

Gato, Maria Assunção. (2014b). *Viver no Parque das Nações: espaços, consumos e identidades*. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.

Keywords: Parque das Nações, Mega Projects, Expo 98, Social selective space.

78 Touristification of spaces and urban lifestyles

São Paulo Square, Lisbon

ANA CRAVINHO
ISCTE-IUL

TERESA MADEIRA DA SILVA
ISCTE-IUL

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade Lisbon's historic city center was marked by extensive transformations, notably the loss of residents and traditional commerce followed by gentrification trends. While the former led to a drain of the city's assets and a consequent degradation of its buildings, the latter attracted new stakeholders increasing building's rehabilitation and prompting the growth of commercial and residential typologies for tourism purposes. Currently, with the COVID-19 pandemic, new challenges arise that change the previously mentioned dynamics. In a global context these dynamics were associated with factors such as the instability of the financial sector, migratory flows and the emergence and development of new technologies which together with the instability of social relations make the relocation of social interaction to multiple places a reality. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, these factors have contributed to the increase of the real estate and tourist pressure, as a result of the occupation of buildings for temporary residence or local accommodation, the mobility of large tourist flows and the growth of nightlife activities, untying the city, its identity and unique memory. But during the confinement period, deriving from it and from the lack of tourist flow, Lisbon has seen an emptying of its public space.

This essay identifies how the "new" stakeholders, especially tourists, contribute to lifestyle and spatial transformations, looking into the particular case of São Paulo square and its surroundings - where the new urban uses, associated with tourism and leisure, demand a livingness and identity of a city in conflict with its territorial and social dynamics. Furthermore, this study contributes to the elaboration of flexible urban strategies that address both top-down and bottom-up demographic change, disclosing how the new dynamics can redefine the city and mitigate its fewer positive effects.

Keywords: city, São Paulo Square, touristification, gentrification.

1. Introduction

São Paulo square presents us with an unfortunate microcosm for the economic and demographic trends at play in Lisbon today. This long-standing conduit of transport, commerce and culture can represent an example and a warning as to the dangers of over-uncareful economic planning. The question we are looking to answer is the following: has this square always been this way and does it need to remain so? This essay will identify some of the ways in which touristification has augmented new urban lifestyles in the districts where it is most prevalent. Furthermore, this essay aims to rethink the urban model with the objective of creating sustainable cities that are in tune with their citizen's needs. With this objective in mind, we open with a geographically and historically framing of São Paulo Square in the context of the city of Lisbon before defining touristification and related concepts, and finally moving on to an analysis of the dynamics that are in play in that contemporary urban tiltyard that is São Paulo Square, advancing our own reflection on the societal consequences.

2. São Paulo Square – Brief historical context and framing

São Paulo Square belongs to the civil parish of Misericórdia and is located in Cais do Sodré, South of Bairro Alto, close to Mercado da Ribeira, the Time Out Market Lisbon and near to the train and underground stations of Cais do Sodré and to the funicular of Bica.

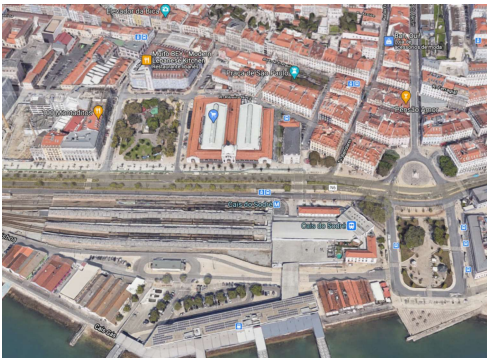


Fig. 1 – Aerial view of Cais do Sodré, highlighting in yellow the location of São Paulo Square.
Source: Google Maps

References to the São Paulo area can be found in travel literature from the 17th and 18th centuries. It is here mentioned as a meeting place for foreign merchants who were established in Lisbon and also to a majority population with connections to maritime activities, initially fishermen, and then later the bourgeoisie who maintained interests in colonial commerce. Nevertheless, it was only at some point between 1566 and 1568 that the civil parish of São Paulo came into being. The name given to the civil parish and to the square, São Paulo, originates in a church with the same name located on that precise site. This church was presumably constructed in 1412 and before the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, had been one of the most majestic churches Lisbon possessed, (Cuiça, 2017).

