BARCELONA WALK21 Conference (Theme 1)

The Promotion of Walking in Lisbon: a winner or a lost case?

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Abstract

The proposed paper deals with the entanglements of political decision-making process at the local level in Lisbon, Portugal's capital city, concerning the discourses and actions relating to the promotion of walking in the city.
It describes:

- how lobbying by local and national NGOs has been a central tool in pushing the issue of pedestrian quality needs into the Portuguese political agenda in recent years,
- how the political and administrative establishments have been reacting to these innovative discourses and demands,
- how non-party civil movements have been using a new found political clout to promote discussion on the need to care for pedestrians, within a national climate of intense fascination with the usage and ownership of private cars,
- how such discussion has been absorbed and rhetorically manipulated by governing politicians concerned with major mobility programmes, directed at reinforcing the use of private cars, thus colliding with their non-substantive intentions of promoting walking in urban areas.

The paper takes an analytical and rather sceptical view of the paradox of mobility vs accessibility, in Lisbon metropolitan area. It also suggests an apparently strong contrast, as well as some surprising similarities, with the Barcelona case, as studied by the team of the author's research partner Manuel Delgado (of the Universitat de Barcelona).

CV:

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The New Word Order

Why do cities differ in their outlook, organization, and feeling? Why is it that what seems right for one sounds so terribly wrong in another? Cities are, and have always been, subject to intentions of materialization of mental order. Their appearance and grid are often the result of rational predispositions, of politicians and of urbanists.

This being so, the older cities become, the more complex the interaction of their layers of time and rational imprints become. And, as more interwoven these get, and the more superposed the rationalizing projects grow to be, prospects of order become more and more slippery and illusive.

Everywhere these rational mental ideations of ordered urban space gain the right to expression, are never-the-less reductions and caricatures of what a city truly is. Urban planning and architectural projections are reductionist vectors in that they limit – and imitate – the flowering of diversity and spontaneity that makes up much of what city life actually is. They impoverish the means and ends of the Urban.

Take urban mobility, for instance. Or rather, the way mobility-oriented infrastructures and their inherent hierarchical models have been interacting with urban housing planning. It's commonplace knowledge that the motor vehicle has redefined not only the way people move about the city but also the way people live in the city and even live the city. In the past 50 to 70 years, extensive car ownership has actually produced city. While new cities have been structured along car usage needs and privileges, existing cities were forced to adapt their pre-existing morphology to the advent of the paraphernalia involved in the motorization process: tarmacing, paving, signalization, parking, tracking, etc. The expansion of the motorcar introduced new forms of hierarchization and apartheiding in urban public spaces, and went as far as to recreate social acceptance towards ghettoization of particular sections of cities.

This immense spending of human energy and resources was, it is now generally

recognized, the consequence of a major single condition: the availability of ample quantities of cheap, non-reusable energy sources. Present-day urban conglomerations are unimaginable as functioning social bodies without this pre-condition.
Now, as the carbon age rapidly slips toward its end (Heinberg, 2004; Kunstler: 2006), city managers are apparently gearing up to face the frightful scenario of having once again – in many a case in a human individual's life-time – to reshape city life to a pre-car configuration. Whereas the last adaptation could be carried forth with largesse and little care for resource allocation, because cheap energy promoted hitherto unthinkable wealth and growth, present-day city managers, planners and dwellers are faced with a almost impossible equation: how to promote a new urban utopia anchored in a nostalgic past without the means to get rid of recent urban history.
Throughout Europe, the new word order is pedestrianisation, cycling, collective transport and alternative energy sources. These cure-all mantras appear in politicians' and managers' mouths with such enticing flavours of optimism that one is led to suspect that we are falling under the spell of wishful-thinking. Of course, this new rhetorical situation is particularly appealing to the likes of *Walk21* in-as-much that it lends all those who have been battling for the social and political recognition of the benefits of pedestrianisation as determining measure for future urban sustainability.
I fear, though, that this spotlight bonanza may come at a terrible cost: that of falling for raw political manipulative embracing on the part of city managers keener on selling erotic words than facing the hard realities of downgrading, ruining, backtracking, shrinking and de-developing.

