PLAY/ACT

A PLACE TO BE
THE PLAY/ACT PLACEMAKING HANDBOOK

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PLACE-DISSONANCE. ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY URBAN DESIGN PRACTICES IN SMALL MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES.

Keywords: urban design; temporary uses; participatory practices

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A relevant set of contemporary urban design practices, such as placemaking, temporary urbanism or participatory practices, present novel perspectives on how public spaces are conceived, managed and experienced. These approaches, which include tactic, low-cost, small-scale actions, bottom-up initiatives and different types of community participation, respond to claims for more flexible, open and inclusive ways of making and designing spaces in contrast to the rigidity of formal planning schemes and developments. They also present potential for questioning established practices, experimenting and innovating, or addressing transition or emergencies. (Andres & Zhang, 2020; Madanipour, 2017). Many of the experiences have initially been developed by the initiative of artists, architects, urban designers or local associations and collectives, but the adoption of these practices has spread among city agents, such as municipalities and planning authorities, or even private actors, that recognise its relevance and usefulness. Accordingly, projects with these approaches can be found across all territorial contexts, from large to small cities or even rural areas, with various scales and lengths.

While these concepts and spatial design practices, which Rendell (2006) named as critical admitting its discursive meaning, tend to respond to specific challenges and resources, their meaning and value are highly contextual and open to multiple interpretations. In this sense, their dissemination across spatial contexts and the opening to other agents (with their motivations), blurring lines between experts and non-experts, adds complexity. In this scenario, these new urban practices face a greater vulnerability and the risk of becoming mistrusted, as seen in their linkages to gentrification or displacement processes (Keidar, et al., 2023).

Recognising their growing interest and mismatches, we discuss some examples of mainstreaming these practices outside large cities and metropolitan areas in four small and medium-sized cities in Portugal, attending to how they are conceived and implemented in public space.1 Are they addressing the local urban problems with innovative perspectives? How do the different actors and agents perceive them? What are the issues behind their implementation?

THOUGHTS ON PLACEMAKING IN FOUR SMALL, MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES IN PORTUGAL

"The external world mediated through human subjective experience." Lucy Lippard quotes Denis Cosgrove to define place.

Both territorially and culturally, the network of small and medium-sized cities plays a vital role in the organisation of the Portuguese urban system, dominated by the two main metropolitan areas (Lisboa and Porto). An overview of planned cultural events per municipality between 2015 and 2021 in urban public spaces juxtaposed with the maps of Ferrão's Por-

tugal Archipelago, reveals a similar “two-speed” Portugal (Duxbury, 2020; Ferrão, 2017). In the 1990s and 2000s, attention was put on cities and integrated urban development policies (Cavaco et al., 2020), with several initiatives targeting medium-sized cities, including land-use planning development, urban and environmental requalification initiatives and later integrated urban developments, with mixed and uneven results throughout the country. However, despite the myriad of tools and instruments in recent decades, cities and place-based development have lost strength in the policy agenda, unable to respond to the numerous emerging urban challenges (demographic ageing and urban shrinkage, touristification and gentrification, territorial and social cohesion, among others).

Within this context, Leiria, Covilhã, Ponta Delgada and Évora showcase different “positions” in the territorial system regarding geography, socio-economic dynamics and their particular urban morphology. Even though the pursuit of placemaking initiatives signals a wish to reconnect place and urban development, recognising each city's unique context, needs, and opportunities, the evidence of local dissonances, i.e., inconsistencies or contrasts between the needs, intended results, and outcomes, suggests the need for a closer reading. This brief sample of examples from each city outlines some of those dissonances, questioning their understanding and sometimes acritical implementation.

C1 Leiria is a medium-sized coastal city between Portugal's two major metropolitan areas, with a relevant socio-economic dynamism. Its dispersed morphology is the product of loosely planned industrialisation and urbanisation along the major communication axis into a patchwork of land uses and spatial patterns. The city benefited from a significant urban regeneration initiative along the River Lis, cited as one of the best examples of the Polis programme at the national level. Despite this consistent track record on public space investment, some local stakeholders consider Leiria's urban and cultural policies a boat adrift, seeing public space as dispersed and disorientated. In recently renovated and central spaces, temporary structures and events frequently occupy public space without anticipation or prior consultation. Despite the complaints about the excess of architectural barriers, the political decision-makers have few proposals for the public space other than to make room for all requests. The result is a refusal of free/empty space and exposure to the perjuries of the processes of eventification and commodification of public space.

