https://doi.org/10.48751/CAM-2025-23388

cadernos do arquivo municipal

CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE LISBOA

ISSN 2183-3176 | 2ª Série Nº 23 (2025), e202502

Destaque

Feeding the poor: A comparison between English soup kitchens and Portugal's *cozinhas económicas*

Alimentando os pobres: Uma comparação entre as *soup kitchens* inglesas e as cozinhas económicas de Portugal

Philip Carstairs
Leonor Medeiros

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the response of industrializing European societies to urban food insecurity and poor nutrition during the 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on England and Portugal. As these societies grappled with the consequences of industrialization and free-market economics, such as increased economic inequality, urban pressure, and unemployment, they faced significant challenges in addressing the needs of the less advantaged and poor. The paper explores the different strategies adopted in England and Portugal, where philanthropic institutions, notably soup kitchens in England and Economic Kitchens in Portugal, played pivotal roles. By analysing how these institutions were integrated into the urban fabric and their architectural expressions, the study highlights how philanthropy not only aimed to alleviate hunger and malnutrition but also reflected prevailing social attitudes towards poverty. This comparative approach underscores the varying impacts of these institutions on the poor and offers insights into the broader socio-economic shifts influencing public responses to urban poverty.

KEYWORDS

Public Kitchen; Food Assistance; Urban Poverty; Philanthropic Institutions; Industrialization

RESUMO

Este artigo examina a resposta das sociedades europeias à insegurança alimentar urbana e à má nutrição durante os séculos XIX e início do XX, em Inglaterra e Portugal. À medida que estas sociedades enfrentavam as consequências da industrialização e da economia de mercado livre, tais como o aumento da desigualdade económica, da pressão urbana e do desemprego, encontraram desafios na satisfação das necessidades alimentares dos menos favorecidos e dos pobres. O artigo explora as estratégias adotadas nestes países, onde as instituições filantrópicas, notavelmente as *soup kitchens* em Inglaterra e as Cozinhas Económicas em Portugal, desempenharam papéis fundamentais. Analisando a integração dessas instituições no tecido urbano e as suas manifestações arquitetónicas, destaca-se como a filantropia procurava tanto aliviar a fome como refletir atitudes sociais sobre a pobreza. Esta comparação sublinha os diferentes impactos dessas instituições e fornece perspetivas sobre as mudanças socioeconómicas que influenciaram as respostas públicas à pobreza urbana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Cozinha Pública; Assistência Alimentar; Pobreza Urbana; Instituições Filantrópicas; Industrialização

THE GROWING NEED FOR FOOD: EXPANDING PUBLIC SUPPORT

Having enough to eat is essential for survival, and in most societies, it depends on having access to resources and sufficient economic power. Over the past two centuries, the challenge of feeding the poor has troubled free markets and been addressed by various forms of charity and welfare. While providing the "right food" to meet nutritional needs is a relatively recent concern, organized large-scale efforts to alleviate hunger and improve nutrition emerged during the 19th century. These initiatives, though well-intentioned, have faced criticism and challenges.

In England, soup kitchens became the preferred solution for feeding the poor. By the late 19th century, however, there was increasing admiration for continental Europe's low-cost dining rooms, though these only became widespread in England during World War I. In Portugal, the liberal ideals of the 19th century fostered an increasingly structured approach to feeding the impoverished, addressing the growing number of workers who filled the cities during industrialization.

The act of assisting those in need – whether individuals or communities – is an ancient practice, as old as humanity itself. However, as societies grew, assistance could no longer rely solely on goodwill or sporadic efforts; it evolved into an organized system sustained by institutions specifically created for this purpose. While assistance comes in many forms, such as medical, spiritual, or material aid, this discussion focuses on food assistance. The models we are here exploring, while related to charity, are distinct from the religious-based practices prevalent in Western traditions, such as the Christian Works of Mercy that included "feeding the hungry" and "giving drink to the thirsty".

Food assistance also underscores the relationship between access to food and proximity to resources, a dynamic often complicated by mobility and distance. For instance, the practice of providing shelter to pilgrims historically extended beyond a bed and roof to include essential items like "fire, water, and salt," enabling them to prepare their own meals (Correia, 1944, p. 278).

The Industrial Revolution disrupted traditional rural livelihoods, separating many from their food production roots. Urban centres grew rapidly, attracting rural populations with promises of opportunity and progress. This migration brought challenges: overcrowding, poor living conditions, and precarious livelihoods.

Julião Quintinha, an early 20th-century journalist, highlighted these dynamics in his critique of Portugal's 1911 public assistance law[1]. He noted disparities in its implementation, emphasizing how the benefits were concentrated in major cities like Lisbon while rural areas remained underserved: "Beggars roam in groups through the streets; especially on Fridays and Saturdays, elderly people, women, and children drag themselves along sidewalks and squares, setting up tents near the homes of the wealthy, and there, in broad daylight, under a blazing sun, blackened by hunger and filth, they trade their wounds and laments"[2] (Quintinha, 1916, p. 24).

Quintinha further observed that rural Algarve produced relatively few beggars compared to urban areas, where workers displaced by age or disability sought support through begging (Quintinha, 1916, p. 30).

This issue was not unique to Portugal. In 1850, Adolphe Thiers, a French politician and historian, presented a report to the National Assembly highlighting the need for public assistance to address the urban poverty exacerbated by industrialization. While he acknowledged the economic progress brought by industrial advances, Thiers critiqued the inequalities they produced. He pointed to overcrowding, unsanitary neighbourhoods, and unsafe working conditions as hallmarks of this new urban poverty (Thiers, 1850).

[1] Lei de 25 de maio de 1911. (1911, 26 de maio). Diário do Governo, Série I, n.º 122. https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/diario-republica/122-1911-1969

[2] All Portuguese quotations have been translated into English by Leonor Medeiros.

These challenges persisted into the early 20th century, exacerbated by political instability and the effects of World War I. Researchers José Lúcio and Filomena Marques note that in 1910, in Lisbon, "a working-class family spent 80% of their income on food", leaving little for other essentials like rent or clothing (Lúcio & Marques, s.d., pp. 11-12).

Hunger, a stark consequence of social and economic imbalance, drove governments and organizations to seek solutions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In Portugal, the 1911 public assistance law was both a response to visible urban poverty and the culmination of efforts by religious and private entities to address food insecurity. The concern for the food aspect is evident in this new phase of restructuring the government structure, as exemplified by the creation of institutions such as *colónias agrícolas* (agricultural colonies), which combined social assistance with agricultural activities, and *mercearias económicas* (economic grocery stores), which provided essential consumer goods at affordable prices to the working and neediest classes, including foods such as bread, rice, beans, olive oil, and other essential items, often subsidized. The creation of the "Sociedade Protectora das Cozinhas Económicas de Lisboa – SPCEL" (Society for the Protection of Economic Kitchens of Lisbon) in 1893 was a fundamental element in the development of this model and its infrastructure, which we briefly analyse here.