Mendacious Barcelona

Earlier this year, Catalan anthropologist Manuel Delgado published a powerful book, *The Lying City: Fraud and Misery of the Barcelona Model* (Delgado, 2008). A love-and-hate letter to this city, as himself notes in the book's preface, the work is a lucid indictment of the way the manage ring, planning and financing powers of Barcelona have, along the past forty years, construed a caricature of city-life in the centre of Barcelona by actually razing whole quarters, by harassing local population, and destroying local organicity ad diversity. Of course, processes of gentrification of town centres have been common throughout the developed world. Of course, gentrification of city centres always tends to bring social and economic changes, and to induce flourishing of the tourism industry.
But the case of Barcelona is exemplary in that is probably one of the most successful cases of the tourist marketing fraud that consists in advertising the

beauties of a history-riddled city centre that was actively emptied of its historical features (at the exception of part of its housing shell). The Barcelona case is also exemplary, as Manuel Delgado notes, in that it has become a managing and planning model for eager mayors in Europe and beyond. Pedestrianisation has played a major part in the rhetoric construction that underlies the disneylandish attraction of the city centre, while the financing and building lobbies have been the main beneficiaries of the all process. Manuel Delgado's final contention is that the Barcelonese have now to live in the urban hell they have let themselves be installed. Of course, Barcelona's urban sprawl is no less arid and aggressive as any other we know, and the conglomeration's dependency on systematic private car usage is as doomed as all others.

But we should ask ourselves a simple question: why has the council of Barcelona been so ready to promote, finance and help stage the present Conference, while - say – the council of Lisbon (or of Madrid, for that matter) wouldn't dream of positioning itself act as beneficiary host of this event. What does it stand to gain, and what is inherently being asked of us?

I will try to answer this question in a sideways manner. I mentioned Lisbon for a number of reasons: first, because Manuel Delgado's team has been kind enough to invite me and my colleagues at the institute I teach and research to participate in a joint R&D programme of compared study on pedestrian flows in Portugal and Spain; secondly, because, diametrically situated in opposite sides of the Iberian Peninsula, the two cities' political history has more than once been correlated, making one look at the other for directions (the episode of Portugal's regain of independence from Castile in 1640 while Catalonia's similar effort was being crushed is perhaps the most sounding of them); thirdly, since the early years of the 20th century Lisbon planners and managers have looked at Barcelona (and Paris, of course) as a desired action model; fourth, because while Barcelona's local administration has managed to successfully surf the wave of (apparent) collusion between mobility and accessibility, Lisbon's was caught at mid-cycle and left struggling behind the wave barrier with the ballast of huge financing problems resulting from a late carbon-inspired urban reshaping, and the resulting political instability that has ultimately resulted in the sad spectacle of having a mayor sacked under grave corruption charges.

Rambling Lisbon

I will focus in the brief story of the appearance and illusive success of the civic-political discourse in defence of pedestrian needs in Lisbon.

I must openly mention that I have not conducted myself with the desired anthropological distance that would maybe enable me to stand neutrally before you, objectively analysing this process.

The fact that I help promote research on pedestrian flows and analysis on car-pedestrian conflicts is not wholly independent from my interests in pushing forth a political discussion on these same subjects. I have in previous occasions dealt with the deontological issues of this difficult cohabitation (Ramos, 2003), so here I merely intend to note this circumstance.

As head of one of very few civil rights organizations in Portugal that has produced discursive and active alternatives to car mobility and has worked since its inception in defence of pedestrian rights, I am no stranger to the national and local political process I am about to briefly unfold to you.

Ten years of active work in publicly fighting for pedestrian rights, from the perspective of risk reduction, and more than twenty years of opinion making about the subject have slowly led me and the association that I represent to some prominence regarding the introduction of the “pedestrians agenda” in the political parties portfolios, most visibly at the local level but also effectively in the specific thematic segment of road safety policies as well as in road maintenance (less so in road construction regulation).

Our campaigning on behalf of pedestrian safety and quality needs has drawn the attention of Lisbon mayors since 2001. Initially, this happened not so much because the level of pedestrian mortality was high but mostly because they found in our discourse and action a sinecure for a self-induced public space scourge, and visibly a repulsive postcard image of the city: the customary practice of parking cars on pavements (it should be noted that the standard width of Lisbon’s pavements is one of the shortest among Europe’s capitals), just as the municipal enterprise charged with disciplining street car parking through the introduction of parking-meters began expanding its territorial scope.

Since 2005, specially, due to a number of highly publicized fatal runovers, the subject of pedestrian safety finally reached the attention of the political body governing the city. Similarly, our initial participation in the Lisbon Councils car-free day programmes gave us the stage to promote such themes as accessibility over mobility, walking and public health, and pedestrians’ rights vs. drivers’ rights.

