

MOBILE HOMES AND CARAVANS IN THE ALGARVE

Migrant Housing, Land Occupation, and Digital Mediation

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Abstract. The article addresses the current housing crisis in Portugal during a period of extreme financialisation of the urban space. It focuses on the Algarve region, specifically Loulé and Albufeira, and stresses its particular context in recent years (2022-2025), marked by high immigration rates and rapid social and cultural transformation. The article explores informal strategies to housing access among disadvantaged migrants. Due to the shortage of affordable accommodation, many of these migrants have occupied rural plots with mobile homes and caravans. These practices, in turn, have introduced new urban-rural dynamics with profound impacts. The central objectives of this investigation are: to identify recent trends in informal housing access by disadvantaged migrants, both in Loulé and Albufeira, following its greater visibility; to examine their experiences with these informal housing practices and their consequences; and to explore digital

communication that supports the informal housing market while at the same time shaping specific public discourses about the issue. Drawing on an interthematic approach that combines urban studies, migration, and digital fields, the article provides both conceptual and empirical insights for analysing socio-spatial and socio-digital practices. It includes a paradigmatic case study, the Guia Campsite, illuminating the precariousness and deprivation of migrant housing in the Algarve region and their digital representation. Conclusions show that migrant housing informality in the Algarve emerges from the interaction between structural housing shortages, restrictive land regulation and digital mediation. Mobile homes and caravans function as adaptive housing strategies but also reproduce new forms of vulnerability, speculation and exclusion. Digital platforms simultaneously facilitate access to informal housing, shape public narratives and reinforce socio-

-spatial inequalities. The findings highlight the need to reconcile housing rights, territorial regulation and spatial justice in peripheral regions.

Keywords: housing access; rural land; informality; migration; digital media.

1. Introduction

Portugal faces an unprecedented housing crisis. It reflects housing financialisation, commodification, the progressive retreat of the state from sufficient housing provision, and a systemic failure of regulation. Such conditions increase dependence on market-based solutions, further deepening socio-spatial inequalities. Capitalist forces have driven sharp price increases, particularly in major cities. Most households cannot access adequate housing in the neoliberal market: homeownership is primarily achievable for the affluent, while rental markets have become significantly tighter, with prices increasing sharply. Touristification, gentrification, evictions and peripheralisation have intensified, resulting in widespread social discrimination and spatial segregation. Greater Lisbon is a prime example, studied by numerous scholars from diverse perspectives (e.g., housing segregation, Seixas and Antunes, 2019; housing informality, Ascensão, 2023; migrant housing, Viegas and Santinho, 2026). Similar dynamics are increasingly affecting other cities and regions, where rising housing costs, limited public intervention, and inadequate affordable housing provision have further exacerbated precarious living conditions.

This article examines informal housing as an increasingly widespread strategy among disadvantaged migrants in central Algarve, specifically in Loulé and Albufeira. It analyses how spatial, social and digital informal practices shape housing access, transform urban-rural spaces and influence migrants' everyday lives. Disadvantaged migrants are understood as people experiencing intersecting socio-economic and housing vulnerabilities, including low income, precarious employment, insecure housing and limited access to the formal housing market, which constrain access to adequate housing. The article asks: What informal socio-spatial practices are emerging in the Algarve in response to growing housing deprivation and segregation? How do disadvantaged migrants engage with these practices, and what opportunities do they create? What role do digital networks play in these processes? What are their spatial, social and digital implications?

In the Algarve (467,475 inhabitants; AMAL, 2023), the third-most-attractive region for immigrants (after Greater Lisbon and Porto), housing costs are very

high, especially in coastal areas. Loulé and Albufeira provide insight into this problem from their situated perspective. The municipality of Loulé (67,096 housing units; PORDATA, 2024) is unequal and polarised in its demographics and economy (urban/rural, coastal/interior) (AMAL, 2023). Its strong economic capacity is largely driven by tourism and luxury real-estate development in the Golden Triangle (Quinta do Lago, Vilamoura, and Almancil/Vale do Lobo), which has also attracted foreign investment, including through the former Golden Visa programme.¹ Albufeira (45,083 housing units; PORDATA, 2024) also has financial autonomy. The municipality attracts short-term residents and mass tourists, and exhibits the highest unemployment rate among the active-age population in the region (19.7%; AMAL, 2023).

The proportion of the Algarve's population at risk of poverty or social exclusion declined from 25.7% in 2022 to 16.4% in 2025 (EAPN, 2023, 2025). However, these aggregate figures mask profound housing inequalities and growing socio-spatial vulnerability associated with the housing crisis. At the same time, the Algarve has Portugal's second-highest rate of immigration growth, with foreign residents accounting for approximately one-third of the population (AMAL, 2023; AIMA, 2025). Their presence is particularly significant in Loulé and Albufeira, where many work in seasonal and precarious tourism-related occupations, including restaurants, food delivery, passenger transport, construction, gardening, and domestic work. Unable to afford adequate housing, many rely on precarious alternatives in rural areas or campsites, including mobile homes, caravans, prefabricated houses, containers, and tents. These changing socio-spatial dynamics are reflected and reinforced through digital media, which have become a key infrastructure for promoting informal housing markets, shaping public and semi-private debates, and mediating migrants' access to housing. However, digital representations often contrast idealised images of affordable lifestyles

¹ It was operational between 2012 and 2023, leading to property investments totalling at least €500,000 or the creation of 10 jobs.

with narratives exposing the precarious housing conditions experienced by disadvantaged migrants.

The article aims to identify emerging forms of informal housing access in central Algarve, examine their implications for disadvantaged migrants, analyse the role of digital media in sustaining informal housing markets and shaping public discourses, and present the Guia campsite as a case study of migrant housing deprivation, rural land occupation and digital mediation. Ultimately, it contributes to the Migrant [& Refugee] Research for (Post)Covid-19. National Measures and Local Actions in the Algarve: A Digital Tour for Access to Adequate Housing and Living Conditions (Viegas, 2025) by advancing the debate on alternative socio-spatial and socio-digital practices. By combining urban studies, migration research and digital ethnography, the article contributes to debates on housing informality by showing how spatial, social and digital practices intersect to shape migrants' housing access beyond Portugal's metropolitan areas (Greater Lisbon and Porto).