SOUP KITCHENS

The first soup kitchen – defined as a charitable or philanthropic institution that provided soup – likely originated with the French Huguenot *La Soupe*, which operated in London's Spitalfields district between approximately 1689 and 1741. However, soup kitchens did not become a widespread method of feeding the hungry poor in England until the 1790s. A series of poor harvests and an economic recession caused by the Napoleonic Wars (1795–1802) drove food prices to unprecedented levels, leaving England's poorest to face starvation. During this time, somewhere between 10% and 20% of the population depended on charitable food distributions, much of which came in the form of soup.

Portugal also turned to soup kitchens during periods of crisis. During the Peninsular War (1807–1814), when Napoleon invaded Portugal, soup kitchens appeared in Lisbon and Porto (Cordeiro, 2012, p. 25). Following the French invasions, "a massive influx of people entered Lisbon, hungry, ragged, and destitute" (Brito, 1899, p. 222), estimated at 50,000 individuals. In response, "the Governors of the Kingdom, the City Council, and several philanthropic citizens organized extensive charitable services in various forms. Among these, the daily distribution of cheap soups was inaugurated, served to the crowds in various parts of the city" (Brito, 1899, p. 222). Later, during the Siege of Porto in 1833, they were used to feed the starving townspeople, an effort widely reported in English newspapers[3].

In England, soup was considered the ideal solution for famine relief for several practical reasons. Poor harvests had pushed the price of bread – the staple food of the working poor – beyond affordability, while subsidized meat soup became a cheaper alternative. Soup also reduced the risk of misuse by recipients, as it was not easily converted into money. It provided an outlet for unsellable meat that butchers struggled to sell during times of economic hardship. Furthermore, Count Rumford, a prominent scientist of the time, argued (incorrectly) that adults could subsist on a few servings of inexpensive soup, making it an appealing option for those managing the crisis without reducing their own consumption (Redlich, 1971, p. 192).

The perceived success of soup kitchens in preventing mass starvation and social unrest established them as the preferred response to subsequent crises. Their popularity grew significantly after the 1834 reform of England's Poor Laws. These reforms narrowed the scope of state-funded assistance, limiting it to specific circumstances such as old age, injury, or illness. Assistance was often restricted to workhouses, which were intentionally

[3] E.g., *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, May 24, 1833, p. 2.

unpleasant to deter dependency. For many, especially those affected by seasonal unemployment or economic downturns, soup kitchens became an indispensable resource, particularly during harsh winters when additional expenses for clothing and fuel further strained their budgets.

Middle-class philanthropists, sympathetic to the plight of the poor, played a significant role in supporting the expansion of soup kitchens. These establishments were funded by voluntary contributions, with subscribers receiving tickets to distribute to those in need. Each ticket entitled the bearer to a serving of soup, and sometimes bread, for a small fee – typically one penny, which covered a fraction of the actual cost. In smaller towns and rural parishes, soup kitchens often operated within parish boundaries, which acted as both ecclesiastical and administrative districts, while larger urban centres typically hosted multiple facilities.

The typical soup kitchen building and its location

Soup kitchen buildings in London varied in size and design, largely dictated by the limited funding available. Donations were typically raised in response to emergencies, leaving little for long-term investments in infrastructure. Smaller kitchens often adapted existing structures or operated out of basic sheds, serving several hundred people daily in spaces as small as 30m^2. Larger kitchens, capable of feeding thousands, occupied buildings roughly the size of a small house or shop, around 150m^2. These facilities might include a kitchen, storeroom, serving area, and a committee room. In rare cases, wealthier donors funded purpose-built soup kitchens with more elaborate designs.

Ramsgate's soup kitchen, constructed in 1849, exemplifies a medium-sized facility (Figure 1). The single-story building housed a single room measuring 6.8m by 4.8m. It featured two doors to manage entry and exit and provided space for supervisors to check tickets and collect payment. Soup was served at a simple counter, behind which two stoves and a preparation area enabled the production of 100 gallons (450 litres) of soup daily, feeding at least 500 people. The building's architecture was plain and cost-efficient, with minimal ornamentation. Situated on a side street near the parish church, its construction and operation were financed by the congregation, reflecting the close relationship between religious institutions and social welfare during the era.

Figure 1 The soup kitchen in Ramsgate, Kent, built 1849, closed after 1940. Photograph by Philip Carstairs.

Most soup kitchens did not have space for people to stay and eat. The poor were expected to queue outside in winter weather, collect the soup in their own jug, and take it home to eat. During harsh winters, when between 10% and 30% of the local population relied on soup kitchens, providing sufficient space, furniture, and crockery for dining in was unthinkable. It would also have required more staff, an expense most soup kitchens could not afford. Even the largest soup kitchens employed only a handful of workers to feed thousands of people.

Although some soup kitchens did offer dining space, along with bowls and spoons, these items rarely appear in surviving inventories or accounts. When Alexis Soyer opened a model soup kitchen in Dublin during the Great Famine of 1847, the spoons were chained to the tables, reflecting the assumption that the poor might steal them.

There are a few illustrations from the 19th century showing people eating inside soup kitchens. However, these images are often more narrative devices, depicting the entire process from cooking to serving to eating, and may not be entirely accurate representations. Figure 2 shows the North West Public Soup Kitchen, one of the grander buildings, provided to the charity by Baron Southampton. In reality, the building was a single-story structure only 5 meters wide, with a roof far lower than the illustration suggests. Fewer than 10 people are shown sitting and eating, with a similar number standing and eating, but the building served over 900 people daily. Those using dining areas at locations such as Blackfriars, London (1799–1801), and the General Soup Kitchen in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1828–1845) had to pay double the price of the soup for the privilege of eating indoors.

During the crisis of 1795–1802, soup kitchens were established wherever was quickest and most practical. Many operated in public locations such as marketplaces, halls, and shops. For instance, the General Soup Kitchen in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1796–1893) began in a small backyard but was soon relocated to the Poultry Market building in 1799, one of the city's smaller peripheral markets. Three other soup kitchens in Newcastle and one across the river in Gateshead were similarly located on the city's outskirts. London followed a comparable strategy, placing soup kitchens in peripheral areas as "the kindest and most economical means of preventing multitudes from being compelled to ask alms in the more opulent parts of town" (Bernard, 1798, p. 221).

