

This handbook is the result of the work carried out by the students of the PLAY/ACT project

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JUNTA DE EXTREMADURA



STREET EXPERIMENTS DURING PANDEMIC TO TRANSFORM URBAN MOBILITY AND PUBLIC SPACE - KIT A NOSSA RUA IN AVEIRO

Keywords: low-cost interventions; social challenges; temporary uses; youth; playing; participatory practices

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STREET EXPERIMENTS DURING PANDEMIC

Experimentation to transform public spaces emerged during the pandemic in response to the need to offer quick and cheap solutions to emerging problems, namely through promoting active urban mobility through pop-up cycle paths, developing citizen collaborative projects to promote the use of public space by children, offering new parklets and terraces to allow safe rest and implementing temporary programs using public space for businesses to remain open (Stevens and Dovey, 2022).

Micro interventions in public space can be an effective way to make streets safer and more attractive for pedestrians. These interventions can be done through low-cost, efficient, and quick actions, involving communities, valuing available resources and strengthening socialization and neighbourly relations fostering an answer to micro-urban problems that can generate collective learning and be replicated in other contexts (Lydon et al 2011). These tactical and temporary interventions allow the testing of concepts and models with the future users of public spaces, and to measure the impact of alternatives, providing information for future permanent solutions and, ultimately, reducing risks.

In some cases, these experiments encounter fierce resistance and fear of the risks involved, including moving too fast, acting too independently, or being too top-down. Criticisms also arise to tactical action with an «anti-state and anti-planning rhetoric» (Brenner, 2017) or the risk of a «deregulation and reduction of investment in the production of urban space decisions by dispersed groups interventions without urban dimension» (Kogan, 2016). Therefore, it is essential to make a concerted effort to involve citizens and stakeholders in this process, enabling them to contribute to solutions and aiding decision-makers in identifying the most appropriate actions (Isidoro, 2017).

KIT A NOSSA RUA IN AVEIRO

The Kit a Nossa Rua is an example of a street experiment to test possible alternatives to urban mobility and the use of public space in the city of Aveiro. Developed during the pandemic under the Participatory Budget promoted by the Municipality, the kit consisted of a set of portable benches, tables, plant pots, sound equipment, design materials, various children's games, and an electric bike with a trailer to carry them. The set was made available so that citizens could request it. The goal was to temporarily close streets to car traffic and streamline recreational and social activities, open to all who wanted to participate, previously agreed upon in meetings with residents and local merchants.

Figure 1. Kit A Nossa Rua at the Cândido dos Reis Street in Aveiro



A participatory process was developed involving several local organizations, mainly Projeto Rua Verde and Ciclaveiro, a community association located in the area and a cycling activist group, and Vizinhos de Aveiro, a neighbourhood organization. The methodology invited citizens who intended to carry out an initiative in their neighborhood to request the Kit and to launch a call to residents, shop owners and other stakeholders. The date of the event was decided collectively after listening to the interested parties, in a

process mediated by the municipality. A communication effort was needed to invite participants to the event.

Two initiatives were carried out on a Saturday afternoon in two different streets (Cândido dos Reis and Bernardo Torres streets). During the events, children played alongside their families and friends, showcasing how this initiative has successfully united multiple generations and provided a shared space for play. Additionally, friends and family members from the neighbourhood, city, and beyond congregated there, fostering socialization and community bonding. The Kit's purpose is not only to facilitate new ways of using public space but also to strengthen the sense of belonging and community among the residents of Aveiro.

A questionnaire was carried out among the participants. It showed that they were mainly residents (73%), women (86,7%), age 31-45 (60%). They came specially with friends and family (80%), walking (53%) and by bike (20%) and stayed there playing for more than 2 hours (73%). The overall evaluation was excellent (60%) and good (40%).

Looking at the analysis of the street where the event was developed, they see it as a place to drive (93%), not a space for social interaction (53%), but all of them would like to socialize in the public space. They feel that an initiative like Kit A Nossa Rua could help, and they might ask for it in the future (60%).

The initiative generated a strong impact creating opportunities for public spaces appropriation beyond mere recreation; reinforcing a sense of community and belonging while highlighting the lack of nearby quality public spaces; mobilizing children and families, fostering intergenerational connections around a playful public; engaging citizens, friends, and relatives from other neighbourhoods who took the time to socialize; emphasizing that parks, gardens, and playgrounds, while important, may not fulfil this cohesive function due to their inherent nature and location.

Street experiments like Kit A Nossa Rua pose some challenges, mainly the need of a strong political commitment, technical mediation between several stakeholders and civic involvement. But they can offer a tool to open new urban imagination horizons, to foster a sense of public space as a shared asset for citizenship and to efficiently testing solutions in different contexts, with significant potential impact before their full implementation.

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