The article is organised into five sections. Following the methodology and conceptual framework, it examines the housing problem in the Algarve region, particularly in Loulé and Albufeira, through three interconnected dimensions: (1) urban - housing access, land regulation and criminalisation; (2) migration - housing deprivation and migrants' experiences; and (3) digital mediation - access to informal land and housing markets. It then presents the Guia campsite case study, where these socio-spatial and digital dynamics converge, and concludes with a discussion on their wider implications.

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach and vision

The methodological approach is interdisciplinary, integrating urban, migration and digital studies. It captures the multidimensional nature of the research problem by examining the informal practices developed by disadvantaged migrants. It combines conceptual insights with empirical analysis. Drawing on these three fields alongside social and digital ethnography, it examines

disadvantaged migrants' access to land and housing. Social ethnography examines everyday practices and lived experiences in specific places, while digital ethnography extends this analysis to online environments where housing opportunities, interactions and informal practices are produced, circulated and negotiated. Together, these complementary approaches conceptualise housing informality as a process unfolding across interconnected physical, social and digital spaces.

The study adopts a multi-sited ethnographic approach. Housing practices reveal both precarity and exclusion, as well as forms of adaptation, agency and alternative socio-spatial arrangements. The work adopts a reflexive methodology, recognising knowledge as co-produced through interactions between field observation, participants' lived experiences and digital representations. Accordingly, physical and digital environments are treated as interconnected ethnographic fields rather than separate domains. Given participants' vulnerability, the research prioritised informed consent, anonymity and minimising potential risks throughout fieldwork and digital observation. These methodological principles are operationalised through complementary field-based and digital qualitative methods, described in the following section.²

Operationally, the study follows the methodological principles outlined in the article Diversity, interculturalism and community building in the Algarve: Preliminary findings for (re)imagining a digital road map of hope (Viegas, 2025), ensuring coherence between conceptual orientation, empirical observation and digital methods within a reflexive research agenda. These principles comprise: (1) subversive layers (urban), referring to spatial practices that challenge uneven geographical development, homogenisation and segregation; (2) rebel dots (social), referring to disadvantaged migrants resisting housing precarity; and (3) counter-fluxes (digital), referring to digital social media practi-

² The project is developed at the Research Centre for Arts and Communication, University of Algarve (CIAC, UAlg), funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT, Portugal), reference 2021.03008.CEECIND/FCT (<https://sciproj.ptcris.pt/7940EEC>).

ces that counter poor representations of disadvantaged migrants, with tangible implications. These principles aim to identify physical and digital spaces that have been transformed, with disadvantaged immigrants as the driving force (Viegas, 2025).

2.2. Methods

The study reviews literature on informality through three interconnected dimensions: spatial practices, understood as expressions of precarity but also of creative transformation; social practices, examined as both sites of exclusion and sources of solidarity and support; and digital media practices, which challenge neoliberal logics and shape alternative politics of legitimation through cultural encounters. Informality thus links spatial subversion, social resistance and alternative media circuits. The review also examines disadvantaged migrants' access to land and housing and the role of digital media in these processes.

Fieldwork was conducted in the central Algarve (2024–2025) following qualitative ethnographic principles, combining prolonged site visits, participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. Access to participants was built on contacts established during the first research phase (2022), followed by snowball sampling and repeated visits that strengthened trust with residents. The initial phase focused on selected sites in Faro and Loulé (as noted in Viegas, 2025); the present research expanded to Vale Judeu, Boliqueime and Guia (Albufeira), concentrating on rural land occupation through mobile homes and caravans. Similar dynamics are also emerging in neighbouring municipalities, including Faro.³

Semi-structured interviews and discussions with key informants identified disadvantaged migrants living in precarious housing - primarily mobile homes and caravans - in rural areas of Loulé and Albufeira. Participants were recruited through contacts in Vale Judeu and fieldwork at the Guia campsite. Selection prioritised

direct experience of informal housing rather than statistical representativeness, seeking diverse migration trajectories and housing situations. The empirical material comprises three in-depth interviews (July–August 2024), one focus group (July 2024) and several informal conversations (2024–2025) with migrants from the Netherlands, Brazil and South Asia. Interviews were conducted primarily in Portuguese and English. Conversations were audio-recorded whenever participants agreed; otherwise, detailed field notes were produced during and immediately after the encounters. Interview transcripts, field notes, visual materials, and digital documents were analysed through iterative qualitative coding derived from the analytical framework. Participants included adult migrant women and men experiencing housing precarity. Two technicians from the local government were also contacted.

Migrant participants represented different national backgrounds but shared similar insecure housing and reliance on informal accommodation. Most worked in low-paid or seasonal sectors linked to tourism, construction and domestic work, while others experienced unemployment or unstable income. Household compositions varied, including single adults and families with children. To minimise identification risks, further personal details were omitted, and all identifiers anonymised. Ethical considerations informed all stages of the research. Participation was voluntary and required informed consent obtained before interviews, conversations and photographic documentation. Participants received information about the study, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any stage. All personal names and potentially identifying information were removed or anonymised, and precise spatial references were limited whenever disclosure could expose participants to additional risks. Care was taken to avoid producing information that could facilitate surveillance, eviction or administrative sanctions.

Photographs, audio and video recordings documented spatial configurations, material conditions and landscape transformations, enabling repeated analysis of field observations. Whenever individuals were recognisable, identifying features were removed. Together, these materials documented land occupation, housing typologies, building materials, infrastructures, everyday activities, and socio-spatial inequalities across the region. Google Maps

³ Fieldwork followed the standards approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Algarve (process 140/2023).

complemented this analysis by tracing land-occupation patterns and their rapid transformation between 2020 and 2024, particularly in the Guia case study.