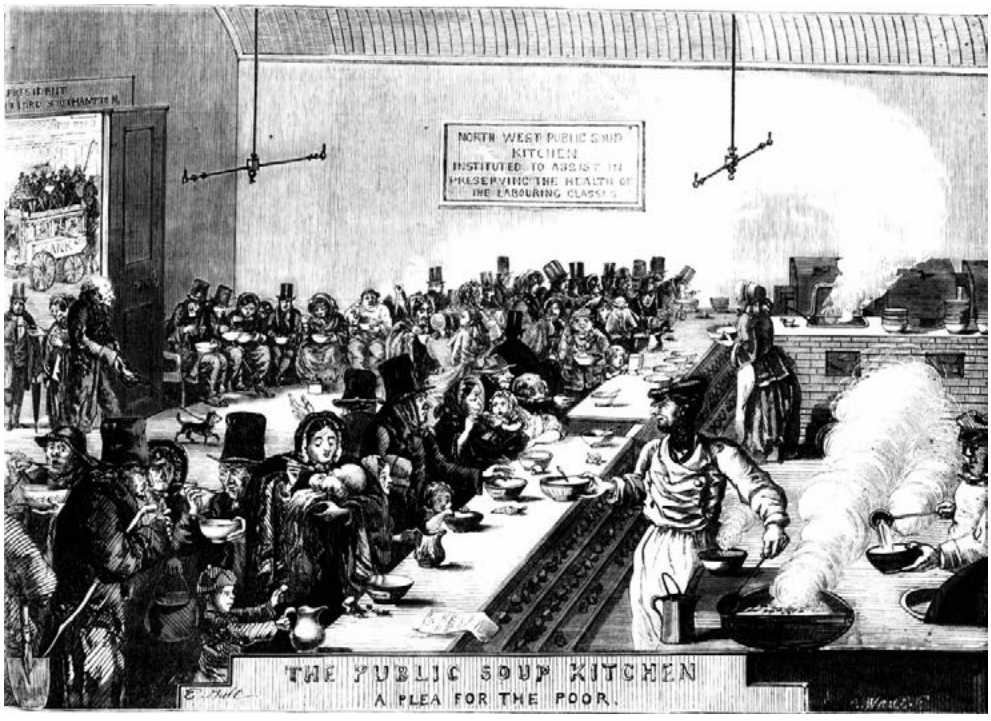

Figure 2 The North West Public Soup Kitchen, 295 Euston Road, London. *Illustrated Times*, 18/12/1858, p. 1.

While these locations served their purpose during crises, urban development and shifting public opinions necessitated their relocation within three decades. In Newcastle, the Poultry and neighbouring Flesh Markets were redeveloped into the covered Grainger Market in 1827. A soup kitchen serving thousands at one of the main entrances to this new Georgian market clearly did not align with the city's improved image. Extreme poverty became increasingly associated with the risk of disease, as the poor lived in crowded, poorly ventilated alleys where waste accumulated. Purity and cleanliness could only be restored by moving the soup kitchen – and its users – to more "suitable" locations, such as the Manors, an area long considered "a dirty part of town" (Bourne, 1736, p. 138). The Manors, described as a "back street and not respectable," was deemed appropriate only for disreputable people[4]. This area was dominated by institutions associated with poverty, such as a prison, a workhouse, almshouses, and industries like gasworks and railways. It was far removed from the wealthier parts of the city. The General Soup Kitchen remained there until its closure in 1893.

Some soup kitchens occupied more prominent and "respectable" buildings, such as the St. Albans Soup Kitchen, which used the town hall for 40 years. However, its use was always temporary. Soup was prepared in the basement kitchen and served in the entrance hall three days a week. At the end of each day, all traces of the soup kitchen were cleared away, leaving only the smell of soup behind. From year to year, there was no certainty it would return, until it inevitably did – until 1888, when the soup kitchen was relocated to "the yard," a grim location where "children often had to stand in mud while waiting"[5].

As soup kitchens were relocated to worse locations, the quality of the soup also declined. The nutritional value dropped from an average of 750 calories per serving to 630 calories. This deterioration reflected growing societal hostility towards the poor and their increasing marginalization.

THE IDEOLOGY OF PUBLIC KITCHENS

By 1870, a vocal and articulate body of critics emerged, strongly opposing charity, especially soup kitchens and state-funded welfare. Known as the Charity Organisation Society (the COS), this group argued that soup kitchens undermined the independence of the poor, fostering a degenerate class reliant on charity rather than hard work[6]. In certain parts of England, particularly industrial regions, the COS managed to weaken local soup kitchens, though their ideology did not gain universal acceptance.

The COS categorized charities providing food to the poor according to what they saw as their level of harm. At the top of their list of "evils" were soup kitchens, followed closely by religious missions that used food as an incentive to attract attendance at religious services, which they claimed had "evil consequences"[7]. Dinner tables – institutions that provided meals to specific groups like children or the sick – were viewed as slightly less objectionable because it was harder to blame these groups for their plight. These tables typically served meals of roast or boiled beef, potatoes, bread, and soup, catering to a vulnerable demographic without undermining the COS's ethos of self-reliance.

The COS only fully approved of one type of establishment: the self-supporting public kitchen. Originally, the term "public kitchen" referred to any public establishment serving food and was sometimes applied to soup kitchens.

[4] *Newcastle Journal*, 10/1/1867, p. 3.

[5] *Hertfordshire Advertiser*, 14/12/1889, p. 5.

[6] COS 1871. *The Report of the Council of the Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity upon the charities known as soup-kitchens and dinner-tables*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., p. 2.

[7] *Idem*, p. 4; COS 1887. Charity and food: report of the special committee of the Charity Organisation Society upon soup kitchens, children's breakfasts and dinners, and cheap food supply. London: Family Welfare Association (Great Britain), Spottiswoode & Company, p. 6.

By around 1860, however, it came to signify establishments serving set meals to be eaten on-site, offering more than just soup and bread, though often not much more. The COS advocated for replacing soup kitchens with public kitchens financed to serve "cooked food on this improved self-supporting footing"[8]. To qualify as self-supporting, these kitchens had to sell food at prices reflecting the true cost of production, adhering strictly to free-market principles. However, the COS acknowledged that finding successful examples of self-supporting public kitchens in England was exceedingly difficult[9].

Britain had only a few notable examples of successful public kitchens. These included the Dining Room in Saltaire near Bradford, Glasgow's Great Western Dining Company, and Gateshead's Public Restaurant Company.

The Dining Room at Saltaire, part of a model industrial community established by Titus Salt in the mid-19th century, catered to both his mill workers and the general public. Meals were of good quality and reasonably priced, such as porridge with tea or coffee for 1½ pence for breakfast, and soup with beef, potatoes, and pudding for 4 pence for dinner. Despite efforts to make it self-supporting, the meals were subsidized, and not all workers chose to use the facility, preferring to eat at home, bring food to work, or frequent nearby public houses (Quinn, 2021, p. 211). Leftover soup was sold at reduced prices at the end of each day.

The Saltaire Dining Room occupied a prominent location between the railway station and the church, directly across from the factory. Workers could access the dining room via an underground passage, avoiding bad weather. Architecturally, the building was substantial and well-designed. It featured seven bays with ashlar pilasters, a central door flanked by large windows, and a bracketed cornice (Figure 3). At 400m^2 with ceilings nearly 9 meters

Figure 3 The dining room and Congregational church, Saltaire [1853]. Tim Green, under licence Wikimedia Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic.

[8] COS 1887, p. 19.

[9] *Idem*, p. 9.

high, it was far larger than typical soup kitchens, yet it served a similar number of people. While its construction cost of £3,600 was less than the £10,000 spent on London's Soup Kitchen for the Jewish Poor, the Saltaire Dining Room was a single-story building, while the London counterpart had four stories, only one of which housed the soup kitchen (Carstairs, 2017, p. 926).

Glasgow's Great Western Dining Company operated on a larger scale, with 25 branches reportedly serving 30,000 meals daily. A simple breakfast of porridge, tea or coffee, and bread with butter cost 3 pence, while a dinner of soup, beef, potatoes, and rice pudding was priced at 5 pence. The branches were described as "large, attractive halls, comfortably heated, ventilated, and lighted, with a supply of newspapers"[10]. Originally established as a commercial venture in 1861, the company was converted into a self-supporting charity by 1871.