This new situation eventually led to, let’s say, hazardous invitations made to us to participate in electoral processes and even to run for municipal political offices. Not wishing to bother you with many details, I simply note that in 2007 I briefly became councillor of Lisbon Municipality (for ten months) in a quite atypical mid-term local election, running as part of a non-partisan civic movement called “Citizens for Lisbon”.

The association’s, and my own personal, proximity to the political administrators of the city has put us in the discomforting position of seeing our arguments hijacked in the process of construing a paternalistic and misleading discourse that is to a very great extent completely empty of durable and coherent consequences in regard to a change of paradigm in urban mobility and

accessibility, as the first signs of the post-carbon age begin illuminating the far horizon. The fact is that mobility policies in the Lisbon conglomeration are yet directed by the wish to correspond to the wishes and needs of large masses of the suburban population who haven't almost any collective transportation means offering a credible alternative to the use of private cars.

The high and medium speed road network, including river crossings, is yet to be completed, and it is for such public works programmes that the council, supported by the national government, allocates the best part of its resources. The train network comes as an afterthought, and the metropolitan underground train company pursues a largely autistic policy, which results in poor interfacing with over ground collective transportation. It has been much reiterated that the Portuguese are under the spell of a very recent access to private cars (indeed, the numbers refer a ten-fold multiplication in less than ten years, from 1988 to 1996). This has given policy makers the justification to continue offering unrestricted access to the city centre, and to overriding any proposals promoting pedestrian and cycling flows, while favouring intensive suburban urbanization over rehabilitation of the older, and emptied, central quarters (*bairros*).

All this causes heightened functional tensions and a paradoxical state of political affairs, at a time when the model begins cracking (suburban real estate prices in free fall, multiplication of unsold new housing, rocketing fuel prices that make house-work shuttling progressively unbearable).

Against this doomsday scenario, politicians have begun grabbing pedestrianising and cycling prospects as lifesavers of their public rhetoric. The most visible effect of this discursive change is that the "mountain factor" has lost centrality. Against the obvious observation that 80% of Lisbon territory stands on a plateau, and that more than 70% of its population live in it, common wisdom and political speech has for decades stressed that Lisbon is so mountainous that cycling and walking cannot be sustainable alternatives to motorization.

Presently, the use of that argument has subsided, as politicians mount on their little used bikes in pre-election campaigns, and are seen, and pictured, strolling in the town centre (it was rather telling that, for the inauguration of a polemical tunnel connecting the Western suburbs to the town centre that now discharges more than 30.000 cars in the city, the previous mayor not only walked it with the TV cameras trailing behind but the population was invited to stroll in it for a day as it remained closed to cars).

The implicit *entente* between electors and elected is that the first are supposed to complaint against the continuous degrading of public spaces, car invasion and atmospheric pollution while fighting all half-hearted attempts to curb car usage, and politicians are expected to keep car flows untouched, and to offer more and more car parking (preferably gratuitous), while worrying publicly because of car predominance, favouring cycling and stressing the virtues of walking the city.

Planed intentions to revamp downtown Lisbon with rehabilitation programmes for a potential gentrified clientele, and to recreate a Barcelonese *rambla* in the main *Avenida da Liberdade* (but still reserving the central lanes for private cars), are under discussion for more than ten years. Cultural centres and museums are naturally part of the package, and the underlying talk is of an expected tourist bonanza if Lisbon succeeds at being sold as a cultural tourism destination. It already is a popular stop in Atlantic cruises, but the crisis of low-cost aviation may cast an unshakable cloud over the solvability of the plan. The explicit intention is to turn Lisbon into a Barcelonese tourist success (the present mayor *dixit*). Regrettably for some, and hopefully for others, it is already too late in the day to replicate the Barcelona model and make Lisbon centre a competing tourist destination.

In any case, none of these great expectations will positively affect the lives of more than 70% of Lisbon's population, cut from downtown Lisbon by the so-called ring of seven hills.

What then would be asked of Lisbon's pedestrian-oriented technical and political minds? To participate in a propagandistic charade that disguises a capitalist urban engineering plan, whose main beneficiaries would be, as in Barcelona, the financial institutions, the real estate promoters, supported by politically compromised urbanists and lobby-dependent city managers.

To put the matter in plainer words, how can pedestrians be protected from pedestrianisers?

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