Digital ethnography examined how informal housing markets and related discourses are produced and mediated online. Data were collected through systematic observation of digital platforms and news reports (between June 2024 and October 2025). The analysis focused on approximately 60 samples, which included: (1) housing advertisements promoting informal accommodation; (2) users' interactions, comments and housing-related exchanges; (3) media representations of migrant housing conditions; and (4) the circulation of narratives concerning informality, migration and housing. Facebook groups provided access to semi-private interactions, while platforms such as Idealista and NIT offered complementary perspectives on housing supply and nature-related lifestyles. These digital materials were analysed alongside the observations and interviews, enabling the study to explore how informal housing practices are simultaneously experienced, negotiated and represented across interconnected physical and digital environments.

Screenshots documented material shared in publicly accessible online spaces and Facebook groups accessed through the platform's standard participation procedures during the ethnographic fieldwork. Observation remained non-participatory and was limited to naturally occurring interactions. Screenshots were retained as field records, while personal identifiers were removed or anonymised in all analytical and published materials. No private messages or restricted personal information were collected. Only material directly relevant to the research questions was documented, and all excerpts reproduced in the article were anonymised to minimise the risk of participant identification.

Digital narrative recognition involved collecting existing news coverage of the case study from television and radio channels' websites and newspapers. News coverage was limited to reports from SIC Notícias (2024a, 2024b), TVI Notícias (2024), and Agência Lusa (2024), later reproduced by local media (e.g., Renascença, Sol, Notícias ao Minuto). They documented the 2024 policy intervention at the Guia campsite, combining testimonies from affected residents and audiovisual footage. The collected narratives

highlighted the illegality and criminalisation of rural space appropriation by migrants from the perspective of legal authorities, and the housing crisis and its practical impacts from the perspective of the so-called illegal residents. This material reinforced and complemented the insights collected during the fieldwork.

3. Alternative informal socio-spatial and socio-digital practices: a brief conceptual framework

Lefebvre's (1974) concept of social space - as a product of everyday social relations - provides the basis for understanding informal spatial practices shaped and reproduced through lived experience and cultural practices. Space is therefore not neutral but reflects power relations, everyday negotiations, and unequal access to urban resources. These practices operate at the margins of political institutions and urban regimes, challenging prevailing norms, regulations, and planning frameworks. Some are criminalised or considered illegal, yet they are closely intertwined with social strategies that respond to structural inequalities (Harvey, 2005). Land tenure and housing access are central to this process: the occupation, transformation and self-production of space constitute inventive forms of resistance and adaptation. While these landscapes reflect precariousness and marginality, they also create opportunities for creativity, empowerment and agency. They provide fertile ground for claiming spatial justice (Fainstein, 2010; Soja, 2010) and advancing the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008). Within this perspective, housing informality can be understood not merely as a response to material deprivation, but as a socio-spatial practice through which individuals negotiate access to resources, claim forms of urban belonging and challenge exclusionary urban regimes.

Research on migration, housing informality and everyday survival strategies suggests that migrants experiencing legal, economic, spatial and social exclusion frequently rely on informal social practices to secure housing and other basic resources. Although these practices operate outside formal structures and may be criminalised, they are fundamental to survival

and integration. As Darling (2016, p. 189) argues, they can constitute “minor political acts”. When excluded from formal housing, migrants develop adaptive strategies that respond to structural inequalities reinforced by capitalist housing markets and uneven geographical development (Harvey, 2005). By filling institutional gaps, these practices become increasingly visible. The occupation, appropriation and transformation of rural land through informal housing exemplify Bayat’s (1997, p. 66) “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”. These spaces not only shape everyday living conditions but also sustain collective action, including mobilisations advocating the right to housing.

Events in digital environments are deeply entangled with material and social life (Egler, 2024; Carvalho et al., 2025). Through digital mediation, existing power relations, negotiations and everyday practices extend across physical and digital environments. Information infrastructures and their algorithms create socio-technical environments that mirror, refract and reconfigure material realities, shaping how housing opportunities, informal markets and social interactions are organised. Informal digital practices translate socio-spatial processes of occupation, appropriation, resistance, negotiation and adaptation into digital environments through narratives, discourses and representations. Regarding housing access, digital platforms govern mediation, often reproducing structural inequalities and exclusion (Ferrerri & Sanyal, 2022). While creating opportunities for disadvantaged migrants to build informal support networks, circulate housing options and negotiate alternative forms of housing access, these platforms simultaneously expose users to fraud, surveillance, misinformation, discrimination and unequal visibility.

4. The housing problem in the Algarve region: building from the cases of Loulé and Albufeira

4.1 Housing access, rural legal framework, land occupation, and criminalisation of informal practices

The burden of housing costs in the Algarve reaches 9.1%, well above the national average of 5% (AMAL,

2023). In the municipalities of Albufeira and Loulé, the average buying prices of apartments are approximately €3,500 and €4,000 per square meter, respectively, resulting in costs ranging from around €350,000 to €400,000 for a two-bedroom apartment (100 square meters) (INE, 2026). Monthly rental prices are also among the highest in Portugal: Albufeira (€439.99) and Loulé (€418.26) rank the fourth- and fifth-most expensive municipalities, respectively, after Cascais (€529.73), Lisbon (€470.87), and Oeiras (€456.62), all located in the Greater Lisbon Area (IHRU, 2023, p. 2). These high costs leave many unable to afford housing, whether through purchase or rent. Albufeira has the highest economic vulnerability rate among tenants in mainland Portugal, at 27.4%, and a severe overcrowding rate of 44.3% (IHRU, 2023, pp. 14 and 28).

On the other hand, it also has a significant share of seasonal residences (second homes), comprising 50% of the housing stock (21,377 units), and a vacancy rate of 13% (5,355 units) (CMA, 2021, p. 52). Loulé has 43% of second homes, and 12% (8,366 units) of its total housing stock is vacant. By January 2025, 330 municipal housing units, out of a planned total of 974, had been completed. However, these efforts remain insufficient to meet demand: at least 1,128 households were experiencing housing distress (CML, 2024, p. 26). By 2025, this figure had increased to 2,000 (Loulé, 2025, p. 15).

In Portugal, land use is governed by a planning system that clearly distinguishes between urban and rural land. Outside designated urban areas, residential construction is generally prohibited or subject to strict legal restrictions, particularly within environmentally protected areas or agricultural reserves. Consequently, although users often perceive mobile homes, caravans and other removable structures as temporary solutions, their use as permanent housing generally requires planning authorisation. This framework is central to understanding the tensions between housing needs, informal occupation, legal regulation, and public enforcement examined below.