The Public Restaurant Company in Gateshead, established in 1884 by Reverend Moore Ede, also attempted to run a self-supporting public kitchen. It moved into a former Methodist chapel in 1885 after investing over £1,000 in renovations. The company expanded with branches in Newcastle, South Shields, and Sunderland, but these struggled financially and closed by 1887. By 1894, the Gateshead kitchen itself had also ceased operations. The challenges included overextension, an unappealing menu, and competition from local soup kitchens. Additionally, the absence of alcohol on the menu may have deterred potential customers. The COS ultimately acknowledged that running successful public kitchens targeting the poorer classes was nearly impossible without philanthropic input.

Efforts to establish public kitchens in England faced significant obstacles. English society, marked by its parochial rather than communal ethos, was resistant to adopting European models of public dining, where such ventures were more successful by 1890. Public kitchens in Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, and Italy were often subsidized, which the COS disapproved of.

Moreover, England's strong adherence to free-market principles clashed with the idea of state-supported or heavily subsidized kitchens. The independent working class preferred to eat at home or in less institutional settings, such as public houses or coffee taverns, rather than share benches with strangers in public kitchens.

It was not until the food shortages of World War I that England introduced state-sponsored communal dining through National Kitchens in 1917. These kitchens addressed many of the challenges faced by their 19th-century predecessors, emphasizing nutrition, appealing venues, and patriotic branding, while distancing themselves from the stigma of charity and the soup kitchen, while appearing to be socialist (Evans, 2025).

THE *COZINHAS ECONÓMICAS* OF LISBON: A PHILANTHROPIC MODEL FOR SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN A CHANGING URBAN LANDSCAPE

One of these models is found in Portugal's *Cozinhas Económicas* (Economic Kitchens), philanthropic institutions established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their purpose was to provide affordable and nutritious meals to the working classes and the most disadvantaged populations. Created by the *Sociedade Protectora das Cozinhas Económicas de Lisboa* (SPCEL), founded in 1893 by Maria Luísa de Sousa Holstein (1841–1909), the 3rd Duchess of Palmela, these institutions reflect a broader context of aristocratic philanthropy during a period of significant societal transformation in Portugal. At a time of growing republican ideals and shifting social structures, such initiatives allowed the nobility to assert their social and political relevance.

The foundation of the SPCEL aligned with Catholic charitable traditions but adopted a more modern approach to assistance, emphasizing dignity by selling meals at reduced prices rather than offering them for free. The statutes

[10] COS (1871, p. 13; 1887, p. 18).

of the Economic Kitchens underscored concerns with health, hygiene, and the moral upliftment of the working classes, aiming to provide practical solutions for affordable nutrition during economic hardships (SPCEL, 1894). These institutions played a significant role in social welfare in Portugal, establishing spaces where workers and the underprivileged could access healthy, hygienic, and sufficient meals at low prices. Selling meals rather than donating them aimed to promote dignity and independence, avoiding the dependency often associated with charity (Cordeiro, 2012).

The first Economic Kitchen promoted by the SPCEL was established in 1893 in the Campo de Ourique/Prazeres area. Over time, five more kitchens were opened throughout the city, with the final one located in São Bento, in 1906. While these kitchens were a private, aristocratic initiative, they received royal and public support throughout their history and were locally managed by the religious *Irmãs Hospitaleiras Portuguesas* (Portuguese Hospitallers Sisters). This model uniquely combined various realities that characterized 19th century assistance: it was an innovative effort led by private entities (on a large scale, with six kitchens), while still retaining, though distancing itself from, the traditional charitable traditions.

This hybrid approach – aligned with established powers yet highlighting their inability to solve a pressing social issue – is a critical aspect for further exploration. The Economic Kitchens' ideology and implementation is not only displayed in their mission but also in their formal and architectural characteristics, as well as their location. Their well-thought-out architecture and prominent locations in Lisbon symbolized their principles, visible to all who passed by. The Economic Kitchens were strategically located around the growing and increasingly industrialized city. New factories, neighbourhoods, and services were emerging, creating a densely populated urban environment. This development gradually eliminated the city's farms and enclosures, making Lisbon increasingly reliant on food supplies from its rural outskirts and the interior of the country.

The kitchens were highly visible within the city, situated in bustling urban areas, with clear fronts directed to open spaces, rather than hidden or relegated to the margins. Their importance is underscored by their influence on local street names, with two of them providing names for the streets where they were established, and the place name still survives today. Initially, the most prominent kitchens were located near the riverside, hubs of activity and labour, where circulation and work were constant, but later locations inland, in the established urban area were used (Figure 4).

It is also worth considering the location of the residence of the project's visionary, Maria Luísa de Sousa Holstein. Residing at the Palácio Palmela, located at Rua da Escola Politécnica nº 140 (now a listed building, near Largo do Rato), she was not too far removed from the communities she first sought to support, and she was probably aware of these changing dynamics in the city of Lisbon, with growing workers' neighbourhoods. The first kitchen, established in the Prazeres area, was close to her palace, and symbolizes her commitment and close connection to the reality of those she aimed to help.

The location of the 1st Economic Kitchen is the one that has proven the most difficult to identify. It was installed at the end of Rua do Forno (later renamed Travessa dos Prazeres), a street crossing the large Rua Saraiva de Carvalho. In the late 19th century, this street featured some residential houses, as well as sheds, stables, workshops (notably the Santos & Morais Lda. workshop), vacant lots between buildings, a bread oven, a factory, and its workers' housing. The Saint Joseph workshop (*Oficinas de São José*), an industrial school, located at the end of the street, was the most important local facility; it was a religious foundation that took in poor and orphaned children. An analysis of the construction records for the area points to the general location of the kitchen (Figure 5), but it was not possible to locate it more precisely. It was also likely the first to be demolished, probably due to the relocation of the workshops and the changes in the configuration of the neighbourhoods, although until recently there were functioning workshops visible on the street.

Figure 4 Location of the six economic kitchens of Lisbon and their proximity to the residence of their promoter, mapped over Silva Pinto's Topographic Map of Lisbon, 1911. Lisbon Municipal Archive, *Levantamento da planta de Lisboa, 1904-1911*, PT/AMLSB/CMLSB/UROB-PU/05/03.

