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Navigating between resistance and unintentional collaboration: The role of left-wing grassroots associations in the tourist city

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Abstract

This article explores the ambivalent role of a grassroots cultural and activist association and its forced displacement between two districts as a result of the rapidly advancing frontier of gentrification in the city of Lisbon (Portugal). Strong institutional and private pressures led to the eviction of the association from its former location in the now gentrified Bairro Alto and its relocation to Intendente, a formerly degraded and excluded area currently undergoing a transition to marginal gentrification. By combining documentary research of secondary sources and exploratory ethnography that includes interviews with key informants, this article examines how the association has navigated between resistance against urban neoliberalism and its own (unwanted) contribution to the dynamics of marginal gentrification. It concludes by highlighting the need to deepen analysis of the ambivalent nature of activist associations campaigning for the right to the city, while providing clues for understanding how grassroots organisations resist, survive and/or collaborate with the manifold processes of urban change.

Keywords

associations, displacement, gentrification, Lisbon, touristification

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摘要
本文探讨了一个草根文化和活动者协会的矛盾角色， 以及由于葡萄牙里斯本市绅士化进程的快速推进，该协会被迫在两个地区之间进行的迁移。 强大的制度压力和私人压力导致该协会从现已绅士化的上城旧址迁出，并搬迁至 Intendente，后者是一个曾经衰落的、被排斥的地区，目前正在向边缘绅士化过渡。 本文结合对二手资料进行的文献研究以及探索性民族志研究，包括关键人物访谈， 探讨了该协会如何在抵制城市新自由主义与其自身对边缘绅士化动态的（意外） 贡献之间找到平衡。最后，本文强调有必要深入分析众多争取城市权利的活动者协会的矛盾性质， 同时提供线索以了解草根组织如何抵抗、适应和/或配合城市变革的多种进程。

关键词
协会、迁移、绅士化、里斯本、旅游化

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Introduction

Over the past decade, a growing number of urban studies scholars have been reporting on the rapidity of urban change in Lisbon (Portugal): the interplay between gentrification, studentification and touristification ongoing in various of the historical neighbourhoods that make up the capital's city centre, including – among others – Bairro Alto, Príncipe Real, Cais do Sodré, Alfama, Mouraria and Graça (Estevens et al., 2023; Lestegás, 2019; Sequera and Nofre, 2020). These transformations have involved the emergence of numerous so-called 'contact zones' between areas already subject to transformation by the neoliberal forces of urban development and those areas still awaiting their urban, social, economic and cultural transformation. Such is the case of Intendente Square, which acts as a symbolic and physical buffer between the neighbourhoods of Anjos and Mouraria in central Lisbon. These two areas are traditionally characterised by urban decay, poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion but in recent years have experienced an intense interplay of gentrification, touristification and studentification, strongly backed by Lisbon City Council (Sánchez-Fuarros, 2016, 2017; Tulumello and Allegretti, 2021).

The southern end of Rua dos Anjos, which opens onto Intendente Square, reveals a glimpse of the non-linear, complex symbolic dialogues over the urban aesthetics associated with the recent process of urban upgrading supported by the City Council, and the everyday life of locals that still populate the area and that did so for many decades before 'the tourist tsunami hit Lisbon' (Malet-Calvo and Ramos, 2018). In this sense, some local scholars have examined Lisbon's transition through the widespread tourist-driven process of gentrification (Lestegás, 2019; Torkington and Ribeiro, 2022), the particularities of nightlife gentrification in the city (Nofre, 2013; Nofre et al., 2017b), the impact of short-term rentals on evictions (Cocola-Gant and Gago, 2021; Mendes, 2021; Saaristo and Silva, 2024) and the state's role in the city's touristification (Estevens et al., 2023). However, little attention has been paid to the emergence of self-managed associative spaces in urban areas experiencing the very initial phase of upgrading under the pressures of the prevailing urban neoliberalism. We refer here to these spaces as grassroots cultural and activist associations, in keeping with the term applied by

Raquel Rego (2023) in her study of the area that inventoried 10 spaces and their contributions to improving democracy and civic participation in the district. In this article, we adopt the literature on marginal gentrification, describing how the arrival of different actors and processes (among others, cultural associations) in previously decayed and stigmatised areas seems to interrelate with their further transformation into fully gentrified neighbourhoods. Young professionals with high cultural capital but modest economic capital, attracted by the bohemian atmosphere and low rental prices, launch their projects and associations in these transitional districts, while the state and the City Council renew the infrastructures and deploy these associations to improve the image and reputation of the respective areas.

In the following sections, we set out to demonstrate how the marginal gentrification ongoing around Lisbon's Intendente area seems to be nurtured both by the presence of different actors in an ecosystem of venues interconnecting grassroots cultural associations, artists and musical events and by the interventions of the City Council and private investors. In particular, we seek to portray the tragic but inevitable story of a particular grassroots association caught up in the middle of these transformations and its struggle to resist and maintain its role as a relevant site of political activism and community support.