Before the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, public spaces in Portuguese cities were extremely diverse in shape, size and orientation in that urban mesh, either emerging in association to singular buildings or located marginally and peripherally to the city centre. After the earthquake and with the reconstruction of the capital according to the innovative Pombaline style, a new concept of public space came to be introduced. The space of the square came to be understood as the stage for cultural and political activity, shaped with this specific purpose and in order meet this function it becomes the key element in organization of the cities sprawl. More than an organising net of urban activities, public space also acquires its own autonomy and livingness as an outside collective space, conceptualised for social encounter.

After the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and the construction of São Paulo Square and its central fountain in the early 19th century, the square became a quintessentially Portuguese public space. Its integral function was that of organising the social conurbation of the city around human activities, for instance, the gathering of Catholics attending São Paulo Church and the need for a fresh domestic water source from the square's central fountain. Despite the absence of street furniture that would encourage prolonged stays, lingering was made possible by the presence of a few kiosks and the steps of both the fountain and church, which together enabled a consistent use of the square. In this way, São Paulo Square becomes defined as an aggregate space which facilitated the encounters of diverse actors, fostering their interaction in terms of geography and associated social contexts.

With the development of industries, the construction of roads and the increasing concentration of population, the life of the city proliferated and expanded. Likewise, the renovated São Paulo Square took up a new role with commercial purpose. At the beginning of the 20th century, the square was superseded as a place of encounter and meeting by these commercial exchanges which become the hallmark of the square's dynamic appropriation.



Figs. 2 and 3 – São Paulo Square at the beginning of the 20th century. Photograph 2, Joshua Beniel (1907). Photograph 3, Paulo Guedes (n/d). Source: Photographic Archive/Lisbon City Council

Over the course of the 20th century, the city of Lisbon became all the more urbanised, hosting a greater number of populations and demographics, however this area was no longer utilised for residential purposes. Cais do Sodré has always been associated with the maritime activities which influenced the predominant commerce of the area, with most of the shops specialised in sailing and fishing equipment and uniforms as well as bars mainly frequented by sailors. In this context, this area of the city had a high rate of delinquency, primarily associated with social interactions which promoted prostitution and transgression, something that we could mark as the beginning of the slippery slope of degradation and gradual reduction of economic activity that the area has experienced since, (Monteiro, 2018). By the end of the 1970, the area faced what would be another turning point when it saw an increased number of nightclubs and bars which attracted younger visitors. These nightclubs promoted the consumption of vintage, bohemian and

decadent, as a new form of social distinction, (Nofre, 2013). Indeed, Cais do Sodré “...times of sailors and cabarets, conflicts and brawls, associated with the phenomenon of prostitution, becomes an old-fashioned image... [developing into] the stage of demonstrations of cultural nature, of new artistic movements and with an attendee population of a social strata, group age and, especially, cultural background, extremely different from those in the 60’s and 70’s” (Monteiro, 2018, p.57).

Over the past few years, partially due to the implementation of an urban planning focus on leisure activities, the area has a successful cohort of restaurants, coffee shops and other spaces dedicated to entertainment. Definitely, Cais do Sodré was repositioned as one of the city hubs for cultural and entertainment for nocturnal practices. Many of the pre-existing spaces that were once dedicated either to prostitution, as an example the pub *Bar Pensão Amor*, or to maritime activities, as *Bar Sol e Pesca*, have been adapted to the new tendencies towards consumption “...transforming Cais do Sodré into a mandatory place for visiting and fruition of Lisbon’s night, namely by tourists and foreign students”² (Monteiro, 2018, p.57). Since 2011 and with the support of the Association of Merchants and Friends of Cais do Sodré, this area of the city was invested with several regeneration projects which allowed the area to rebrand under a new dynamic, transforming it into a place of “... no doubt nocturnal life activities, through the traffic closure in Rua Nova do Carvalho, popularly renamed as *Rua Cor-de-Rosa*, (...) producing a rise in the number of consumers”³ (Monteiro, 2018, p.58).