If affordable housing in urban financialised land markets is difficult to find, rural areas offer even fewer options due to the stringent construction regulations and extensive restrictions mentioned earlier. For example, the National Ecological Reserve (REN) comprises areas legally protected for their ecological value or vul-

nerability to natural hazards. Exceptions authorised by the government include soil and forest protection works, maintenance and repair of existing buildings, and public infrastructure. The National Agricultural Reserve (RAN) protects land suitable for agriculture, livestock, and forestry. Construction is also strictly regulated; however, it is permitted, e.g., for agricultural purposes, storage facilities, and tourism. Recently, in response to the housing crisis, a new Land Law (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2024) was approved, allowing municipalities to reclassify rural land as urban. Its objective was to relieve pressure on the urban land market. This law has been strongly criticised by scholars and planning practitioners. Although urban land is not considered scarce, critics argue that the reform may encourage urban expansion and financial speculation (Tulumello, 2025).

Fieldwork suggests that many participants were either unaware of, or underestimated, the legal constraints. Consequently, a significant number of individuals have been buying, renting, or using previously acquired plots to meet their long- and short-term housing needs. The findings also indicate that the occupation of land with precarious solutions, such as mobile homes, prefabricated or wooden houses, containers, caravans, tents, or similar structures, has become increasingly common. Observations documented a rise in the use of campsites across the rural landscape to accommodate growing numbers of residents, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022). The use of such accommodations on rural land requires authorisation, as noted, regardless of whether they are removable. The municipality of Loulé, for example, issued fines to approximately 700 landowners in this situation, many of them Portuguese, and notified them of administrative possession and demolition orders: “We must enforce the law because the rule of law requires it” (SIC Notícias, 2025) (Online Statement 1). This statement reflects the institutional framing of informal housing primarily as a matter of legal compliance and planning enforcement. However, for many affected residents, these occupations constitute adaptive responses to structural housing shortages, illustrating the tensions mentioned above.

Affected landowners organised a petition calling for the suspension of the demolitions (the movement “Do

Not Tear Down the Houses”). These 700 households represent almost half of the municipality’s estimated housing needs and substantially exceed the number of households benefiting from recent public housing provision. At the same time, the approval of the new Land Law led some to believe that their plots could be urbanised, reinforcing informal activities. These misconceptions fuelled speculation in rural land, with prices rising by up to 100% regardless of their real potential: “it used to cost €9,000 [now is more than double]” (Post 1). Rather than reflecting changes in the legal status of rural land, this example illustrates how expectations generated by the new legislation fuelled speculative behaviour and increased land prices despite continuing planning restrictions.

4.2. Migration, struggles and deprivation of rights

Portugal has historically maintained comparatively open migration policies and a public discourse broadly supportive of immigration, reflected in its strong performance in international integration rankings (MIPEX, 2025). However, this context has changed considerably since 2024. Successive reforms to migration governance - including the end of the manifestation of interest procedure, tighter border controls, institutional restructuring and a more restrictive political discourse - have coincided with the electoral rise of anti-immigration narratives promoted by right-wing populist actors, contributing to changing public perceptions of migration. Currently, the country has approximately 14% permanent foreign residents, amounting to approximately 1.5 million out of almost 11 million inhabitants (AIMA, 2025; INE, 2025). Of these foreigners, around 40% live in Lisbon (606,179), while 11% reside in the Algarve (167,321) (AIMA, 2025).

With an estimated total population of 467,475 (AMAL, 2023), the Algarve region has the highest percentage of permanent foreign residents, at 36% of its inhabitants, and an annual growth rate exceeding 30%. Loulé, the most populous municipality (72,348 inhabitants), is home to 29,578 immigrants, representing about 41% of its population and approximately 18% of the Algarve’s immigrant population (AMAL, 2023; AIMA, 2025). The municipality of Albufeira, in turn,

has 44,168 residents (AMAL, 2023), of whom 61% (26,906) are immigrants (AIMA, 2025), representing approximately 16% of the Algarve's foreign population.

The less affluent economic migrants, primarily seeking job opportunities and improved economic conditions, are primarily from Brazil, the largest nationality, accounting for 31.4% (484,596) of foreign residents nationally and 17% (17,496) in the Algarve (AMAL, 2023; AIMA, 2025). Other migrants experiencing economic and housing vulnerability in the Algarve region come primarily from Eastern Europe (Romania and Ukraine) and Asia (India and Nepal). Brazilians benefit from the CPLP agreement - a mobility agreement signed in 2021 between Portuguese-speaking countries -, facilitating their entry into the country: "I fell in love with a Brazilian woman. She returned to Brazil to try to enter the Netherlands [my home country], only to discover that she could not do so legally. So, we both came to Portugal" (Statement 2). This testimony illustrates how Portugal was perceived by some migrants as a comparatively accessible destination within Europe, particularly following the CPLP mobility agreement. At the same time, it also highlights how mobility trajectories are shaped by legal constraints operating across different national contexts rather than by Portugal alone.

However, many migrants subsequently experienced social discrimination, spatial segregation and difficult living conditions in Portugal and the Algarve. Many remain socially and economically vulnerable, relying on social assistance and cultural activities while simultaneously developing community-building practices (Viegas, 2025). Since 2024, migrants have also increasingly reported experiences of racism, xenophobia and discrimination, reflecting broader political and social changes in Portugal and across Europe. Reforms to migration legislation, tighter admission procedures and the growing prominence of anti-immigration narratives have contributed to a more polarised public discourse, with tangible consequences for migrants' everyday housing experiences and sense of belonging (Viegas, 2025; Viegas & Santinho, 2026).

In the Algarve, migrants face systemic challenges similar to those experienced by other residents, particularly in accessing urban services (infrastructure, transportation, schools, employment, and healthcare).

