students to perform gestures that define the school itself. In fact, it is not possible to understand the historical evolution of the spatial dimension apart from the action that takes place within. This is, we believe, a fruitful way of thinking about and inquire into the intense educational and boarding daily life in a school for blind students.

## AUTHORSHIP

Authors' contributions: Conceptualisation, MRA e CMS; Methodology, MRA e CMS; Validation, MRA e CMS; Formal analysis, MRA e CMS; Research, MRA e CMS; Data curation, MRA e CMS; Writing of original draft, MRA e CMS; Writing of revisions and corrections, MRA e CMS; Supervision, MRA e CMS; Project administration, MRA e CMS. All authors have read and agree to the publication of this manuscript.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no external conflicts of interest, direct or indirect, personal or financial. or indirect, personal or financial interests related to this article.

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## **Espaços Educacionais para os Cegos: o Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho (1888-1996)**

### **RESUMO**

Seguindo o exemplo de diversos países da Europa e América no final do século XVIII e século XIX, Portugal teve a sua primeira escola para alunos cegos em 1888. O internato Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho foi um projecto pedagógico fundado pela Associação Promotora para o Ensino dos Cegos que resultou num edifício escolar deveras interessante, com uma personalidade única. Baseados nas plantas originais, relatórios institucionais, entrevistas e fotografias, pretendemos dar ênfase ao espaço vivido, que definiu esta escola sobre o espaço planeado, assim como à sua contribuição para o conceito de “black box of schooling” e para a história da educação de alunos cegos. A coleção de fontes possibilitou-nos um ponto de vista interno e externo da sala de aula, suportado pelos relatos na primeira pessoa e na análise da materialidade especializada. Analisámos a planta original de 1910, as grandes remodelações ocorridas em 1969/1970, e apresentámos as vivências espaciais e suas problemáticas à luz dos temas da cegueira e da educação. Não é possível compreender a evolução histórica da dimensão espacial da instituição em separado da ação que nela decorreu. Assim, a experiência da arquitetura é dinâmica no tempo e no espaço. Concluimos o nosso escrito propondo novas linhas de pesquisa que possibilitem a exploração dinâmica entre espaço, pedagogia e sujeitos.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação de cegos; Arquitetura escolar; Materialidade; Biografias; Espaço vivido.

## Espacios educativos para ciegos: el Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho (1888-1996)

### RESUMEN

Siguiendo el ejemplo de diversos países de Europa y América a finales del siglo XVIII y siglo XIX, Portugal tuvo su primera escuela para alumnos ciegos en 1888. El internado Asilo-Escola António Feliciano de Castilho fue un proyecto pedagógico fundado por la Asociación Promotora para la Enseñanza de los Ciegos que resultó en un edificio escolar muy interesante, con una personalidad única. Basados en las plantas originales, informes institucionales, entrevistas y fotografías, pretendemos dar énfasis al espacio vivido, que definió esta escuela sobre el espacio planeado, así como a su contribución al concepto de "black box of schooling" y a la historia de la educación de alumnos ciegos. La colección de fuentes nos permitió un punto de vista interno y externo del aula, apoyado por los relatos en primera persona y en el análisis de la materialidad especializada. Analizamos la planta original de 1910, las grandes remodelaciones ocurridas en 1969/1970, y presentamos las vivencias espaciales y sus problemáticas a la luz de los temas de la ceguera y de la educación. No es posible comprender la evolución histórica de la dimensión especial de la entidad por separado de la acción que en ella ocurre. Así, la experiencia de la arquitectura es dinámica en el tiempo y en el espacio. Concluimos nuestro escrito proponiendo nuevas líneas de investigación que posibiliten la exploración dinámica entre espacio, pedagogía y sujetos.

**Palabras clave:** Educación de ciegos; Arquitectura escolar; Materialidad; Biografías; Espacio vivido.