Currently, due to the pandemic, public spaces are emptied as a consequence of consecutive national and local lockdowns, and a lack of tourists, the main actors for places which focus is entertainment and leisure. In Cais do Sodré, an area with few residents, this emptying has revealed the fragilities of these recent urban policies and the deficient way in which revitalisation and rehabilitation of Lisbon’s city center has been undertaken.

3. Touristification of urban spaces and lifestyles – São Paulo Square

From 1970 onwards, and in line with what was happening in other European cities, Lisbon transitioned to post-industrialism and deindustrialization, essentially through the mechanism of this shift of attention into economy and leisure. Since 1990, regeneration strategies have been focusing on confirming Lisbon as a top destination on the international map of tourism, soliciting foreign investment by showcasing the city as ideal destiny to international visitors, students, and other migrant populations from Europe who want to live somewhere lively but with accessible living costs, “In such a post-industrial context, the future of most cities would depend on them being desirable places for consumers to live in or visit and,

¹ Translated by the authors.

² Translated by the authors.

³ Translated by the authors.

accordingly, revitalizing urban cores usually involves the rebranding of cities as spaces of leisure and pleasure” (Cocola-Gant, 2018, p.3).

At the beginning of the 21st century we are confronted with a fragmented city, where different areas of the city have been repositioned as global, advertising themselves as integrated with the new logics of spatial functionality and appropriation that we encounter in a digital era. One example of this are the buildings that were once industrial but have nowadays been transformed to cultural hubs which reflect this notion of Lisbon as a mobile and connected city which is eager to challenge other European capitals. The development of new technologies and the decontextualization of social practices alongside Lisbon sharing the GMT time zone with London, Europe’s financial center, has helped to create the ambiguous community of creative and remote workers responsible for the recent growth of Lisbon’s population city. Gradually, those who inhabit the city merge with the ones linked to the new commercial approach of space, namely, producers, merchants, retailers and clients, as well as those attracted by the new aesthetic and by the dynamic narrative which has been pushed and made possible by the mobility of contemporary life.



Figs. 4 and 5 – São Paulo Square and surroundings, December 2018. Source: Authors.

The financial crisis of 2008 has accelerated this demand based on foreign investment and tourism which is broadly considered to be silver bullet for stimulating the city into swift economic growth. During this period numerous public policies were implemented with the objective of attracting second home residence buyers and other European Union investors, for example the provision of low interest loans. In 2012 with the liberalization of the real estate market saw the dawn of the so-called golden visas, which also offered basic citizenship benefits for international investors from outside the European Union.

In the past few years, the increase of tourism in the city of Lisbon has elevated the economic development beyond expectations with enormous contributions deriving from investment in conservation and the regeneration of the city’s historic center. As a result, the city has been witnessing a rising in property appropriation for touristic purpose, such as shopping centers, hotels, short-stay accommodation, restaurants and other nocturnal activities which has been seen to come at the cost of the displacement of the remaining local residents. Thus, tourism is one of the direct causes of this flight of resident population, who don’t have the economic power to face the increase of property cost and are forced to the outskirts of the city. What the city is left with are processes of globalization, gentrification, exclusion and social segregation.

A recent study concluded that in 2010 the civil parish of Misericórdia had 13 registered establishments of short-stay accommodation but by the end of 2020 there were 3.589 properties with this designation, (Turismo de Portugal, 2020). Unequivocally, this sharp increment demonstrates the importance and influence that tourism has been having on real estate speculation in the civil parish of Misericórdia. It is crucial for the life of the city that we understand how this increment was made possible, as a direct result of the displacement of local residents, by the means of recycling old factories and by repurposing derelict spaces attributing them new usages and functions.

Alongside the described displacement of local residents, the recent trends indicate a new demographic flux with the arrival and settlement of new populations to the area, who are not characterised as tourists and whose occupation of the area is not seasonal producing a mitigation to the former tendency. Amongst these populations who settle in the territory are international students, migrants and younger generations who are generally more affluent than the locals that they replace and whose tastes bring further cultural and socioeconomic transformations. The former is reflected in the observed changes to the commercial typologies of the civil parish, which are described by (Salgueiro, 1992, p.400) as “... a particular movement of invasion of the former neighbourhoods by sophisticated commerce and services.”