Objectives and methods

Thus, this article focuses on the multiple driving forces, social actors and complexities inherent to the processes of marginal gentrification recently taking place in different neighbourhoods across the city of Lisbon, Portugal (see Figure 1 for the locations). Adopting the example of one particular grassroots cultural and activist association (MOB/Sirigaita) and its displacement during the last decade from Bairro Alto to Intendente – due to the combined actions of multiple actors, including rising rent costs, pressures from the City Council and police harassment – we seek to illustrate the growing exclusion of alternative grassroots organisations in neoliberal Lisbon. MOB (which stems from *mobilização* – mobilisation in Portuguese) and its new incarnation in Intendente as Sirigaita (a Portuguese term for a flirty, confident woman) thus constitutes the centre of our attentions in this article. As we later see in detail, this organisation provides a meeting place for various groups of left-wing activists, who put on all kinds of cultural, musical and political events. Furthermore, MOB/Sirigaita is far from being the only organisation operating in these transitional areas but rather represents one component in an ecosystem of venues that together attracted new publics and an audience sometimes internally divided into 'politicised', 'artistic' or 'musical' subcultures. The literature often perceives these kinds of alternative organisations populating the 'grey areas' of urban development (regardless of their political stances) as agents of gentrification, as they fit in perfectly with the portraits of marginal gentrifiers contained in the literature. Therefore, our ethnographic approach to the relocation of MOB/Sirigaita reveals the unexpected outcomes of state-led urban planning in the 'grey areas' of urban revitalisation.

This article draws on the ethnographic material gathered by the authors in the framework of a programme on 'urban night geographies', which took a particular grassroots association in the vicinity of Intendente Square (Lisbon) as its case study. The fieldwork took place between February and June 2022 and started out by a cautious approach to the association consisting of presenting our research to one of the most prominent members (himself an academic). Our research proposal was debated in an assembly meeting

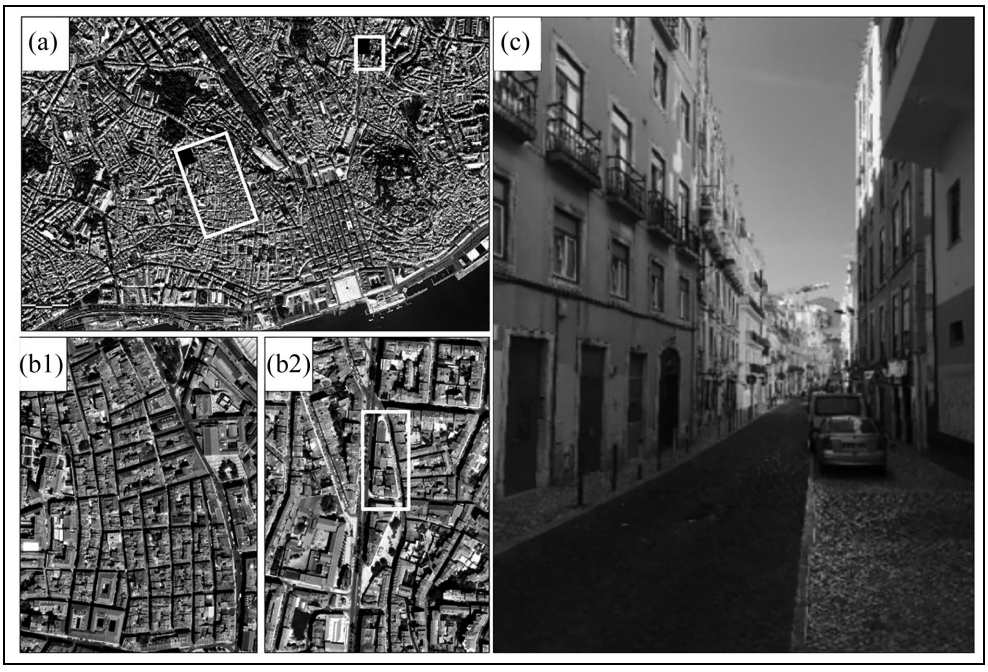

Figure 1. From Bairro Alto to Intendente, the displacement of MOB follows Lisbon's urban transformations: (a) location of Bairro Alto (left) and Intendente (right) in Lisbon and (b) detail of the urban morphology of Bairro Alto (b1) and Intendente (b2). *Source*: Aerial orthophotos courtesy of ArcGis, by Esri. (c) Detail of Rua dos Anjos, the street in which Sirigaita is located, in Intendente. *Source*: Photography by the authors.

and subsequently approved by association members, which thereby allowed us to circulate through the association and talk to its members. The fieldwork included direct and participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with six association members. The participant observation consisted of our attendance at numerous events and parties on the premises during the first half of 2022 (from February to June), generally on Fridays, from 8 pm to 11 pm, including political debates, film screenings, concerts and parties. After the parties, we sometimes stayed inside the venue after it had closed along with a few members, which provided us with familiarity and the opportunity to learn both about its usual characters and about those running the association. This was paramount to acquiring the necessary knowledge and intimacy both for carrying out the interviews and for including the appropriate questions. Among the interviewees, we included two members who took part in MOB, in Bairro Alto, before it turned into Sirigaita, in Intendente; the volunteer staff coordinator; a bar worker; the creator of the feminist bookshop located in Sirigaita; and the facilitator of a women's support group hosted by Sirigaita reaching out to female drug addicts and sex workers in the Intendente region. During our long conversations with the members appearing in this article, we also obtained their individual consent to register and reproduce their accounts. We consider these narratives to provide valuable material to understand the

positioning and experiences of direct protagonists in urban change, people who personally witnessed how their political and cultural projects were erased and, in some cases, even deployed in the service of what they were campaigning against. Moreover, these testimonies represent one facet of the city's history, as we here analyse organisations that are in jeopardy at the time of writing. The next section sets out a summary of the state of the art on marginal gentrification, paying special attention to the recently published academic literature on the particular case of the role of left-wing community associations in the urban upgrading of Lisbon's historical neighbourhoods.