One of the most pressing issues is access to adequate housing in urban areas. Numerous situations were reported during interviews, informal conversations, and the focus group discussion. At the same time, similar accounts were also documented through social media posts and housing-related online groups analysed during the digital ethnography. Their challenges include: homelessness or poor living conditions, as some are forced to sleep in cars or tents; inadequate and unaffordable rental housing, as many face high costs for substandard housing such as basements or garages; overcrowded living arrangements, as some share rental units and essential services (water, electricity, gas, internet) with unrelated individuals or households to reduce costs; peripheralization, as cheaper rental options are often found in the interior or distant municipalities, resulting in dependence on limited public transport - note that in high-altitude rural areas near the coast, cheaper transport options, such as Uber, are often unavailable; dependence on employers, as many rely on employer-provided accommodation, living in company-owned apartments or rooms (e.g., in the golf, restaurant and construction industries); and fraud and deception including scams involving rental payments and multiple rental agreements for the same property. Some found housing solutions in the rural areas described above, particularly in mobile homes and caravans.

4.3. Digital-mediated informal market

Digital social media platforms and networks have become key infrastructure for promoting the informal housing market in the Algarve. They circulate information and provide access to alternative and often precarious forms of housing, particularly by advertising the sale and/or rental of plots, mobile homes, and caravans. These practices are prevalent amongst migrants in Loulé and Albufeira, regardless of origin and socioeconomic background. They are often visible through the diversity of vehicles (old, new, foreign-registered) and license plates, which also reflect different socioeconomic profiles. The advertisements evoke different ideas of place and lifestyle: some emphasise nature, seclusion, and self-sufficiency, while others highlight

sea views, leisure amenities, and proximity to tourist infrastructure. Despite these differences, they all position themselves as affordable alternatives to the inflated housing market, sometimes adopting ironic slogans, e.g., “without breaking the bank” (Post 2). The proliferation of these digitally mediated housing practices - land for or with mobile homes and caravans - is producing visible socio-spatial transformations in rural areas. These include the proliferation of mobile homes and caravans on rural plots, the subdivision and informal rental of land, the expansion of campsites as permanent residential spaces, the installation of improvised infrastructures, and increasing conflicts surrounding land-use regulation and enforcement.

Digital news also highlights the growing use of mobile homes on rural land as a viable living solution, emphasising ease of installation, flexibility in location (anywhere in the countryside), various styles, affordability, and quick setup. Mobile homes, in particular, are advertised online for their wooden construction and sustainability, described as “cheap (€23,000), quick (2 months), and sustainable” (Post 3). There are many mobile homes for sale along National Road (NR) 125, at various prices, alongside second-hand units listed online, both for sale and for rent on established plots. Some are in good condition (e.g. priced at €24,000), while others require refurbishment (€7,000) or assembly (€12,500 plus €5,000 for setup). Some mobile homes can also be exchanged for other goods such as cars. Housing units typically range from one-bedroom (around 30 m²) to three-bedroom units for larger households. Some accommodate families and friends in double units. Subletting is a common practice, with rooms explicitly advertised for certain migrants, particularly Brazilians (€400/month). Second-hand caravans are available for sale (€800 and up) or rent (€350 per month) for use on rural plots under annual agreements. Some may lack legal documentation, but the owner claims, “I can prove it is mine” (Post 4). Together, these advertisements illustrate the diversity and increasing normalisation of digitally mediated informal housing options in the Algarve.

Despite current planning restrictions, rural land is being sold for mobile home and caravan accommoda-

tion. Prices vary depending on the plot size, infrastructure and the lifestyle promoted. For example: “View over the Quarteira River. 45,000 m² of land, ideal for a mobile home” (Post 5); another states: “Rustic land suitable for a caravan or mobile home, with nearby electricity and river water access, priced at €12,000” (Post 6). Renting rural land is also a viable option for these purposes. Many plots offer amenities such as Wi-Fi and electricity, with prices around £250 per month, plus additional charges for electricity and water, described as “very reasonable” (Post 7). The reference to the price listed in pounds sterling rather than euros suggests the advertisement is aimed at an international audience. For those who prefer community living, plots can be rented at campsites. Guia Campsite, for instance, offers various options: renting plots for mobile homes, caravans, and tents together with additional infrastructure for permanent housing and holiday stays. The site is described as “quite secure and surrounded by nature” (Post 8).

5. The Guia campsite⁴

5.1 The urban view: “People have chosen this campsite because of its privileged location”

The Guia campsite is located in central Algarve, within the municipality of Albufeira. It is located near the region’s road network, including the Via do Infante motorway, which provides connections westward to Lisbon and eastward to Andalusia. It is also well linked to nearby urban centres - both small and large - such as Guia, Ferreiras, and Albufeira, via the NR 125. The campsite lies immediately east of the Guia Shopping Centre, inaugurated in 2001, separated from it only by the access road leading toward Albufeira’s coastal area, approximately 6 to 12 kilometres from well-known beaches such as Praia dos Alemães and Praia da Oura. The site is therefore centrally located, visible, and easily accessible, “close to jobs, easy for carpooling

⁴ The subtitles were transcribed from interviews with migrants living at the Guia campsite.

and for electric scooter transport” (Statement 3). This testimony suggests that the campsite’s location constituted a strategic housing asset, reducing commuting costs while maintaining access to employment opportunities in the surrounding tourist economy. While the immediate area has seen little structural change, the landscape along the NR 125 has evolved due to commercial activity, including car and mobile home sales. An example is the outlet next to the campsite.

The Guia campsite area is classified as RAN: “It is agricultural, it is a problem, and you cannot change it [...] they cannot make it legal” (Statement 4) - although the shopping centre is located immediately adjacent to the site. This legal status lies at the centre of the conflict examined in this article, illustrating the contradiction between planning regulations designed to protect agricultural land and the growing use of such land to satisfy urgent housing needs. The campsite covers approximately 4.5 hectares (Google Earth, 2025; Statement 5) and has been rapidly occupied since 2020. The site was vacant in 2018, sporadically occupied in 2021, and by May 2023, it hosted approximately 80 mobile homes and caravans. This number increased to 130 in April 2024, and to 150 by July 2024, accommodating an estimated 400 to 500 people, including children (Google Earth, 2025; Statement 6). The land was informally subdivided into plots of approximately 150 sqm. Mobile homes and caravans were arranged in an irregular pattern, often along the perimeter or clustered near existing trees for shade (Figure 1).

