# How to rediscover the public square in the contemporary city: the experience of Lisbon

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*Abstract*

*During the 20th century and in particular, throughout the post-second world war, Lisbon's public square's design and function have changed as a consequence of the urban expansion and the cars' massification. After the Lisbon Strategic Charter 2010-2024 development, in 2014 the City Council of Lisbon presented the program of interventions in the public space "Uma praça em cada bairro" [A square in each neighborhood]. In this context, it has been proposed the qualification of more than one hundred and fifty public spaces in Lisbon. Through this paper, we aim to understand how this program contributed to rediscover the public square as an urban form and its traditional socioeconomic functions. The impact of the program and its concluded interventions were analyzed through a visual qualitative methodology. The qualitative evaluation of the previous and post-intervention spaces was enabled through the comparison of the Google Street View archives from 2009-2016 and the pictures taken during this research in 2020. By using this methodology this paper assesses the introduction of new urban elements, such as pavements, vegetation, urban furniture, lighting, and signs. This analysis shows the qualitative impact of the program "Uma praça em cada bairro" [A square in every neighborhood] on the qualification and revaluation of the public square as an urban forum in Lisbon. After the interventions the car traffic and parking was reduced about 21% of the total case studies area. Green spaces also increased, as did the areas dedicated to people.*

*Keyword: public, space, square, Lisbon.*

## 1. The city at eye level

In 2014 the Lisbon City Council presented the program "Uma praça em Cada Bairro" ["A square in each neighborhood"], which became an opportunity to rethink and qualify the public space of the Lisbon city. This program is noteworthy for interventions reaching all parishes of Lisbon. These convey new ideas of public space with transformative potential for the neighborhoods or micro-centralities it intended to promote (1). In the sequence of the Lisbon Strategic Charter, approved in 2009, and the Lisbon Local Development Plan, approved in 2012, the program presented in 2014 identified 150 spaces for intervention with 18 projects already implemented. Those projects and their transformational actions trigger these paper structural questions: (i) What are the transformations carried out by the program "A square in each neighborhood"? (ii) How does this program qualify and enhance public spaces?

This paper analyses this program strategy to rediscover the public square in contemporary Lisbon in 3 sections. The first and introductory section reflects on classical approaches of observation of the urban form

and public spaces and presents the methodological aspects of this research based on qualitative analysis, photography, and the Google Street View potential for urban analysis. The second section displays the qualitative transformation results and analyses the case studies after the program's intervention. That analysis focus on two dimensions: pavements and urban furniture. The third section discusses the results and reflects on the implications of the transformative process for the quality of the city.

This paper follows a theoretical framework laid down by different authors: Carmona(2), Cullen(3), Gehl(4), Lynch(5), Merlin and Choay(6), Pereira(7), and Whyte(8). Their perspectives and methodologies contributed to understanding cities and public spaces, namely the square and the street. These methodologies reflect the city and the public space through different lenses: history, function, form, and image. With these authors' work, it is possible to analyze the image of the city as an essential aspect of the citizens' quality of life.

**Table 1. Observation techniques by selected classical authors.**

| Author | Observational technique | | | | |
|--------|-------------|---------|-------------|-------|--------|
|        | Observation | Drawing | Photography | Video | Inquiry |
| Cullen | X | X | X | | |
| Gehl | X | | X | | X |
| Lynch | X | X | | | X |
| Pereira | X | | | | X |
| Whyte | X | | X | X | X |

These authors use different methodologies, techniques, and approaches but share the same interest: to observe the city and its public space. Merlin and Choay (5) clarify the notion of public space that we still know today. This concept emerged in 18th-century Europe as being outdoor spaces, places of anonymity, and informal meetings, opposed to the private, intimate spaces, the home. They also clarify, among other concepts, the Urban Design specifying that it must provide the means for public space purposes and accomplishment. So, we consider that the quality of public space depends on the urban design investment at the most varied scales.