Marginal gentrification in the tourist city

In the early 1980s, Damaris Rose, the originator of the 'marginal gentrification' concept, argued that, unlike mainstream gentrification, the protagonists of marginal gentrification are young adults with high levels of cultural capital but who are tenuously employed or modestly earning professionals. This was not a new idea to the gentrification literature. Zukin (1982) had noted that artistic, cultural and political groups often chose to settle in deteriorating central urban areas where they found affordable rents and large spaces available, coexisting with (and maybe stimulating) neoliberal programmes aimed at revitalising these same areas. However, it was Rose (1984) who introduced the concept of the 'marginal gentrifier' to describe young individuals who possess relatively low levels of economic capital but higher levels of social and cultural capital, and are often politically engaged, well-educated and cosmopolitan students or artists. According to Rose, it is precisely their presence that defines the beginning of an 'early stage' in gentrification, a necessary condition prior to the full transformation of the area. These young 'early or marginal gentrifiers' settle in marginalised central neighbourhoods, attracted not only by affordable rents but also by the social composition of these areas, which were still vibrant, mixed districts populated by ethnically diverse working-class residents alongside the young newcomers. Later, Jon Caulfield (1989), in his seminal article 'Gentrification and desire', portrayed this period of social mixing and coexistence between classes in great detail and depth and as a politically radical period of emancipation, creativity and solidarity. As middle-class, unconventional and progressive youth, they imagined and projected their district as 'multicultural', 'authentic' and 'traditional', labels that would later be used by local authorities and investors to whitewash the reputation of areas while revitalising them through intervention programmes.

In other words, these young and creative 'marginal gentrifiers' play central roles in reshaping the symbolic values and projected images of these rundown urban contexts, which constitutes a prior condition for the arrival of the state-led renewal programmes and the private residential and commercial developments. In fact, some authors, such as David Ley (1996), portray marginal gentrifiers as some sort of gentrification pioneers endowed with an amazing proficiency to search, identify and point to the next promising neighbourhood for exploitation by urban capitalism through gentrification. Indeed, within the framework of revitalisation initiatives, local authorities and property owners have deliberately encouraged influxes of artist and community associations, exemplifying what Zukin (1982: 176) terms an 'artistic mode of production'. The call to the 'creative classes' in the wake of the publication of Richard Florida's (2002) book also interrelates with the perception that the authorities developed in the early 21st century as regards the influence these

populations might have on urban transformation. However, just how do these transformations actually take place? Firstly, there is the need to 'whitewash' the reputation and public perception of the zone, ensuring that every trace of 'marginality' and 'disorder' installed in the imaginary of the place becomes transformed into the more marketable 'vibrant', 'exciting' and 'diverse'. This takes place through the daily cultural practices and spatial appropriations of these young 'marginal gentrifiers' and the cultural events, music parties and art exhibitions they organise, often making use of the public space locally available. Interestingly, the establishment of alternative cultural hubs in these marginalised areas stimulates the influx of other young consumers, such as tourists, students and other such populations, reshaping the perception of the district and inspiring the emergence of retail services targeting young people, the arrival of public revitalisation projects and, finally, the emergence of real estate developments. Therefore, the subsequent phase of gentrification, after the rise in urban value triggered by the presence of these activities, typically consists of these marginal gentrifiers getting displaced and evicted due to the escalating rent prices in the district. More wealthy, new inhabitants finally arrive in a now completely renovated and revalued area to occupy purpose-built developments and enjoy a socially cleansed urban centrality, thus concluding the cycle of renewal.

However, even though most recent works approaching marginal gentrification take the issue of housing as the main object of analysis (Musil et al., 2022; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021; Van Criekingen and Decroly, 2003; Verlaan and Albers, 2022; Yee and Dennett, 2022), Rose originally pointed out that:

> (…) such revitalizing neighborhoods may be supportive of alternative ways of making a living for some of those who have been economically marginalized by the present phase of restructuring. There are possibilities of developing collective forms of self-help (…), rather than the individualistic forms that are an integral part of the ideology of gentrification. (Rose, 1984: 65–66)

Indeed, Rose reached beyond the issue of housing to additionally focus on the reconfiguration of neighbourhood networks through grassroots cultural associations led by marginal gentrifiers, especially artists developing creative projects and initiatives in neighbourhoods where they are recent arrivals, a topic subsequently widely explored in the literature (Grodach et al., 2018; Ross, 2022). However, the particular role of grassroots cultural associations in revitalising urban areas impacted by the early stages of gentrification otherwise remains a topic overlooked by the literature.