Internal circulation emerged through dirt tracks forming an organic network, flanked by irregular car parking. In 2024, the Guia campsite consisted of two residential zones: one at the entrance, facing the Shopping Centre, situated near the reception and gates; and a second, more concealed area at the rear - “A good area and a bad favela-type area” (Statement 7) - where most of the mobile homes and caravans were located. This distinction suggests that housing precarity was also socially differentiated, with variations in investment capacity, housing quality and environmental conditions producing internal socio-spatial hierarchies. A smaller, more orderly sector in the south-east was arranged orthogonally, forming a structured internal street (Figure 2).

The size and quality of the housing spaces, comprising plots with mobile homes, caravans, or tents, depended on residents’ financial investment and their capacity to improve them over time. Differences were evident in their physical configurations, with some exhibiting signs of poverty. However, “people are proud of their houses, even if they look deprived” (Statement 8). This statement reflects residents’ efforts to create dignity, stability, and a sense of home despite severe material constraints. Differences were also evident in the way plots were occupied: fenced boundaries, verandas for shade, outdoor enhancements (gravel, artificial grass, potted plants), among other personalised improvements (Figure 3). Some displayed signs of relative prosperity (Figure 4).



Figures 1 and 2. *Author (2024).*



Figures 3 and 4. Author (2024).

For infrastructure, many units had underground or above-ground water tanks and a 2,000-litre septic system - “everything goes into the ground” (Statement 9). The lack of adequate sanitation infrastructure illustrates how informal housing often externalises environmental and public health risks normally addressed through formal planning systems. Some households also had individual gas tanks and, for energy, solar panels or generators. The campsite was also wired and sub-wired for electricity, with meters installed in most units. This resulted in exposed cables running through the soil, a significant danger for residents, particularly children who have no dedicated place to play: “They are giving up their youth” (Statement 10). This testimony highlights the broader social costs of housing precarity, particularly for children growing up in spaces lacking basic safety and recreational conditions. Moreover, extensive bush clearing to make space for housing further reduced the already limited shade.

The Guia campsite operated under an informal land access model, with plots rented for between €150 and €200 per month. Payments were made in cash, with no official receipts provided. In some cases, however, an unofficial document served as proof of payment. Informal housing options varied widely. Mobile homes could cost around €14,000, plus an additional €6,000 for local installation, bringing the total to €20,000. Cheaper options were available depending on size and materials - the less affluent generally used caravans and tents as low-cost alternatives - while more expen-

sive, self-produced mobile homes could cost up to €40,000. One owner even had two: one for domestic use and the other for short-term tourist rentals. Other mobile homes were rented long-term at €750–850 per month, often accommodating six to eight people, resulting in overcrowding. “It is much closer to work than in the countryside, where housing is cheaper. A three-room flat costs €1,000 - how can you afford that? You just share it” (Statement 11). This testimony suggests that living in the campsite was driven primarily by the economic constraints of the regional housing market rather than by personal preference.

5.2. The migration view: “The whole world is here, but they are afraid [...] many are crying”

Guia campsite was highly diverse, accommodating people from around the world: Latin America (primarily Brazil), Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh), Africa (South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Angola), and Europe (Ireland, England). The majority of these migrants are low-skilled, low-paid hard workers, such as cleaners in apartments and hotels, and waiters in restaurants and night bars: “We need immigrants to do the dirty hard work” (Statement 12); they also work in commerce (e.g. shopping centres) and TVDE/Uber drivers (e.g. South Asian migrants). This statement highlights the regional economy’s reliance on migrant labor and the hierarchical view towards that workfor-

ce. Others are internal migrants who relocate to the Algarve for seasonal employment, particularly in the summer, following affluent tourists, before returning to their regions of origin (e.g., Porto, Lisbon).

Most immigrants are economically disadvantaged, with limited resources, seeking to survive. Many have invested their savings in mobile homes or caravans - “most of them are proud [...] it is not a party” (Statement 13). For many, investment in mobile homes represented a long-term housing strategy where formal alternatives were inaccessible. In turn, a minority enjoy better resources and living conditions, particularly those from South Africa, the UK, and the Netherlands: “We have good neighbours, we get together, we drink beer in the afternoon” (Statement 14). The campsite therefore cannot be understood solely through deprivation, as everyday sociability and mutual support also foster residents’ sense of belonging and community.

In July 2024, a public prosecutor entered the Guia campsite to carry out a police operation against the landowner. The campsite was sealed off, and most of the residents were identified. “People were put in a queue and asked to register” (Statement 15). The intervention marked a shift from relative institutional invisibility to direct state surveillance, transforming residents’ everyday experience of the campsite. Until then, the relevant authorities were unaware of how many people were living on the site. Only a few managed to leave with their caravans before the exits were closed. Electricity was cut during a heatwave exceeding 40°C. No one could charge their phones, essential for communication and internet access, or electric scooters needed for commuting: “I am from Punjab, India. I arrived in January 2024 and work at a beach bar in Galé [10km distance]. I need to recharge my scooter at a nearby campsite where a friend of mine lives or at work” (Statement 16). This account shows that the loss of electricity affected not only domestic life but also residents’ ability to work and sustain their livelihoods.

People were left without lighting, running water, or sanitation because the suction pump required for water circulation and toilet flushing ceased to function: “They cannot even take a shower” (Statement 17). The loss of basic services rapidly turned an already precarious situation into a humanitarian concern.

Food in fridges defrosted and spoiled, prompting frequent trips to the supermarket. Waste collection was also disrupted, leading to waste accumulation and heightened health risks. “Now everyone is crying - there are children, elderly and sick people” (Statement 18). These accounts demonstrate that the intervention had immediate social consequences extending beyond the legal dispute over land occupation.

In the days following the intervention, Municipal Social Services distributed food to vulnerable residents. At the same time, the Republican National Guard (GNR) continued patrolling the campsite, reflecting a state that both protects and controls. During this period, uncertainty about future living conditions led residents to prioritise emergency maintenance, mutual support, reduced investment in the campsite, and the search for alternative housing: “We have to stay together, we have the same problems, but we are competitors for plots outside” (Statement 19). This testimony illustrates how housing scarcity simultaneously fostered solidarity and competition for limited accommodation. Residents began disinfecting water tanks with chlorine - “I know I should not, but I am doing it to make it safer... maybe legionella” (Statement 20). In the absence of institutional support, they also developed improvised forms of risk management, including sharing the few available electric generators collectively. Some also created WhatsApp groups to purchase new generators to be shared among households jointly.