An independent artistic network, which could boost these new urban practices, emerges in Leiria almost as a reflection of the urban and economic dispersion that defines its geography. Autonomous artistic structures emerge scattered throughout the territory, operating between vacant private spaces in rural fields and disused industrial structures. Still, they admit to facing difficulties in dialogue with local planners.

C2 Situated on the eastern slopes of the Serra da Estrela, the highest mountain in mainland Portugal, Covilhã is traditionally recognised for its wool production and manufacturing. However, with the breakdown of industries, it faces, like many inland areas, continuous depopulation towards other larger cities. The city centre is falling into neglect, and the university's presence does not seem capable of driving the urban transformation. When asked why the city's current state exists, some local agents point to conservatism and distance between the local decision-makers and the inhabitants.

In this context, several local cultural structures explore forms of urban (inter)action in new and different exhibition spaces within the city. Urban art festivals, independent film cy-

cles, and theatre and dance companies converge in the idea of a locally engaged artistic practice dealing with existing urban and landscape challenges (linked to Serra da Estrela's proximity). However, not all recognise the potential to explore these initiatives as new urban practices. Urban planners and managers only acknowledge them as tourism and place-branding actions and not as relevant cultural projects, even less as urban regeneration enablers.

This mismatch between the views, values and interests of agents is reflected directly in an increased risk of failure of new practices that emerge there temporarily, as well as indirectly in the exhaustion of local groups that are not considered and involved in urban regeneration or transformation processes through their urban projects, becoming processes of exclusion.

C3 Located on the island of São Miguel, in the Azores archipelago, Ponta Delgada is the most populous city in the archipelago. Between the sea and the fire, Ponta Delgada grows on a sea-facing slope based on an orthogonal grid. This relationship between sea and land has come under pressure from car traffic (extending to the whole island) and the increase of air connections to the rest of the world with relative ease. Since 2015, low-cost flights have opened up to a much more significant tourist influx and global immediacy, changing the commercial, social, cultural and urban dynamics. In this context, on the one hand, artistic agents have been betting on the island's potential, geography, culture and landscape as an engine for exploring and experimenting with new creative communities and events, often translating into events in urban public spaces open to the global public. On the other hand, urban planners and decision-makers face contemporary challenges, such as the pedestrianisation of the historic centre in the face of the constraints caused by cars. So, using tactical urbanism could be an opportunity to trigger a transformation process and build commitments between the players involved. However, the City Council’s initiative, developed within its view on placemaking, consisted of merely placing foreign-looking structures along the centre, cutting off car access to part of the downtown, and imposing its top-down view.

The different (mis)understandings and enforcement of these practices affect the potential of tactical or temporary urbanism, now turned into “urbanness”, and the quality of the public space itself.

C4 The last case in point was Évora, a concentrated city whose historic centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1986 and with a fundamental role in Alentejo's regional dynamics. Évora's historic centre is renowned for its dense urban fabric and is recognised as a "museum city". In common parlance, Évora is the city within the walls, although a new city expands radially beyond this limit.

If Leiria, Covilhã and Ponta Delgada showcase different approaches to placemaking, Évora, on the other way, is refraining from them. In an opposite perspective from Leiria, Évora suffers from the effect of conservatism and patrimonialisation of the urban centre. Heritage protection and defence in favour of preserving the urban fabric quickly becomes the domain of property protection, not allowing the emergence of bottom-up dynamics as in any other part of the city. This represents a loss of opportunity and openness to the emergence of new urban, social and cultural dynamics responding to new demands and urban lifestyles. The long-lasting nature of this phenomenon also seems to affect the areas around the protected area, outside the walls, with programming and intervention in public spaces left to the municipality.

Despite this, Évora now faces a unique opportunity to open up and explore new forms of action in public spaces with the development of the European Capital of Culture project for 2027. Some local players seem more favourable than others, but the opportunities will undoubtedly be there.

FINAL REMARKS

With the above-cited examples, our intention is not to discredit these types of practices or discourage their use but rather to point out that their widespread adoption by more players faces challenges related to different understandings and motivations for their pursuit. In some cases, they serve different agents and motivations (either social, cultural, or political) as a mechanism for implementing a specific vision of space rather than building it in an open-ended manner, a place. Thus, they risk becoming dissonant and mistrustful among people, as the focus on the process may be replaced by the focus on the product.

A careful examination of the implications and interests that drive these initiatives is needed to understand how these urban practices may or may not be tools for developing and making place. For the agents implied, this means accepting the "temporality and contingency of spatial production, because in being alert to the coming wants and needs of others, one has to project visions and solutions onto an uncertain future" (Awan, Schneider, & Till, 2011).

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