Focusing on the Lisbon context, a few recent works (Estevens et al., 2020; Rego, 2023; Rego and Borges, 2021) have discussed the role played by these alternative associations near the city's Intendente Square. On the one hand, Rego (2023) and Rego and Borges (2021) propose that non-mainstream grassroots cultural organisations help keep communities alive by providing alternative nightlife and cultural activities. They also 'facilitate the inclusion of subcultures and combat gentrification while remaining beyond the scope of public funding and dependent on their own social networks' (Rego and Borges, 2021: 157). This anti-gentrification effect appears to happen on different scales. Rego (2023) classifies these cultural associations into two types according to their degree of political engagement: cultural entertainment and cultural activism. On the other hand, Estevens et al. (2020) argue that the alternative, cultural-led initiatives developed over the last decade in Intendente Square can be identified as clear

drivers of gentrification in the area. Artists and cultural activities organised by alternative associations (often sponsored by the City Council) favoured the marketisation of 'diversity' and 'cosmopolitanism' to attract new publics and investors to this neighbourhood since the beginning of the public-led urban regeneration programme implemented there in the late 2000s (Estevens et al., 2020; Sánchez-Fuarros, 2016). After several years in activity, this first wave of alternative settlers, who contributed to fostering a new ambience in the area, is now at risk of displacement, in keeping with the classic stages of the gentrification model. Whatever the case may be, these studies leave space for further debate about the ambiguous positions of cultural grassroots associations in local neighbourhoods as both gentrifiers and victims of gentrification, as we shall return to in the following sections.

Lisbon's urban transformation: From the Bairro Alto to Intendente

The first district analysed in this section, the Bairro Alto, first experienced rapid transformation of its economic, social and cultural life in the 19th century, with the arrival of individuals belonging to the city's artistic bohemia class, the construction of local newspaper headquarters, the opening of the first Fado houses and the appearance of female prostitution, marauders and other marginal(ised) actors in Lisbon's 19th-century urban night (Fina, 2016). This produced a peculiar social mix very similar to the nightlife prevailing in other great harbour cities of southern Europe, such as Barcelona (Villar, 1996). Over the 20th century, and up until the 1980s, the process of urban deterioration in Bairro Alto was accompanied by a surge in the poverty rates among its resident families, an accentuation of its social marginalisation, and marginal (largely female) prostitution closely linked to a dangerous nightlife, often interlinking with criminality. However, the fall of fascism brought about by the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974, and the emergence of a young liberal middle class eager for freedom, democracy and the internationalisation of the city, led to the configuration of sufficient conditions for the urban, social and economic transformation of Bairro Alto, especially from the early 1980s and continuing into the present.

Over this time, Bairro Alto emerged as the focal point of the city's alternative counterculture, which was driven both by the LGTB movement and by the many artists who moved their workshops to the area. Bairro Alto was turned into a popular destination for partying and dancing, even while simultaneously maintaining a provincial and secluded atmosphere not yet shaped by global consumer culture. In imitation of the great triumph of Madrid's *Movida* in the 1980s, Lisbon attempted to emulate this by promoting the unregulated opening of new bars and nightclubs and ignoring closing-time rules within the framework of turning Bairro Alto into the city's most important nightlife district. However, urban regeneration could not be carried out until the arrival of European cohesion funds in the mid-1990s, when Bairro Alto experienced its first wave of gentrification (Mendes, 2008). Indeed, the 1997 Urbanisation Plan for Bairro Alto and Bica, approved by the Lisbon Municipal Assembly on 24 October 1996, specifically set out to attract new economic activities related to fashion and retail, as well as restaurant and nightlife venues (Nofre et al., 2017a). Henceforth, the urban transformation of the Bairro Alto has gone hand in hand with the inclusion of Lisbon as one of the most attractive cities, whether for international university students or as a global-level urban tourist destination (Malet-Calvo et al., 2017; Nofre and Malet-Calvo, 2019). In summary, Bairro Alto was transformed from a bohemian and local

neighbourhood favoured by the alternative counterculture to an intensely exploited and packed nightlife destination. As a result, many residents have left the neighbourhood and it has been overrun by short-term rentals and hostels. Local associations and alternative cultural venues (such as MOB) have long been disappearing, thus resulting in a loss of diversity and character in the area.

The city's other side, Intendente Square, belonging to the Anjos neighbourhood, presents a very different profile and has only more recently been revitalised. In fact, for the past 30 years, the square ranked as the most neglected area in the neighbourhood, with the common and visible presence of drug dealers, drug users and sex workers throughout the day (Estevens et al., 2020). Drug trafficking and consumption in the area worsened when, in the late 1990s, a peripheral shantytown that had hitherto concentrated these activities (Casal Ventoso) was demolished and many of these activities shifted to the area. Mouraria's traditional marginality and image of poverty was then aggravated by the arrival of a significant number of drug dealers and users, greatly impacting on the daily lives of inhabitants. Intendente Square then gained a particularly notorious reputation, with many people avoiding visiting or passing through due to safety concerns. It is also important to note that ever since the 1980s, the neighbourhood has been populated by a growing number of migrants from various countries, especially including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China and Portuguese-speaking African countries such as Angola, Cape Verde and Mozambique (Malheiros et al., 2012). This diversity is reflected in the retail sector, as new stores opened by entrepreneurial immigrants replaced the traditional shops and street vendors, contributing to the area's stigmatisation and its avoidance by local middle-class consumers.