This process of touristification is undoubtedly the predominant phenomena of

socioeconomic transformation for many areas of the city with touristic “potential”, leading to the creation of short-stay accommodations, the implementation of support structures, the inflation of real estate and the consequent shift of the profile of resident population. According to Coccola-Gant, touristification is responsible for three forms of displacement: “...residential displacement, commercial displacement and place-based displacement. (...) In this regard, displacement is economic, but also cultural and it has to be linked to the introduction of new lifestyles that undermine the use value of neighborhoods as residential spaces” (Coccola-Gant, 2018, p.2).

There is a definite worry that the introduction of new urban lifestyles might place at stake the authenticity of spaces and the right of everyone to the city, “... as new opportunities and territories are being explored and brought into the network of places to be or visit, they risk the transformation and loss of their uniqueness” (Gravari-Barbas, 2017, p.14), as well as transforming them irreversibly, this might affect “...long-term residents (...) lose the resources and referends by which they define their everyday life”, (Coccola-Gant, 2018, p.15). Those local residents, who choose to remain, end up experiencing several forms of socio-spatial segregation and exclusion. Under this perspective, “the gap between the purchasing power of visitors and local residents leads to a market pressure on both housing and services that makes places increasingly unaffordable for the indigenous populations” (Coccola-Gant, 2018, p.8).

Without doubt some of these transformations have a positive impact in the territory, for example, as an enabling factor in urban revitalisation furthering investors to succeed in fast economic growth, promoting inclusive social and cultural differentiation and promoting working opportunities. However, the diversity of its contemporary actors poses problems that generate conflict. As described by (Nofre, 2018, p.9): “...the role of international and national university students in producing, reproducing and consuming new urban, youthful, hedonist nightscapes has a central role in the process of rejuvenation and socioeconomic revitalization of formerly run-down neighbourhoods,” but in the specific case of the civil parish of Misericórdia “...the expansion and commodification of youth-oriented nightlife in central areas has involved the rise of critical problems regarding the coexistence of residential communities and alcohol-fueled nightlife entertainment undermining community livability during night-time hours” (Nofre, 2018, p.1).

Over the past few years further public interventions were enacted which have been contributing to the touristification of this area, introducing new usages and modes of consumption. Since the end of 1990, Lisbon’s City Council has been supporting the expansion of nightlife entertainment, mainly by prioritizing the attribution of licenses to infrastructure related to the commerce and leisure industries. For instance, in October 2015 the county approved a positive 12 month communitarian intervention project, named SAFEIN. This project’s objective was to improve

public health and safety conditions in public and private spaces in Cais do Sodré and its surroundings during nighttime: “...the Project aimed to engage and empower different social actors – namely neighbours, venue owners, municipal police and representatives of the civil parish – to foster further implementation of new initiatives of co-participative governance of the urban night in Cais do Sodré” (Nofre, 2018, p.13).

Despite the efforts of Lisbon’s City Council to reinterpret the territory, conflict between demographics has been a constant, mainly the complaints are raised by the most elderly and relate to the impact of nightlife activities. For example, producing excessive noise and environmental pressure, the sale of illicit substances, vandalism, security issues, circulation and parking difficulties. International migrants can be seen to be distinct from local residents, in behavior, language and/or values and these cultural differences produce positives and negatives which can include the further polarization and fragmentation of urban environments.

In a city where tourism is seen by the central government as a silver bullet to redefine and renovate its economy and as a decisive factor to foster creativity and international competitiveness, it should be of equal priority that we develop mechanisms which enhance the positive aspects of tourism and minimize their more negative consequences. On the positive side, tourism offers unique economic development opportunities, namely by creating working positions, infrastructures, sustainable business models supported by the new technologies and also offers the possibility of promoting our rich heritage worldwide. It has to be borne in mind that new populations arriving to the territory contribute to rejuvenation through this diversification of population, in contexts that can be of integration and sharedness, where a rich and plural cultural offer comes to contribute towards social and geographical cohesion.