Construction of house foundations and other improvements (fences, shading, etc.) stopped. Broader efforts to upgrade the camp, such as protecting exposed electrical wiring, were also abandoned. In this context, residents were confronted with a lack of viable plots to relocate mobile homes and caravans: “Where to move? Nobody knows where to go. I can take my house with me, but where?” (Statement 21). The mobility promised by mobile housing proved largely illusory, as legal and affordable relocation opportunities remained extremely limited. Moving costs - around €5,000 - further limited options. Moreover, because of the campsite’s alleged illegality, residents were unable to sell their mobile homes on-site, despite some posting “for sale” signs. Many had invested all their savings, making these potential losses particularly severe for economically vulnerable households.

Immigrants living in the Guia campsite reported feeling confused and misled by both the campsite director and the Portuguese system. While the campsite was illegal, and therefore unsuitable for residential use, they claimed they were unaware of this: “They say we should have known, but we were tricked” (Statement 22). Many therefore distinguished between the campsite’s illegality and their own good-faith participation in the rental arrangements. Moreover, they had no alternatives. Even after the intervention, the manager continued to request rent payments. These residents used the campsite address when applying for residence permits, and several public institutions accepted it as valid, including the tax authorities and the social security office. Official letters were delivered on-site as one resident explained: “They need a residence permit from the Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA) to get the [taxpayer identification number] NIF. My wife went to the Tax Authority (AT); we all thought it was legal. Only in November 2023 did we realise it was illegal” (Statement 23). This reveals contradictions within public administration.

Despite this situation, the campsite continued to be advertised, and new immigrants were admitted thereafter: “I knew [after Christmas 2023] that it was illegal, but I did not have the courage to tell him” (Statement 24). This testimony also suggests that information circulated unevenly within the campsite, contributing to residents’ continued vulnerability. Overall, residents pointed to a lack of information and the absence of coordinated action by local authorities, which undermined their ability to plan and regularise their housing and living situations.

5.3. The digital view: “Illegal campsite in Guia: residents are desperate and have no alternative”

Following the intervention, the Guia campsite case received limited but targeted media attention. Media coverage developed along two main lines: institutional actors raised concerns about public safety and legality to justify the criminalisation of informal housing and land occupation practices in Portugal, portraying them as hubs of crime and threats to public order; subsequent reporting focused on urban planning and legal

permits, and violations of fiscal regulations, tax compliance and budgetary offences. Residents, by contrast, shared their perspectives on the housing problem and access, highlighting issues related to rights and opportunities. They also discussed misunderstandings about legality and institutional delays. Their accounts revealed profound shock, despair, and disillusionment with the authorities. For many, the 2024 summer operation represented a major social injustice. However, the case generated no significant housing mobilisation at either local or national level, leaving residents largely to face the situation alone.

The formal complaint filed by the Albufeira Municipal Council against the landowner two years prior led to a legal enforcement operation. Supervised by a public prosecutor, it involved representatives from several public authorities. Approximately 100 officers from the GNR and 40 officials from the Tax Authority participated alongside the Economic and Food Safety Authority (ASAE), Civil Protection, the Fire Service, the municipality, and the Centre for Investigation of Environmental Crimes and Offenses (NICCOA) of the Nature and Environment Protection Service (SEPNA). Authorities reportedly confiscated 12 mobile homes, seven cars, €45,253 in cash, and several firearms, including a shotgun, a pistol, and two air rifles. They issued 10 administrative offense reports: four for non-payment of vehicle circulation tax and 6 for failure to declare entry into the national territory. These reports were communicated to the appropriate agencies: AT and AIMA. The scale of the operation reflected a strong institutional commitment to ending these practices. As stated, “The campsite was growing in plain sight; something had to be done” (Statement 25). This institutional narrative framed the intervention primarily in terms of legality and public order, contrasting with residents’ accounts centred on housing need and survival.

In turn, residents framed these informal practices as part of their survival strategies. Several had migrated from distant rural areas in search of employment and rented plots and accommodation in good faith. They found listings online, signed contracts, and insisted that the landowner assured them that the arrangements were lawful. Basic services were already operating, including sewage collection by tanker lor-

ries. Residents were informed that delays in installing connections to the public water network were due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was only after police intervention that many learned the land was classified as RAN. Although they were not formally evicted, many residents reported feeling pressured to leave the campsite without being offered any housing alternatives. Some chose to leave during the 2024 intervention to avoid confrontation, while most stayed due to a lack of options - "It is not legal, but what choice do we have?" (Statement 26). This question captures the central argument of the article: informal housing practices emerge less from a rejection of legality than from the absence of viable alternatives within the formal housing system. The disconnection of essential utilities, such as water and electricity, further worsened conditions for those who remained.

6. Conclusions

What informal socio-spatial practices are being adopted in the Algarve to address growing housing deprivation and segregation?

These socio-spatial practices constitute subversive layers that challenge structural uneven geographies, homogenisation, and capitalist segregation (Harvey, 2005), as evidenced by the tourism-driven development strategies of the municipalities of Loulé and Albufeira, which have exacerbated housing crises and the lack of affordable housing. This creates both an exclusionary dynamic and a governance challenge. In response, alternatives such as caravans and mobile homes, among other precarious solutions, have emerged and escalated in rural areas. The case study of the Guia campsite in Albufeira exemplifies this trend. Rural landscape transformations became particularly visible after the Covid-19 pandemic, as processes of adaptation, resistance and land occupation intensified. This situation blurs the boundaries between formal and informal (self-produced) urbanisation (Lefebvre, 1974) and, particularly since the 2024 Land Law, extends urban logics into the countryside. At the same time, exclusion is perpetuated through regulatory enforcement, which ultimately results in eviction despite the absence of viable large-scale relocation alterna-

tives. Limited housing supply and restrictive planning regulations therefore continue to marginalise those experiencing severe housing deprivation.