Following the success of the 1998 Universal Exposition in Lisbon and the Portuguese government's shift towards a post-industrial economy, many areas in the city were targeted within the scope of making them attractive to tourist consumption (Malet-Calvo and Ramos, 2018). However, it was not until 2011, after a huge media campaign aimed at changing the place's deprived image, that the renovation started. The (at the time of writing) Prime Minister of Portugal, António Costa, who was then the Mayor of Lisbon, decided to relocate his official office from its traditional location near Terreiro do Paço Square to an old ceramics factory situated in Intendente Square. This move occurred during a period of extensive redevelopment in the area, which included pedestrianisation, the installation of new public furniture and the renovation of nearby buildings (Estevens et al., 2020). The presence of the mayor in the area generated an immediate impact of pushing the aforementioned marginal practices away from the immediate vicinity. However, at the same time, the rapid touristification of the city meant that the plans initially approved by Lisbon City Council for a process of urban regeneration and cultural revitalisation in the neighbourhood were overtaken by the 'tourist tsunami' (Malet-Calvo and Ramos, 2018). Analogous to other central Lisbon neighbourhoods, the onset of touristification in Largo do Intendente has entailed the rapid conversion of housing into short-term tourist accommodation units and international university student residences (Sánchez-Fuarros, 2016, 2017; Tulumello and Allegretti, 2021). In short, Intendente Square, which was once considered the most dangerous and stigmatised area in central Lisbon, underwent a rapid transformation and, in just a few years, became the trendiest and most popular alternative location in the city, attracting not only international artists, hipsters and bohemians (Mandoux, 2019) but also grassroots associations such as Sirigaita (the former MOB association).

MOB: The birth (and forced displacement) of a grassroots cultural association

Back in 2012, in the week of 20 to 27 September, a new associative space was founded in Bairro Alto: MOB. In those days, the space hosted many activities: an event in solidarity with the Russian punk-rock group Pussy Riot, the launch of a self-defence guidebook aimed at orientating young people in precarious employment, a screening of a documentary critical of college hazing in Portugal, as well as many music events spanning Brazilian pop music, house and rock and roll (see Figure 2 for some posters of events). The association defined itself as follows: 'MOB is an open space, a place of encounter, music and shows, self-organisation and mobilisation for whatever is needed. It emerges out of the shared initiative of two associations, Crew Hassan and Precários Inflexíveis'.[1] Indeed, MOB was the outcome of two existing organisations pooling their efforts. Crew Hassan was an alternative association housed in a very central Lisbon building that staged many musical events, mostly reggae and hip hop. Following disagreement with its landlord, it was evicted in 2010 after seven years of activity and would only regain a physical presence following the opening of MOB two years later. Precários Inflexíveis was launched during preparations for the 2007 1st of May demonstration as a collective aimed at becoming a megaphone to report labour abuses and denounce job precarity. It played a central role in the widespread civic mobilisation against the precariousness of life that took to the streets nationwide in 2011, known as 'geração à rasca' (generation trash).

The newly created MOB finally found a suitable place to house its activities in Bairro Alto, a district that still retained part of its underground nightlife culture even after the intense process of gentrification experienced there (Malet-Calvo et al., 2017; Nofre et al., 2017b). In fact, MOB was not the only alternative venue in the district. Indeed, it was surrounded by other cultural and activist venues within close proximity, including Associação Loucos e Sonhadores (Fools and Dreamers Association) and Zé dos Bois (Jo of the Ox, an untranslatable wordplay with LGTB connotations), alongside many other neighbourhood groups and associations which together composed an ecosystem of alternative venues then still challenging the mainstream nightlife in Bairro Alto. According to Francisco, a bookseller and one of MOB's oldest active members (and a key informant here), the new space was expensive (€1500 per month) but significantly large, allowing them to accommodate the activities of the many political and cultural collectives that joined MOB in the following years, with each focused on different issues, from housing rights to more recent concerns such as climate change. It even opened a small bookshop in the venue that Francisco himself managed. The first year of MOB's activity was very successful. Being in an area with a high level of nightlife activities meant that event attendances were high, especially on the lively nights of Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and MOB swiftly accumulated a total of 13,000 registered members.

The nightlife economy in Bairro Alto underwent significant expansion during the 1990s and 2000s, reflected in the proliferation of bar and club venues. This led to adverse impacts on community liveability and challenges for residents, such as noise and rubbish issues. Consequently, on 16 November 2011, Lisbon City Council enacted a substantial reduction in the closing hours for Bairro Alto's bars, scaling them back from 2 am to 8 pm (Câmara Municipal