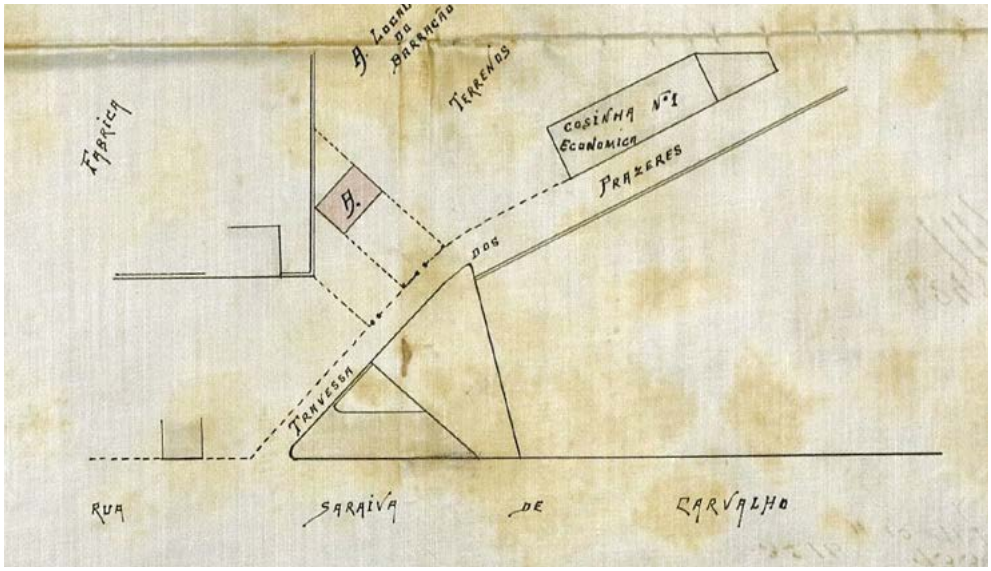

Figure 5 Project for a wooden shed for cart repair workshop that José Maria Correia intends to build on his land in Travessa dos Prazeres, Lisbon, indicated on the map with the letter A, indicating the location of CE1, in 1917. Lisbon Municipal Archive, Obra 30811 - Processo 8243/1.ª REP/PG/1917, f. 5).

The kitchen had the support of religious institutions, which saw it as a way to promote moral and social values while helping those in need. It also served as a space for social control, where beneficiaries were encouraged to follow established behavioural norms (Cordeiro, 2012). The Prazeres Kitchen quickly demonstrated the model's viability, serving hundreds of people daily, becoming an example to be followed, leading to the creation of other kitchens in different Lisbon neighbourhoods.

The 2nd Economic Kitchen, located in the Anjos area definitively put these institutions on the map. Newspapers of the time stated, "This useful institution, recently established in Lisbon, (...) is providing great benefit to the proletariat" (As cozinhas económicas, 1895, p. 59). With a full-page illustration of various aspects of the Anjos Economic Kitchen, it specifically highlighted "a type of waiter" and "the Chamberland filter spout that provides water" (Figure 6). Its location helped it to have a significant impact on the society of the time. Anjos was just north of the dilapidated historic areas of the city where poor living conditions were evident, such as the old Moorish quarter (Mouraria). The Anjos Kitchen was near an important city thoroughfare, where several factories in the ceramics and textile industries had been established and were expanding.

In 1909, it was damaged by a fire and the collapse of the adjacent Modern Theatre (*Teatro Moderno*), but the government immediately ordered its reconstruction (Figures 7 and 8). That same year, the Duchess of Palmela passed away, and her daughter, D. Helena Maria Domingas de Sousa Holstein (1864–1941), Marchioness of Faial, succeeded her in the administration of the Economic Kitchens. The following year, the proclamation of the Republic led to changes in the kitchens' organizational structure. However, this kitchen was rebuilt by the Ministry of Public Works under architect Lino de Carvalho between 1912 and 1914. It continues to provide services today,

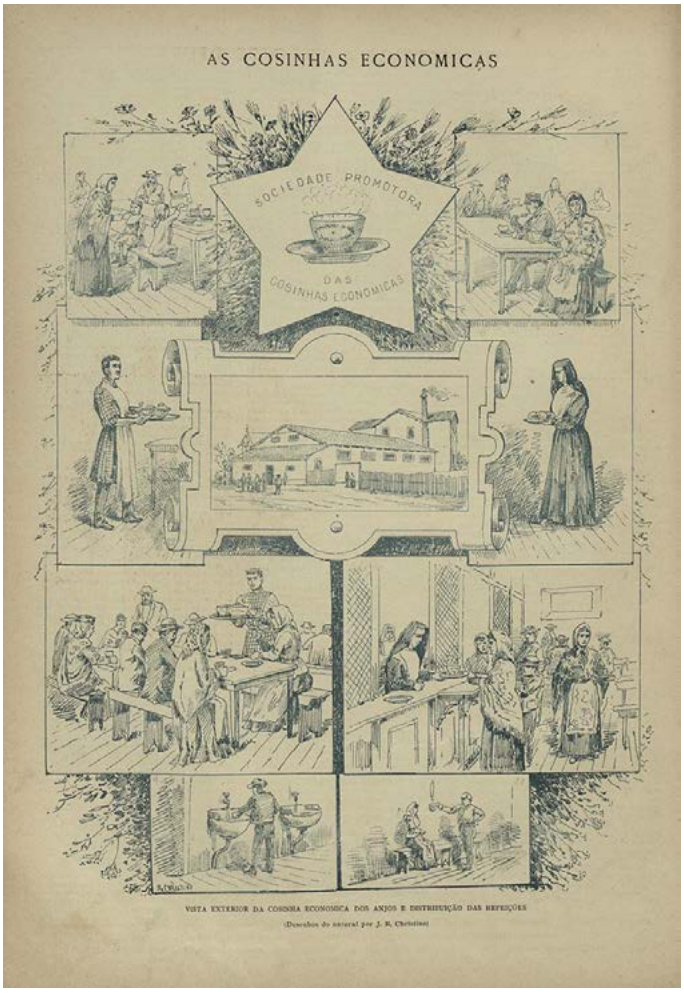

Figure 6 "Exterior view of the Anjos economic kitchen and meal distribution". *O Occidente*, 1895, p. 60. https://hemerotecadigital.cm-lisboa.pt/OBRAS/Ocidente/1895/N584/N584_master/N584.pdf