At the beginning of 2020, São Paulo Square and its surroundings were an area where touristification was at its most intensive which was visibly struggling with the different usages that had been imposed on it. The square was segmented and disputed by the different actors who came to populate it. According to (Comissão Europeia, 2011, p.36): “A cohesive city is not necessarily a city with complete equality and a homogeneous population, but a city where everybody is welcome and each one’s integrity respected,” however, for such principles to be achieved it is necessary to strike a balance.

After March 2020 due to the pandemic and consequent lockdown, the afore mentioned scenario is not currently as severe as it has been. Unfortunately, this evacuation has not been a positive one. The square is mostly silent, a silence only broken by the punctuation of the few residents who persist and by the merchants, who in an attempt to minimise economic losses, remain open. Many of the places designed for commerce and leisure are vacant and look as though they will remain so for some

time. Many more are predicted to close in the uncertainty of a future that is dependent on the duration of a pandemic which we still do not fully understand which is further eroding the encounter, interaction and the meeting of individuals in public space.



Figs. 6 and 7 – São Paulo Square and surroundings, May 2020. Source: Authors.

This and many other vibrant public spaces like it have been stripped of their social lives and to a certain extent their meanings. The Covid-19 pandemic has made people see public space differently, yet how can this newfound appreciation be employed for long term social good? São Paulo Square is a demonstrable clinch point for a city that has bet everything on tourism and has suddenly found itself faced with a new reality.

The pandemic and the consequent impact on all sectors of the economy, particularly tourism, has shown that a strategy based on rapid regeneration policies is a hostage to fortune, based on a forecasting of “black swans”, a metaphor for events which come as a surprise, have a major affect and become inappropriately rationalised as being indispensable after the fact and with the benefit of hindsight (Taleb, 2018). Prospective ways forward could be the implementation of progressive housing policies, with accessible rents for younger populations, providing the civil parish with

facilities specifically designed to the needs of these actors, such as kindergartens, playgrounds and the provision of other types of equipment targeting towards supporting the older population, such as care homes, day centres and clinics.

Going into this “new normal”, the implementation of tourism directed taxes could be considered as a strong measure which would counteract the negative impacts of tourism in a targeted way, to be used for example, in the cleaning of public spaces that suffer disproportionately from the social problems, tourism can produce, as well as a redoubled information strategy which would promote this awareness amongst tourists. These strategies can also be implemented together with corporate sponsorship and be executed co-productively with the bars, restaurants and nightclubs in order to implement better consumption practices and social cohesion.

The adoption of involving, inclusive practices to the civil parish's residents may be the key to change, reprogramming the relationship between resident and visitor as less one sided and encouraging the residents to engage actively with the changes which will inevitably occur. The fostering of an increasingly participative and involved resident population would go some way to achieving a better balance between residents and visitors. Lisbon needs to plan more homeostatically and understand the centrality of places like São Paulo as effective organs contributing to the city's health. The focus should be on improving our capacity to design, implement and evaluate public housing and tourism based on a holistic vision of the city and society, where the strengthening of local municipal power as a regulatory agent for the city's tourism development can be at the root of the development of urban social movements defending the right to housing and to the city.

4. Final Considerations

São Paulo Square and its surroundings have been the object of profound social and economic changes from the time of its construction right up until today. To better understand the complex reasons behind such changes, it is necessary to restate that the original site of São Paulo, part of one of the core centres of the city of Lisbon - Cais do Sodré - has a unique identity which has always resisted the establishment of a significant resident population due to its bohemian character and its long standing reputation for transgression and excess. This is not a new problem but perhaps the current climate can give us an opportunity to approach it in a new way.

Although tourism boosts urban regeneration, a city that is exclusively dependent on this sector will always be at the mercy of variables outside of its control, as the pandemic has shown. Covid-19 presents us with a chance to rethink our “new normal” and adjust our urban model, investing in greater economic diversification and more sustainable and better targeted support for the needs of its citizens. Measures should be taken to retain and capture assets in the neighborhood, and through the design and implementation of local urban regeneration processes,

and the introduction of principles, practices and policies to prevent eviction and displacement of residents, we can put in place the concrete measures and initiatives to ensure the “right to housing” rather than “gentrification by tourism”.