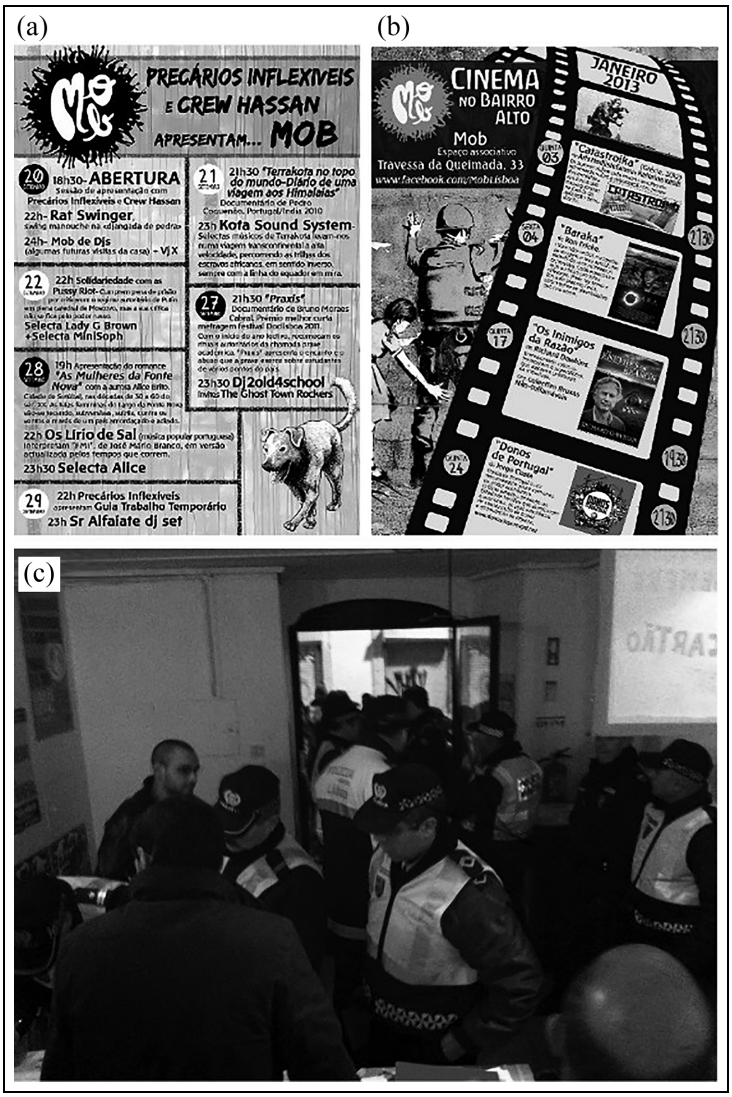

Figure 2. Bringing cultural activities into the nightlife in Bairro Alto while resisting institutional forces: (a) a poster for the opening programme of MOB in Bairro Alto, 20 September 2012; (b) MOB cinema programme, January 2013. *Source*: MOB Facebook account; and (c) municipal police officers entering MOB to order its immediate closure after alleged complaints from neighbours about the noise they were making.

de Lisboa, 2011). Despite MOB not falling under the regulations governing bars, given its status as an association, and the absence of specific regulations regarding opening hours for associations in the city, it nevertheless faced pressure to close early. On Saturday night, 4 February 2013, a dozen municipal police officers broke into the MOB venue and forced it to close by midnight (see Figure 2 for the police action).

As MOB reported on its Facebook page:

> On Saturday, the entrance to Mob was in a state of disarray. You couldn't even get in.

> Lisbon City Council ordered the cultural associations to close at midnight. We heard about it from a dozen police officers in reflective vests bringing a fine of between 2500 and 25,000 euros. More information in the coming days. (MOB, 4 February 2013)

After three months, the Lisbon Municipality finally recognised its status as an association, and hence not governed by bar rules, thus allowing it to keep its doors open until 2 am (3 am during weekends). However, in the meantime, the police intervention disrupted the venue's momentum as an inspiring space in the district, scaring organisers and members alike. The final blow for the association came from an enormous rental rise, up from €1500 to €2500, forcing the association to leave. MOB's venue in the Bairro Alto has remained closed to this day.

> Currently, the space we left in the Bairro Alto in 2013 is still closed, without any activity, another space for speculation. If you calculate … nine years with 12 months each is well over 100 months. We paid a monthly rent of €1500. Imagine that! The landlord has lost €150,000! (Francisco)

In summary, the brief existence of MOB in Bairro Alto (2012–2014) was characterised by the dual pressures often encountered by cultural and activist associative venues: on the one hand, City Council hostility towards places openly critical of its governmental activities (including its role in gentrification and the attraction of mass tourism) and, on the other hand, the private interest of landlords always ready to extract higher levels of rental income. Furthermore, as we shall see in the next section, while the Bairro Alto was abandoned to the dynamics of nightlife gentrification (Hae, 2011; Nofre et al., 2017b), the City Council and some investors had already begun to focus on another location in the city.

MOB's landing in Intendente Square and its transformation into Sirigaita

MOB moved and reopened its doors at 12-F on Rua dos Anjos in 2014 and quickly became part of the cluster of cultural and activist associations attracted by the City Council's urban strategies and public funding for the Intendente area from 2011 onwards. In keeping with the rise of this new artistic and cultural underground ambience, other venues moved into the area, including bars and cafes as well as activist organisations that were not in receipt of public funding. MOB reflects one case of this, and it was able to achieve not only a cheaper rent here (€500) but also the ideal mixture of centrality, arts and marginality to develop its activities and roots in the neighbourhood. The new MOB shares the same urban ecosystem as 10 other cultural and activist associations inaugurated between 2010 and 2015 in the Anjos neighbourhood, which includes Intendente Square, according to Rego's (2023) survey. We would argue that, while attracting cultural and activist associations to the Intendente area and its immediate surroundings, the City Council engaged in what we would term 'state-led marginal gentrification': a process of pushing marginal gentrifiers into an urban regeneration target zone with the aim of intensifying and hastening the initial stages of the gentrification process. Indeed, when MOB moved to the Intendente area, association members were not entirely unaware of the City Council's intentions:

> When we settled here [Rua dos Anjos, Intendente], we knew the plan was to revitalise the area by changing the look of the square. In fact, it was the City Council itself that suggested we move here back in 2013, when they were pressing us over the opening hours in Bairro Alto. They told us that here, in Intendente, they wouldn't control us in the same way. (Francisco)

The ambiguous participation of Sirigaita, as part of a territorial-based ecosystem of cultural associations, bars and cafes, encapsulates how even while raising the flag in protest against neoliberal urbanism and real estate speculation, the association is simultaneously mobilised by state entities as an actor there to enhance the process of (marginal) gentrification. Tragically but inevitably, it represents part of a leisure-based ecosystem of venues that attracts middle-class consumers, and mostly marginal gentrifiers, to a formerly stigmatised area, thus enabling the cycle of gentrification to advance. In our conversations with MOB members, some shared its concerns about being part of the problem:

> Sirigaita always struggled against becoming a force for gentrification. Sometimes we joke about the fact that the closest convenience stores remain open after we close, to attract clients from our activities looking for another beer. We know we are part of it but we also think we are the least of the problems in the area. (Simona)

Indeed, it immediately felt captured by the commodified logic of a district experiencing an ongoing process of gentrification, by forces that are simply beyond its control. In addition to this act of relocation leading to the unintended position of marginal gentrifiers, moving to Rua dos Anjos also implied losing part of the association's collective life force, with Crew Hassan's people requiring a larger venue more suitable to their activities while other members began raising families.

> The younger leaders got married and had kids. Most of them were no longer available to offer the free activism that had until that moment guaranteed the existence of MOB. We haven't had the capacity to create a natural succession producing new leaders and more militants. (Francisco)

The organisation was unable to embark on any fresh new phase until 2018, when there was both the arrival of new people and collectives and the name change from MOB to Sirigaita: as it had welcomed activists with new concerns, particularly feminism, the new name referred to a strong, seductive and autonomous woman. Currently, the space welcomes many collectives, including Habita and Stop Despejos, linked to the housing struggle; Climáximo, focusing on climate issues; Coletivo Marxista, dedicated to left-wing political debates; and Bela Rama, an organic food cooperative. There are also weekly meetings of As Manas (The Sisters), a feminist collective that primarily brings together women dealing with substance abuse and sex workers suffering multiple forms of violence. At Sirigaita, there are also permanent book stalls, one called Livraria das Insurgentes (The Insurgents' Bookstore), featuring female and feminist authors. However, these activities do not collectively pay the bills. Therefore, Sirigaita runs evening entertainment programmes, especially from Thursday to Saturday, including performances, DJ sets, debates and film screenings. On these occasions, a bar run by volunteer staff and the snacks and meals cooked and served by Sirigaita members function as the association's main source of income.

However, Sirigaita is once again in a vulnerable position. Our key informant, Francisco, identifies three crises in the association's history. The first involved the 'three-month war against the City Council' in Bairro Alto, with police involvement and the 'final blow' delivered through a rent increase, leading to MOB's displacement to Rua dos Anjos. There then followed a crisis in member engagement, with insufficient support to sustain the venue's everyday operations. The third crisis on Francisco's list is the current risk of a new eviction. Despite two years of negotiation with the landlord, assisted by a key association member who is an experienced lawyer, the landlord said that Sirigaita

needed to leave the Rua dos Anjos premises in February 2024. Nevertheless, the association members were (and still are) determined to resist this new displacement and have launched an anti-eviction campaign:

> We've decided not to leave. A letter with a date is not an eviction letter. If the landlord wants to evict us, he has to go to court for the judge to determine if he's right. We'll wait for the eviction order. The end of February doesn't have to mean the end. (Marisa, at the launch of the anti-eviction campaign at Sirigaita, October 2023)

At the end of February 2024, the association members did actually refuse to vacate the building. The landlord has since gone to court to initiate an eviction process that has not yet reached any decision. At this stage, it would appear that the real estate market is operating freely in its own interests in the Intendente area, with many associations leaving the district due to increasing rental prices. The City Council seems to consider that the task of cultural associations as marginal gentrifiers has now been completed and is no longer providing financial support. Another sign of the extent of the operation's success is the slow disappearance of police officers from the area. Police officers used to patrol the non-visible, symbolic frontier that emerged between middle-class consumers in Intendente Square and the shadier Rua dos Anjos, where the majority of drug users and sex workers were still active alongside the MOB/Sirigaita venue. After some years of public success and dynamic renovation, the transformations have extended beyond Intendente Square, leading to the displacement of the drug users and sex workers ever further away. Since MOB/Sirigaita arrived on Rua dos Anjos in 2014, the entire area has been revalued and has undergone several sharp transformations: the last brothels and some grassroots associations disappeared (there used to be more than the current 10 in the neighbourhood), local stores were replaced by outlets serving vegan meals and craft beers and tourists no longer fear crossing these streets at night.