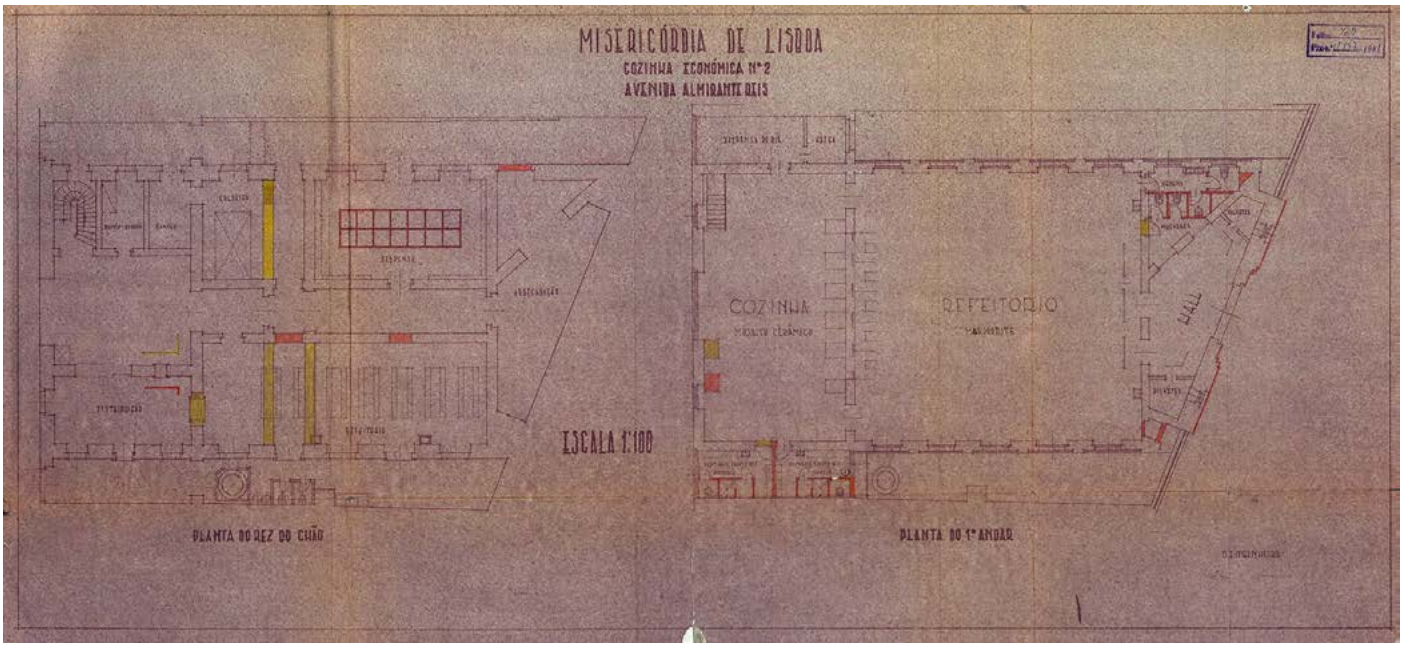

Figure 7 Floor plan of the Economic Kitchen of Anjos. Lisbon Municipal Archive, Obra 36650, Processo 12897/DSC/PG/1941, f. 69.

Figure 8 Confeccion of Soups, Economic Kitchen of Anjos, Lisbon, 1959. Historical Archive/Library of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Lisbon, ACESP/GA/02/Cx001, Fotografia 26.

with the 1997/1998 conversion of the dining hall into a social support center with facilities for the homeless, such as rooms, showers, a lounge, and laundry services[11].

The 3rd Economic Kitchen installed in Lisbon was located in a predominantly industrial and working-class area, an identity that would also mark the next two kitchens. Located in Alcântara, its construction began in 1894. In a letter dated June 22 of that year, the Marquis of Faial, tasked by the Economic Kitchens Association with overseeing the construction of the 3rd Kitchen in Alcântara, submitted the project plans to the Lisbon City Council (Figure 9). This request was approved in a session on August 23, 1894, with the stipulation that "no project tax be charged as it is a charitable work"[12].

Architecturally modest in character, the Alcântara Kitchen was a structure placed where it was greatly needed, in an area lacking significant governmental or prestigious institutions nearby, which may also explain its less elaborate decoration (Figures 10 and 11). The land owned by the Lisbon City Council, was near the Cascais Railway Station and the Count of Daupias textile Factory. The area was dynamic and industrial, surrounded by the movement of goods, and a growing working-class population, linked to the commercial activities along the river, benefiting from both maritime and rail connections.

In 1894, Alcântara had distinctive characteristics associated with its economic, social, and urban transformation, reflecting the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the city's growth. The estates that once existed there were progressively altered and transformed from a rural into an urban landscape with workers' villages and factories, (Pereira, 1994). Many factories, warehouses, and workshops were established along the Alcântara Valley and near the Tagus River, including textile mills, soap factories, ceramics factories, grain mills, and tanneries, all benefiting from the port's proximity for product distribution. This industrialization attracted a large working-class population, resulting in urban densification. In 1894, an outbreak of bubonic plague (introduced via ships from international ports) significantly affected this densely populated and unsanitary working-class neighbourhood, located near the many piers and docks that developed there. Having this philanthropic infrastructure available would surely have helped in relieving the effects of that event.

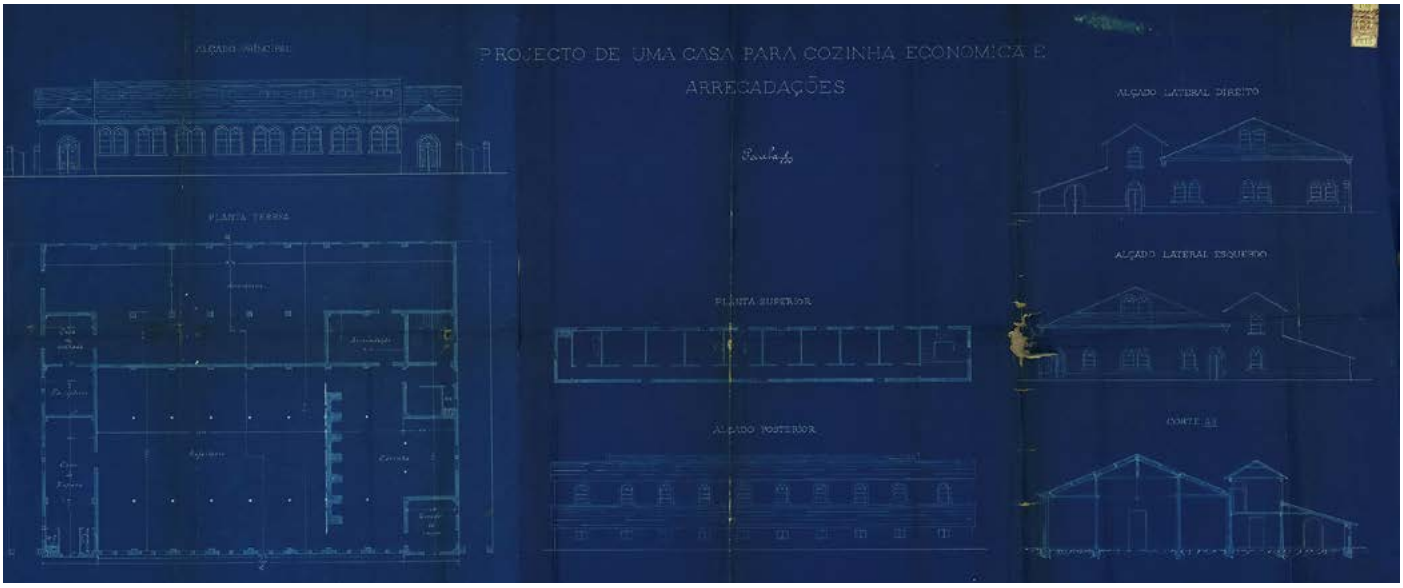

Figure 9 [Project for a house for an economic kitchen and storage rooms]. Lisbon Municipal Archive, Obra 4052 - Processo 4858/1.ª REP/PG/1894, f. 5.

[11] H. Mantas e J. Simões, *Refeitório dos Anjos / Cozinha Económica dos Anjos / Sopa dos Pobres / Sopa do Sidónio / Sopa do Barroso / Centro de Apoio Social e de Acolhimento Nocturno dos Anjos [Registo nº 25569]*, 2006. SIPA - Sistema de Informação para o Património Arquitetónico. http://www.monumentos.gov.pt/site/app_pagesuser/SIPA.aspx?id=25569

[12] Lisbon Municipal Archive, Obra 4052 - Processo 4858/1.ª REP/PG/1894.

Figure 10 People waiting for soup at the Alcântara's Economic Kitchen, Lisbon, in 1959. Historical Archive/Library of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Lisbon, ACESP/GA/02/Cx001.