To enhance and value the memory and identity of a space, through interaction, respect and innovation among the different actors is the main challenge if we want a city to be attractive, dynamic, competitive, plural and proud. A city which promotes new senses of belonging, giving back the function to the subject as stage of interaction, encounter and creation of social practices.

References

- Comissão Europeia. (2011, October). Cidades de Amanhã: Desafios, visões e perspectivas. http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index_en.htm
- Cocola-Gant, A. (2018). *Tourism gentrification*. In Lees, L. and Phillips, M (Eds) *Handbook of Gentrification Studies*, Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing
- Cuiça, P. (2017). *Roteiro, Junta de Freguesia da Misericórdia*. Junta de Freguesia da Misericórdia
- Gravari-Barbas, M. & Gainard, S. (2017). *Tourism and Gentrification in Contemporary Metropolises*, International Perspectives, Contemporary Geographies of Leisure, Tourism and Mobility. London & New York: Routledge
- Monteiro, M. B. (2018). *Quando a rua entra em casa*. Doutoramento em Estudos Urbanos. Lisboa: FCSH - Universidade Nova de Lisboa, ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa
- Nofre, J. (2013). Série II, 23. *De lo sórdido a lo vintage, de la marginalización a la distinción. Gentrification y ocio nocturno, em Cais do Sodré, Lisboa* (pp. 1-14). Fórum Sociológico
- Nofre, J. et al (2018). *The 'Pink Street in Cais do Sodré: urban change and liminal governance in a nightlife district of Lisbon*. *Urban Research & Practice*. DOI: 10.1080/17535069.2018.1449010
- Salgueiro, T. B. (1992). *A Cidade em Portugal – Uma Geografia Urbana* (2.ª ed.). Edições Afrontamento
- Taleb, N. N. (2018). *O Cisne Negro - O impacto do altamente improvável* (9.ª ed.). Alfragide: Dom Quixote
- Turismo de Portugal. travelBI. (2020, December 31). *Alojamento Local/Oferta*. <https://travelbi.turismodeportugal.pt/pt-pt/Paginas/PowerBI/rnal-registo-nacional-de-alojamento-local.aspx>

99 White elephants in southern europe

Urban Development and Social Change in the context of the 2008 financial crisis and the pandemic

DIMITRIS POULIOS
National Technical University of Athens

ABSTRACT

Up until the early 2000s, the Mediterranean urban landscapes were praised for being the best examples of successful urban transformation and inclusive growth. The case of Barcelona was considered a “Model” that combined urban competitiveness, social cohesion, and participatory governance mechanisms. Other cases, like Athens, though lacking behind in terms of urban transformation, were commented on for their low segregation and informal urbanization.

Mega-Projects and Mega-Events as a starting point for wider urban interventions lay at the core of Southern European success stories, along with a governance model that promotes city competitiveness and urban boosterism. However, we argue that the circumstances have been changing rapidly since the breakout of the economic crisis of 2008. Cities were not only lacking the financial resources to continue such urban initiatives, but also public support.

On the contrary, more and more cities are moving away from the urban boosterism agenda of the previous decades. This shift from Grand Projects to “Grand Challenges”, comes with a focus on social cohesion policies and the improvement of the quality of life for citizens. This new urban policy situation coexists with more “traditional” urban competitiveness strategies that were the initial response to the crisis situation.

We present these changes through the cases of Barcelona and Athens by exploring urban policy responses during the last decade.

Keywords: urban policy, social cohesion, urban competitiveness.

1. White Elephants and urban change in Southern Europe

Since the early 1980s, urban regeneration initiatives through Mega Projects and international events have been lying at the core of urban policy in European cities and across the globe. Mediterranean urban landscapes in particular followed this trend with great success, with Barcelona being a “Model” case of urban renewal.