From Cullen's work (3), we would like to emphasize how it defines and represents the elements that produce the urban landscape. A city is an object of its inhabitants' perception. Its analysis is a sequential observation of the urban environment and how the different urban elements are combined to organize the urban setting. With Lynch's research (6), we learn to dismember the city by its constituent elements: ways, limits,

neighborhoods, outstanding elements, nodes. Its mental maps and surveys help us to think about the city through looking and structuring visual elements. In relation to that, the case studies analyzed in this paper correspond to urban spaces for social meeting that do not only occur in situations of great road complexity but can also be quality public spaces.

For this study, eight public spaces intervened under the program "A square in each neighborhood" are analyzed, namely: i) Largo da Boa Hora à Ajuda; ii) Largo do Calvário; iii) Largo da Graça; iv) Largo do Leão; v) Largo da Memória; vi) Largo de Santos; vii) Praça Duque de Saldanha; viii) Rossio de Palma.

Pereira (7) establishes a methodology for observing and reading the city as a fundamental stage of the urban project. Her method is suitable for a critical analysis of the territory to obtain a diagnosis (problems and possibilities) that serves as the intervention basis. Thus, according to this research, proposals must reflect the understanding of the project area. That is, a broad knowledge of the territory facilitates the design of integrated proposals. In this perspective, we must clarify that analyzing the public spaces intervened by the program "A square in each neighborhood" was essentially carried out by direct observation and using other resources to read the transformation of the case studies.

This research pretends to explore the impact of the program "A square in each neighborhood" in Lisbon public spaces after its creation in 2014 (1). Photographies were a source of information in that process. As stated by Basil (9), "Photography and video should be a critical part of observational research and should be used in a wide range of studies, applied to objective and subjective perspectives and both quantitative and qualitative questions.".

The livability (and quality) of public spaces can be analyzed by these observational methods, as William H. Whyte did in his research "The social life of small urban spaces" (8). Photographs can also provide "significant content, given the research question" (10), namely when we pretend to analyze the townscape transformation, the public space, and its elements.

Google Street View is available from Google Maps application (http://maps.google.com) since 2007 and collects images that "provide panoramic, street-level views of city streets, in which the user can navigate forward or backward along the street, pan 360 degrees, rotate the camera vertically 290 degrees, and zoom in and out." (12).

Even though it was not created for research purposes, it constitutes a relevant source to "explore world landmarks, see natural wonders, and step inside places such as museums, arenas, restaurants, or small businesses" (11) as well as public spaces. The historic imagery on Street View's archives enables us to observe "how your neighborhood has changed over time." (11).
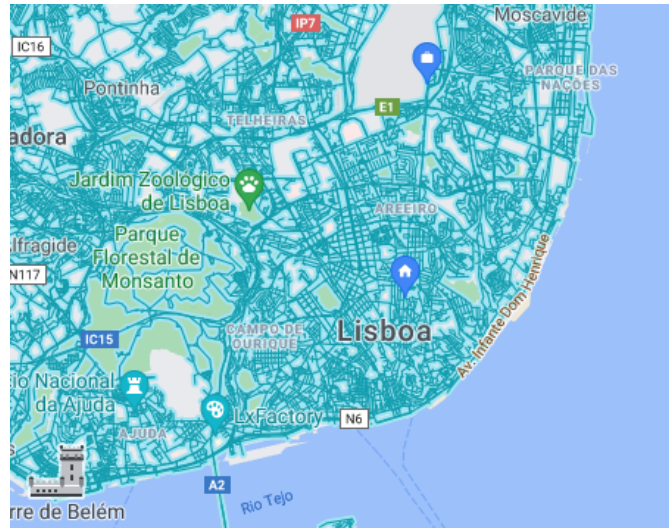
**Figure 1.** *Street View (blue lines) information availability in Lisbon (partially). (GOOGLE, 2021)*

Given the extension of Google Street View imagery, it is possible to answer questions on public space landscape (12) but not without limitations. The paper "Using Google Street View to Audit Neighborhood Environments" (12) highlights three limitations: 1) Public spaces pictured are mostly limited to "automobile-accessible streets"; 2) It is not known the time when the pictures were taken; 3) Pictures are from a driver's perspective and some elements can be hidden by parked cars on a sidewalk, for example.