Figure 11 Exterior of Alcântara's Economic Kitchen, Lisbon, in 2014, which remained in use until its recent demolition. Photograph by Phil Carstairs.

The interest in continuing to open facilities of this nature led to the creation of several petitions organized by workers requesting similar facilities near factories. One such request was for the installation of an Economic Kitchen in Xabregas, which resulted in the 4th Economic Kitchen, located on Rua de Xabregas and inaugurated in 1896 (Cordeiro, 2012). This area, recently urbanized, saw factories occupying former convents, while warehouses and workshops expanded alongside workers' housing. As industry expanded to the city's outskirts, particularly large-scale industries found significant opportunities in this area of Lisbon. This led to rapid and intense development, characterized predominantly by industrial activities. Concurrently, there was an increase in worker housing spreading further inland, reflecting the growing need to accommodate the burgeoning workforce near their places of employment.

It is interesting to point out the concerned demeanour of the construction manager who tried to prevent the dismissal of workers when the construction of the Xabregas Economic Kitchen was completed. He addressed the Director of Public Buildings and Lighthouses, in a letter dated December 7, 1893: "As we are concluding the construction of the economical kitchen in Xabregas and needing to dismiss a large number of workers (…) I remind Your Excellency of the convenience of already starting the works on the new kitchen at Campo das Cebolas, whose project and budget I will soon send to Your Excellency, in order to avoid having to dismiss those workers"[13].

The port area of the former Cais das Cebolas was characterized by trade exchanges, customs inspection offices, workshops, factories, as well as the movement of people and goods (with the Santa Apolónia railway station established nearby since 1865). The initial proposal was to place the Economical Kitchen No. 5, or Ribeira Velha Kitchen, next to the Customs House building, but after lengthy study, it was eventually set up on an available plot next to the Lisbon Assay Office. The land was granted by the Port of Lisbon Administration to the government for this purpose. On seeing the start of the construction, the Assay Office became anxious emphasizing how "considerable values in gold, silver, and precious stones are stored" at the site[14].

[13] National Archive of the Torre do Tombo, Construção do edifício para cozinha económica no Campo das Cebolas (1895-1898), PT/TT/MOPCI/DEPFM-01-02-02.22/953.

[14] *Idem*, Sheet 145, Book 1.

The construction was completed in 1897, and is noteworthy to mention the letter sent to the Directorate of Economical Kitchens in May of that year by the Special Directorate of Public Buildings and Lighthouses: "I have the honour and great satisfaction of sending Your Excellency the keys to the building of the new economical kitchen at Campo das Cebolas, which has just been constructed by this directorate to serve that meritorious institution". Moreover, the letter expresses hopes for the advancement of the construction of "another kitchen near the Conde Barão square, which is the center of another important industrial neighbourhood," considered as "useful for the well-being of the proletarians"[15]. The Conde Barão plan apparently never came to fruition.

Once again, at Campo das Cebolas we see the Kitchen building constructed for providing food assistance to the poor being built more carefully and in a more dignified style, reflecting the important institutions in its vicinity and the position of philanthropy within the local community (Figures 12 and 13).

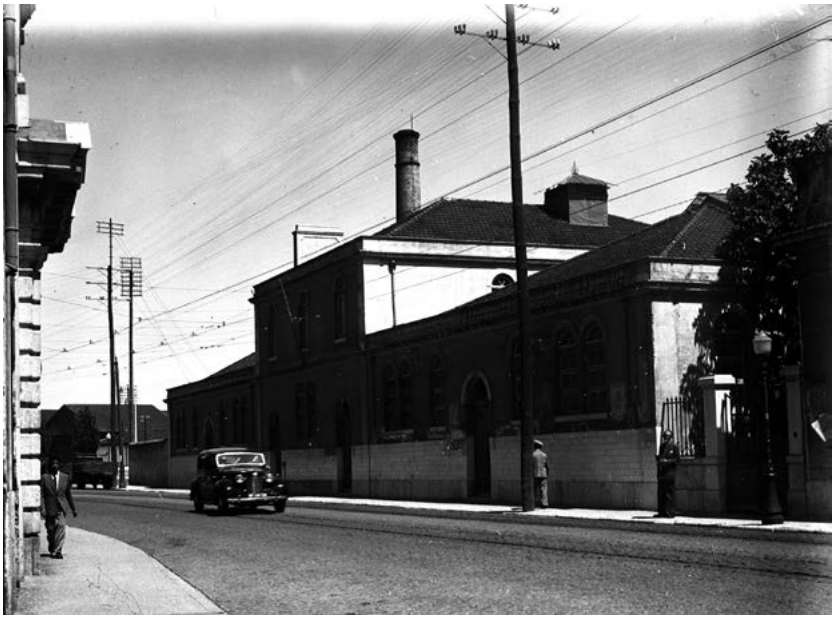

Figure 12 View of Ribeira Velha, building of Economic Kitchen n.º 5, in 1953. Lisbon Municipal Archive, PT/AMLSB/CMLSBAH/PCSP/004/EDP/000394.

Figure 13 Inside Economic Kitchen n.º 5, s.d. Information System for Architectural Heritage – SIPA.

[15] National Archive of the Torre do Tombo, Construção do edifício para cozinha económica no Campo das Cebolas (1895-1898), PT/TT/MOPCI/DEPFM-01-02-02.22/953.

The São Bento Economic Kitchen, the sixth to be actually constructed, occupies a strategically significant location directly opposite, a former Benedictine monastery dating from the late 16th century, which is currently the seat of the Assembly of the Republic. Historically the Palace was known as the Palace of the Courts and served a similar legislative function. Completed in 1906, this kitchen was built on a site that had pre-existing structures, adapted, and transformed for the new function. The choice of location carries profound symbolism, embodying the institution's core mission to elevate the poorest, enhancing their dignity in a visible manner (Figure 14). Positioned directly in front of the nation's legislative power, the kitchen serves as a perpetual reminder to policymakers of the persistent issues of poverty and the ongoing need for societal support. Furthermore, it highlights the critical role of the institution in advocating for the underprivileged, continually emphasizing the historical importance of the nobility and clergy in providing social welfare.

The promotion of the *Cozinhas Económicas* in Lisbon frequently emphasized the healthy and clean environment of the buildings, painting an idyllic picture of well-maintained spaces that promoted health and social well-being. This image also helped to solidify donor support and public approval for the initiative, but they may have been overcrowded facilities and perhaps less hygienic than the promotional descriptions would like to admit (Figure 15). These discrepancies between the idealized representation and the operational reality of the economic kitchens raise important questions about the narratives used in combating urban poverty and food insecurity, which also deserve further exploration.

These *Cozinhas Económicas*, established according to a specific model, ceased operation in 1910 with the establishment of the Portuguese Republic, an anti-monarchist and anticlerical regime. However, their utility and significance transcended political boundaries, prompting their rapid reactivation. They not only resumed operations but also expanded their scope with the addition of more economic kitchens, soup kitchens for the poor, and other food assistance facilities. These new initiatives had distinct features compared to the six original kitchens set up by the *Sociedade Protectora das Cozinhas Económicas de Lisboa*. Under the Republic, the Economic Kitchens still operated on a mixed funding model that included state subsidies, private donations, and payments from users, and continued to be crucial for the daily sustenance of many Lisbon families. It was estimated that in 1910, around 32% of Lisbon's population received a full meal from these kitchens, while a significant number of other residents bought tickets just for bread or a single dish (Lúcio & Marques, s.d., pp. 13-14).