However, the empirical evidence also demonstrates that informality cannot be understood solely as a space of resistance or emancipation. It also creates opportunities for speculation, informal intermediaries and unequal power relations, as landowners, campsite operators and informal markets may benefit economically from migrants' urgent housing needs without providing legal security or adequate living conditions. Informality therefore emerges both as a survival strategy and as a mechanism through which new forms of vulnerability and exploitation are reproduced, illustrating the contradictions inherent in the production of space under capitalist urbanisation (Lefebvre, 1974; Harvey, 2005).

How do disadvantaged immigrants engage with these informal practices, and what opportunities do they leverage within these dynamics?

Informal social practices are developed by the rebel dots, i.e. disadvantaged immigrants, that, whether acting individually or collectively, resist everyday poor housing and living conditions and spatial segregation: a tactical and minor political act (Darling, 2016). Among the multiple housing actors are several state entities, multi-scalar decision-makers, and property owners. By contrast, poor migrants struggle to secure affordable housing in the formal market, which forces them into precarious conditions. They adopt informal alternatives and occupy rural land with mobile homes and caravans, reflecting the ordinary practices described by Bayat (1997). Nevertheless, they remain subject to enforcement operations that offer no viable alternatives.

The Guia campsite illustrates this ambivalence particularly clearly. Residents actively transformed space, invested in housing improvements and developed relations of mutual support, demonstrating agency and adaptive capacity in producing everyday living spaces (Lefebvre, 1974). At the same time, many became embedded in informal circuits of plot rental, subletting, uncertain legal arrangements and unequal access to information, exposing them to fraud, financial loss and renewed insecurity. Their practices should be understood not simply as resistance or illegality but as situated responses to highly unequal socio-spatial conditions.

These practices blur the lines between need and illegality, the latter being socially and politically constructed. Recognising this does not diminish the legitimate aims of rural planning regulations, including environmental protection, agricultural land preservation, infrastructure capacity and public safety. Rather, the findings highlight the need to balance territorial regulation with access to adequate housing for populations experiencing severe housing vulnerability, exposing enduring tensions between spatial regulation and the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008). They also illustrate a tension between the right to housing and adequate living conditions, on the one hand, and compliance with urban-rural regulations, on the other. For the most disadvantaged, opportunities remain limited. Although community building often emerges through solidarity and mutual support (Viegas, 2025), their capacity to claim rights remains narrow, while housing mobilisations continue to be concentrated mainly in major urban centres.

What role do the digital world and its networks play in these processes of informality?

Informal digital media practices constitute counter-fluxes in response to stigmatising narratives, discourses and representations of disadvantaged migrants. They extend the informal socio-spatial practices discussed above into digital environments. In practical terms, they create opportunities to access informal housing outside the formal housing market while challenging narratives of migrant illegality and criminalisation. By linking spatial informality to migration, these exclusionary narratives reinforce processes of marginalisation. Digital platforms and networks play an essential role, mediating and amplifying these socio-spatial practices in a peripheral region.

At the same time, digital platforms increase the visibility of informal housing practices and facilitate access to alternative housing opportunities, while simultaneously reproducing misinformation and new forms of socio-spatial vulnerability. Rather than merely representing informal urbanisation, they actively participate in the production of space by mediating how housing practices, land occupation and everyday life are organised, negotiated and experienced. As infrastructures of information flows, they continuously reconfigure the material world (Egler, 2024; Carvalho et al., 2025).

What are the spatial, social, and digital impacts of these processes?

Significant economic vulnerability, everyday needs, a rapidly growing housing shortage, insecurity, and the absence of a timely state response have generated large-scale, affordable, albeit highly precarious, informal solutions. This cyclical reproduction of housing informality reflects the system's failure to provide adequate living conditions while sustaining the conditions for its own reproduction (Harvey, 2005). It raises questions about state responsibility, accountability, governance, proportionality, the balance between legality and social protection, and the enforcement of urban regulations, criminalisation, and the forced displacement of those without alternatives.

The Guia case further demonstrates that state intervention cannot be reduced to an opposition between repressive institutions and resistant migrants. Different public authorities simultaneously performed protective and coercive roles: while social services provided emergency support to vulnerable residents, planning authorities and law-enforcement agencies prioritised regulatory enforcement. Residents therefore experienced the state both as a provider of care and as an agent of surveillance and control, revealing the contradictory nature of contemporary housing governance. Likewise, social relations within the campsite combined solidarity and competition. Residents relied on mutual support to cope with everyday precarity while at the same time competing for scarce plots and alternative accommodation. Rather than opposing dynamics, solidarity and competition emerged as intertwined responses to structural housing scarcity, illustrating how everyday practices simultaneously reproduce cooperation and unequal socio-spatial relations (Harvey, 2005; Bayat, 1997).

All this raises concerns about human dignity, housing rights, and spatial justice (Fainstein, 2010; Soja, 2010). Yet local collective action and housing mobilisation in the Algarve remain significantly limited. Digital mediation, however, may become a space for more inclusive housing practices by supporting creative, accessible informal alternatives rather than reinforcing exclusionary dynamics (Ferrerri & Sanyal, 2022). It also provides visibility to these landscapes of informality and their multiple possibilities (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008).

Ultimately, the article argues that housing informality should be understood as a contested socio-spatial and socio-digital condition produced through the interaction between structural housing shortages, uneven territorial development, everyday adaptation, and multiple forms of regulation, mediation and representation. By combining Lefebvre's conception of the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1974), Harvey's critique of uneven geographical development (Harvey, 2005), and Bayat's understanding of the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" (Bayat, 1997, p. 66), the article shows that migrants' informal housing practices simultaneously express agency, necessity, adaptation, and vulnerability.

These dynamics broaden the discussion of the right to the city to include rural housing challenges (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008). The interplay between resistance and exploitation, along with the balance of housing rights, land regulation, and digital opportunities, raises key questions about spatial justice (Fainstein, 2010; Soja, 2010). This exploration reveals the possibilities and limitations of new socio-spatial and socio-digital practices, prompting reflection on how to create a more just future.

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Bio

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