However, in the mid 2000s, these approaches started to show signs of decline. Public funds became more and more scarce, real estate interests favored more speculative approaches and the balance between competitiveness and social cohesion started shifting in favor of the former. The crisis and the real estate bubble of 2008 led to the end of this contemporary “Belle Époque” of urban regeneration, with the “freezing” of many large-scale projects and development initiatives. Failed urban development projects became the portrait of the financial crisis.

As a reporter from *The New Yorker* commented in 2013, “debt doesn’t look like much. It has no shape or smell. But over time it leaves a mark”. Debating about the case of Spain, Nick Paumgarten observed that it was there that it “manifested itself, first, as empty buildings, stillborn projects, and idled machines. The country now is a museum of doomed developments – a white elephant safari” (Paumgarten 2013). The collapse of the real estate market was not the only reason behind the critique of urban regeneration strategies. For many, pro-market urban boosterism approaches, flagship projects designed by star-architects lay behind local economic failure and the recession. In Athens, the underused and abandoned facilities of the 2004 Olympic Games became in the public debate the “monuments” of excess and irresponsible public spending. In Barcelona, cultural facilities and tourism promotion strategies were linked to the housing crisis. In Valencia, the City Council even took legal action against Santiago Calatrava, the architect behind Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias de Valencia, for the high upkeep of the facilities. All over Europe, city councils and governments were facing enormous difficulties dealing with the costs of operating and supporting large scale cultural and public infrastructure.

What is even more surprising, despite these circumstances, is that Mega Projects and large-scale urban regeneration initiatives continued to be the “common sense” of urban policy making in most of the cities even after the obvious failures and the market collapse. PPPs and real estate development were a key part of urban policy trajectories after 2008. However, this neoliberal vision of crisis-led urban transformation did not remain unchallenged. Dealing with the effects of the crisis, the poverty, the social inequalities and unemployment also led to a return to social cohesion policies. Under the pressure of social movements, city councils and policy makers, explored policies that battled urban segregation, enhanced the access to affordable housing and improved the quality of public spaces and civic facilities. In our view these initiatives introduce new ways

in envisioning urban transformation in an era of great uncertainty broadened by the pandemic conditions.

Our approach is based on field research in Athens and Barcelona from 2014 to 2019. On the following chapters we will elaborate more on what we understand as being a paradigm shift in urban policymaking.

- We begin by looking into the first urban policy responses after 2008 that continued in the footsteps of the previous norms and tendencies of urban competitiveness.
- Then we present city-wide social cohesion initiatives and urban development strategies in the fields of housing, public space access and social inclusion.
- Finally, we make some comments concerning theory, supporting our view that we are moving in a transition era where different value-metrics are introduced in policymaking, challenging the ways we conceptualize “Mega Projects” and what is valuable for cities and citizens¹.

2. The crisis and the continuation of the urban competitiveness agenda

In an effort to understand policy shifts during the recession that followed the 2008 market crash, Peck, Theodore and Brenner posed the following question: *why is it that mainstream late neoliberal urban-policy formulations appear to be so tired, so prosaic, so anemic, and yet still continue to represent the doxic ‘common sense’ of urban policymakers around the world?* (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2013, 1095). And they were right. For many analysts and scholars, despite the crisis and social unrest, market-led urban policies maintain an indisputable hegemony (Aalbers 2013; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2013; Harvey 2011). What is observed after 2008 is a continuation of urban boosterism and competitiveness remedies (Bayirbağ, Davies, and Münch 2017). Some would even argue that the process of neoliberalization is deepening (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Davies and Blanco 2017). One explanation could be similar to what Harvey (2010) refers to as “politics of denial”, criticizing the dominant economic thought. Policy makers were unable to accept “failure”. Nevertheless, what holds true for most of the cases is that the neoliberal thought is so embedded in urban governance institutions that urban competitiveness, branding tools, PPPs, lean government, and other policies are taken for granted.

This was evident in the case of Barcelona. In 2007 Jordi Hereu Boher, who had

¹ The Case Studies are based on doctoral thesis research on Athens and Barcelona between 2015-2019. The research was funded by the Onassis Foundation.