Figure 14 Rua de São Bento [Sociedade Protetora das Cozinhas Económicas de Lisboa. Cozinha n.º 6] in 1908. Lisbon Municipal Archive, PT/AMLSB/CMLSBAH/PCSP/003/FAN/000875.

Figure 15 *Cozinha Económica* in São Bento, photographed by the newspaper *O Século* in 1926, showing dusty floors and water infiltration marks in the ceiling. National Archive of the Torre do Tombo, PT-TT-EPJS-SF-001-001-0001-0013A.

The legacy of these kitchens has persisted into the present in a fragmented and often underappreciated manner. Kitchens No. 1, No. 3, and No. 5 have been demolished, victims of urban expansion and transformation. Meanwhile, Kitchens No. 2 and No. 6 continue to provide social services under the administration of *Santa Casa da Misericórdia*, an institution that has taken over the management of these facilities, focusing primarily on social support functions. Kitchen No. 4 is currently used for different purposes but faces potential threats due to significant urban changes and gentrification affecting the area, further compounded by ongoing deindustrialization. Kitchen No. 3 was only recently demolished, between 2022 and 2024, apparently without any proper record of the building being made. It is hoped that the surviving examples will fare better as they form an important part of the cultural history of the city and nation.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the examination of food assistance models through the lens of history, from the English soup kitchens to the *Cozinhas Económicas* of Lisbon, provides a broad perspective on the strategies employed to combat food insecurity in different urban contexts. The Economic Kitchens in Lisbon, initiated by aristocratic philanthropy, signify a distinctive model that intertwined with the socio-economic transformations during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reflecting a blend of traditional charitable work and modern social welfare strategies. These kitchens served not only as a direct response to immediate needs but also as institutions promoting dignity and self-reliance among the impoverished. Their locations were coordinated city-wide and chosen to benefit the working poor of the industrializing city and to display the importance of philanthropy to the wider community. Before embarking on her project, the Duchess of Palmela studied food relief projects in other European countries (Cordeiro, 2012). This may have enabled her to devise a scheme that was both popular and long-lived and construct buildings that were impressive and dignified.

On the other hand, England's approach, characterized by the widespread use of soup kitchens during crises, underscores the evolving public attitudes towards poverty. The transformation of these establishments from emergency responses to regular fixtures in the landscape of unofficial welfare marks a significant shift in recognizing and addressing the persistent issues of urban poverty and food scarcity but their impermanence and the lack of state involvement reflect the English free market and *laissez faire* approach to social problems. The buildings were usually small and hidden away on back streets; the policies became harsher in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. There were efforts to establish public kitchens in more prominent locations that provided a wider range of foods on a year-round basis rather than only during hard times. With a few notable exceptions these initiatives failed due to insufficient resources and an insistence on their being financially self-supporting. This contrasts with Portugal's more centralized coordinated approach which succeeded in uniting aristocratic philanthropy, religious charity, and political expediency to create a long-term and more popular solution to hunger.

Together, these narratives highlight the crucial role of such institutions in shaping social policies and public responses to poverty and the importance of the buildings and their locations in articulating those policies and responses. The continued relevance of food assistance programs, evidenced by their adaptation and persistence, underscores the enduring challenge of urban poverty and the necessity for innovative and compassionate solutions. The historical insights from both Portugal and England serve as valuable lessons for contemporary social welfare practices, advocating for a balanced approach that respects the dignity of the individuals it aims to serve while adapting to the changing socio-economic landscapes.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

As cozinhas económicas (1895, March 15). *O Occidente: Revista Illustrada de Portugal e do Estrangeiro, XVIII*(584), 59–60.

Bernard, T. (1798). An extract from an account of a charity in Spitalfields, for suppling the poor with soup and potatoes; with observations. In T. Bernard (ed.), *The reports of the Society for bettering the condition and increasing the comforts of the poor* (Vol. 1, pp. 216-222). The Society.

Bourne, H. (1736). *The history of Newcastle upon Tyne: Or, the ancient and present state of that town*. John White.

Brito, G. de (1899). A Sopa Económica no Largo de Arroios. *O Occidente: Revista Illustrada de Portugal e do Estrangeiro, XXII*(748), 222-225.

Carstairs, P. (2017). Soup and reform: improving the poor and reforming immigrants through soup kitchens 1870-1910. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, *21*(4), 901-936.

Cordeiro, R. F. (2012). *Filantropia: As Cozinhas Económicas de Lisboa (1893-1911)* [Dissertação de mestrado, ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa]. Repositório ISCTE-IUL. https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/handle/10071/5510

Correia, F. da S. (1944). *Origens e formação das misericórdias portuguesas*. Henrique Torres.

Evans, B. (in press). Soup kitchens and social assistance in the 19th and 20th centuries: Spaces and foodscapes of the working world. *Cadernos do Arquivo Municipal*, (23)

Lúcio, J., & Marques, F. (s.d.). *A Pobreza em Lisboa na I República*. Observatório de Luta Contra a Pobreza na Cidade de Lisboa. https://www.observatorio-lisboa.eapn.pt/ficheiro/A_POBREZA_EM_LISBOA_NA_I_REPUBLICA_VERSAO_FINAL1.pdf

Pereira, N. T. (1994). Pátios e vilas de Lisboa, 1870-1930: a promoção privada do alojamento operário. *Análise Social, XXIX*(127), 509-524. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41011019

Quinn, R. L. (2021*). Rural remnants? Historical geographies of landscape significance at Saltaire (1853-c.1900) and the assembling of a peri-urban heritage site*. [Doctoral Thesis Department of Geography and Environment, University of Hull]. University of Hull. https://hull-repository.worktribe.com/output/4790656

Quintinha, J. (1916). *Assistência à mendicidade*. Ventura Abrantes.

Redlich, F. (1971). Science and charity: Count Rumford and his followers. *International Review of Social History,* 16, 184-216.

SPCEL (1894). *Estatutos*. Imprensa Nacional.

Thiers, A. (1850). *Rapport général présenté par M. Thiers au nom de la Commission de l'assistance et de la prévoyance publiques dans la séance du 26 janvier 1850*. Assemblée Nationale Législative. https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_oCNeAAAAcAAJ

Submissão/submission: 20/01/2025
Aceitação/approval: 28/02/2025

Philip Carstairs, Independent Researcher, BR1 2HB Kent, United Kingdom. carstairsp@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7628-4482

Leonor Medeiros, CHAM and History Department, Schools of Social and Human Sciences, NOVA University of Lisbon, 1069-061 Lisboa, Portugal. leonormedeiros@fcsh.unl.pt
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6638-0905

Carstairs, P., & Medeiros, L. (2025). Feeding the poor: A comparison between English soup kitchens and Portugal's *cozinhas económicas*. *Cadernos do Arquivo Municipal*, (23), 1-19.
https://doi.org/10.48751/CAM-2025-23388