Discussion and conclusions

While the role of activist artists – otherwise called artivists – in marginal gentrification processes is a research topic that has been progressively addressed by an increasing number of authors (Nossel, 2016; Trend, 2022), the role of ambivalent agents of urban change, which cultural and activist collectives for the right to the city often (and sometimes are forced to) play, remains a research topic yet to be studied in depth. In this article, we have examined the case of a cultural and activist association and its forced displacement through the interplay of the private interests of landlords, the rapidly changing topography of urban activism and the urban renewal plans of Lisbon City Council for two different districts. MOB/Sirigaita has been navigating between resistance to the forces of urban neoliberalism and its role as an unintentional driver of marginal gentrification in a 'grey zone' within the 'tourist city'.

As this article has demonstrated, over the last decade, MOB/Sirigaita has become a dynamising actor in the southern end of Rua do Anjos, a former marginal area of central Lisbon now undergoing transition. Certainly, its cultural and political activities have attracted a population of marginal gentrifiers while also helping to dynamise the neighbourhood of Intendente in general as part of an ecosystem of venues that stimulated the arrival of middle-class consumers. However, the association has also simultaneously contributed to strengthening the resistance movement against neoliberal Lisbon with its activist engagement. What is more surprising, and positive from our perspective, arises from how its members are aware and conscious of

their participation in the negative side of the urban changes ongoing in the area. Interestingly, some members have recently written about these contradictions and their positioning as the complexities unfold in the neighbourhood where the transformation dates back to 2011 (Allegra, 2022).

Allegra (2022) compares the network of alternative spaces to which Sirigaita belongs to so-called '*colectividades*', which were (and still are) important spaces of sociability and leisure founded in the early 20th century through popular grassroots associations with the key objective of providing culture and recreation (and even education and welfare in some cases) to the working classes. The rapid touristification of the city and the recent conversion of the Portuguese capital into an urban hub for digital nomads (Haeck and Volpicelli, 2023) has led to the disappearance of most of the city's *colectividades*, which have been wiped off the map whether by the actions of real estate investors, the boom in rent prices or speculative hotel investments (Sánchez-Fuarros, 2018). However, the differences are noticeable: while the still-existing *colectividades* are non-politicised institutions per se that emerged within the framework of the urban social contract between the neighbourhood cultural and activist associations and the local authorities prevailing in the last century, such spaces now occupied by associations campaigning for the right to the city such as the MOB/Sirigaita association correspond to a completely different historical context. They are born out of the turmoil of the neoliberal urban model, taking advantage (and surviving) within a period of destruction leading to the disappearance of the unique ambiences and atmospheres once nurtured by the development of dense affective–emotional networks between neighbours over decades and generations.

Displaying high levels of spatial mobility, as if constantly surfing the wave of the changing urban frontiers, grassroots associations experience a constant threat of displacement, inhabiting temporarily liminal 'grey areas' with their brave, but often ephemeral, cultural and political projects of resistance. The paradox of marginal gentrification stems precisely from how it allows for the initial emergence of alternative modes of creative existence, imaginative political projects and social mixing while simultaneously fostering the construction of the urban, political and social conditions bringing about their own destruction. In this sense, while Allegra (2022) recognises that these grassroots associations are, 'in many ways, textbook cases of the dynamic of the so-called marginal gentrification', the author also presents their past and present contributions to local struggles and the defence of people's right to the city. Indeed, this is the case of the MOB/Sirigaita association, which navigates between a strong commitment to countering the forces of urban neoliberalism and its own role as a driver of marginal gentrification in a 'grey zone' of the 'tourist city'. However, as stated above, the association is currently dealing with a new threat of displacement, which may well serve to close the cycle of transformations that began back in 2011 with the practical disappearance of all non-commercial, social and cultural associations from the Intendente Square area. Current perceptions of the zone depict a socially sanitised hot spot for tourists and university students (both local and international) with significant levels of purchasing power.

Although Rua dos Anjos remains an area in transition, characterised by a blend of new hotels and restaurants catering to tourists and middle-class hipsters, along with small retail outlets predominantly run by Southern Asian migrants, the trends suggest it will inevitably face a similar destiny to that of Intendente Square. Within this framework, there is a strong likelihood that Sirigaita will be unable to continue in the

neighbourhood, as the premises currently occupied undergo reconversion into one of the dozens of the migrant-run souvenir and refreshment shops for tourists that monopolise the current retail landscape of this area. The MOB/Sirigaita case presented in this article demonstrates the need to get closer to the ground and to unpack the rapidly changing topographies of alternative movements, to better understand the myriad of complexities deriving from the interplay of urban processes such as marginal gentrification, studentification and touristification that, unlike years ago, are today simultaneously promoted and reproduced by both public and private actors. Today, we are experiencing the complete subsumption of urban land by capital, which is jeopardising the diversity of cities and the well-being of a vast part of society for the benefit of international investors in real estate and tourism. Thus, the public authorities need to assume a protective role towards certain associative movements that, even if critical of these same administrations, play a central role in defending the fundamental rights of many collectives in the city, proposing solutions and envisioning a future of social justice and more balanced cities.

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Note

1. Facebook post, 17 September 2012. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/MobLisboa (accessed 22 May 2024).

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