In this research, we used Google Street View as a source of images before the interventions by the program in Lisbon. All the places selected had historic imagery on Street View, but some of them did not have recent update. So it was decided to take pictures of the public spaces, in November 2020, using similar Street View perspectives.

Those perspectives are at an eye-level which is, according to Jan Gehl in his work "Cities for people" (4), "the most important scale for city planning.". The author recommends that cities should be planned to address human-scale needs or, as the author calls, "universal human activities": walking, standing, sitting, listening, and talking (4).

It is from an eye-level scale that we can perceive the good city quality: "The battle for quality is on the small scale." (4). Picking this perspective, the Street View imagery, even if captured from the top of a car, is a fast and comprehensive way to observe and evaluate urban public spaces.

From 2014 until June 2021, eighteen public spaces/interventions are concluded within the program. Of those, eight public spaces match the form and definition of public square: "public place composed by the empty space and its surrounding buildings" (5). Public spaces being free, accessible, and open include other types of spaces (2). Among them, public squares, in opposition to streets, divide and mark the urban grid, in an allusion to Kevyn Lynch's work on "The Image of the City" (6). With these methodological notes, the

evaluation of the transformation of those public spaces, after the program "A square in each neighborhood", will be made with the observation and qualitative analysis of photographs before and after the intervention.

## 2. Transformation of Lisbon public squares

The results of the transformation after the intervention of the "A square in each neighborhood" program for the eight case studies are presented in Table 1. The use of the same perspective between the Street View images from 2014 and the 2020 photographs (before and after) stresses the change that these public squares went through.

A satellite imagery analysis that measured the distribution of functional areas in the case studies also stresses the transformation of these public squares (13). Before the interventions, 56% of the total case studies' area was dedicated to car traffic and parking. The program's strategy did not eliminate that function from the public space but reduced it to about 21% of the total case studies area (13). That reduction of cars' area contributed to increasing the people's area and the green spaces (13).
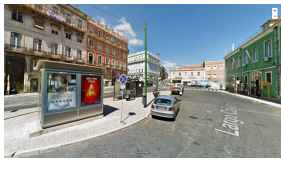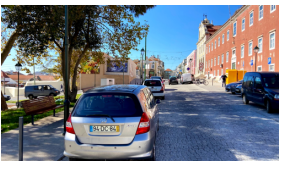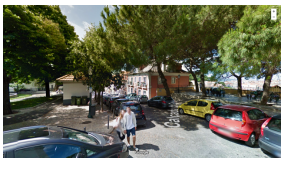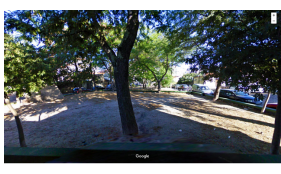
The public space's transformation highlights the program's progress, reducing the area dedicated to tires/cars, in allusion to Cullen's "Townscape" (3) idea. This change contributes to the "Cities for people" approach or, as Jan Gehl defends a basic human right: good city quality (4). Closing car circulation and parking areas contribute to open new perspectives and uses for the public space. In the case of these public squares, it is a stake their social, economic, and environmental functions more than answering the private transport demands.

**Table 2. Functional areas' variation between 2014 and 2020 (13).**

| Case study | Functional areas (% variation (2014-2020) | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | People | Cars | Green |
| Largo da Boa-Hora à Ajuda | 5 | -10 | 5 |
| Largo do Calvário | 27 | -27 | 0 |
| Largo da Graça | 16 | -16 | 0 |
| Largo do Leão | 36 | -36 | 0 |
| Largo da Memória | 25 | -24 | 6 |
| Largo de Santos | 15 | -15 | 0 |
| Praça Duque de Saldanha | 12 | -39 | 17 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rossio de Palma | 13 | -13 | 0 |
| Average | 17 | -20 | 5 |

Given our approach that pretends to analyze the "empty area" corresponding to the public square, we focus our discussion on two classes of urban elements: pavements and urban furniture. Within the second class, we included benches, tables, chairs, trash cans, lighting, signs, kiosks. Both of these two elements are associated with public space design and are interdependent. Furthermore, these elements can acknowledge a public's demand or need, but their installation can also introduce new habits (11).

| Before (2014) | After (2020) | Before (2014) | After (2020) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Largo da Boa-Hora à Ajuda | | Largo do Calvário | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Largo da Graça | | Largo do Leão | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Largo da Memória | | Largo de Santos | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Praça Duque de Saldanha | | Rossio de Palma | |
|  |  |  |  |

| Before (2014) | After (2020) | Before (2014) | After (2020) |
|---|---|---|---|
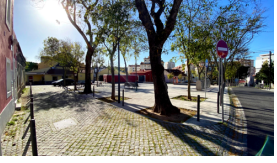
**Table 3. Case studies: 2014 vs. 2021.**

In comparison with the two moments that the photographs represent, the pavement's transformation is the most indisputable. The approach - to enlarge the peoples' area - adopted different types of pavements. From the traditional "calçada Portuguesa" like in Largo da Graça, Largo de Santos, and, particularly, Praça Duque de Saldanha for its rich patterns, to more contemporary approaches like in Largo do Leão or Rossio de Palma. Even with differences, there was a pavements enrichment and differentiation with these interventions.

The pavements substitution support the program's strategy by answering the question: What this area is meant for? Also if we consider the types of pavements used, more comfortable for walking, but also more diverse and noble, they denote the requalification of these public squares.

Over this floor, different elements were placed. Because this program (re)creates public squares, considering its social, cultural, and economic dimensions, benches, tables, lighting. But, remembering the title of this paper, old elements like fountains, bandstands, and kiosks helped to restore these public squares. We can highlight three particular examples: 1) The old fountain in Largo do Calvário that was taken to another location to facilitate the circulation in the area, was, with this intervention, relocated in the Largo; 2) A new bandstand was placed in Largo da Graça; 3) The kiosks that almost disappeared from the Lisbon public spaces in the 1990s, were included in different public squares.

## 3. The public square in the contemporary Lisbon

The program "A square in each neighborhood" was presented by the Lisbon City Council in 2014 and, 6 years later, 18 interventions are concluded, 5 is ongoing, and others were transferred to another public program "A Rua é Sua" ["The street is yours"]. The name of this program inspires many questions for the urban morphology study. Questions like "What is a public square?" Or "What is a neighborhood?". Picking the example of this paper's case studies we can argue that a public square in Lisbon had multiple forms, images, and designations. Somehow this program's interventions uniforms the public space's images and enhances its social and cultural value. The neighborhood question wasn't addressed in this paper but is interesting for future research.

About the methodology, besides the fact that Google Street View presents some problems like the case that pictures are from a car perspective serves to understand where the car could go before and can't go anymore and express the transformation of the public squares. Also, the photographs served the purpose of analyzing the physical transformation of the public squares.

The rediscovery of the public square by the municipality contradicts the previous car-centric planning period. This program promotes the social, economic, cultural, and environmental functions of the public square against the "Invaded city" scenario where public squares are dominated by car traffic and parking demands. So, to rediscover the public square in contemporary Lisbon is to address its original multifunctionality. The transformation of these public squares have three dimensions in common: reinforcement of these spaces as social gathering places, the improvement of active mobility, and the increase of areas dedicated to consumption.

This program, and the interventions, follow the idea of city (and public space) humanization. Even though it happens with decades of delay if we compare it to some other international experiences, like Barcelona in the '80s, the program follows much of the "Cities for people" concept and principles, more visible in the work of Jan Gehl. The public squares were transformed to address that concept, turning former car parking and car traffic areas into public squares. The program pretends to create centralities and for that, it transforms the Lisbon public space in order to address the "city of neighborhoods" strategy. The transformation of these places is the rediscovery of its previous-to-car-invasion phase or, in other words, the city reconquer of in a reference to the work of Jan Gehl. The transformation and adaptation of these old public squares through times and urban strategies is an example of its strength and durability through time.

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