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# Cultural diversity scenarios in the urban public space

## The case of Mouraria neighbourhood (Lisbon)

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*ABSTRACT. The issues discussed here point to the importance that 'culture' has taken in the contemporary processes of urban intervention, particularly with regard to programs and projects initiated by the prefix 're' – requalification, rehabilitate, revitalize, regenerate, rehabilitate. Another set of questions in this discussion refers to the role that urban public space has taken in implementing the urban and cultural interventions. The discussion must be initiated by reference to social dynamics and urban intervention as currently takes place in the neighbourhood of Mouraria, a representative quarter of popular Lisbon. Mouraria experiences an urban condition crossed by numerous setbacks and heterogeneities: an aging population along with the renewal brought by immigrants, precarious living conditions, formal / informal business, traffic and drugs consumption, prostitution. It is also a neighbourhood representative of 'culture' and 'diversity'.*

*KEYWORDS: diversity; culture; multicultural places; urban intervention; public space.*

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## 1. Introduction

The issues discussed here point to the importance that 'culture' has taken in the contemporary processes of urban intervention, particularly with regard to programs and projects initiated by the prefix 're' – requalification, redevelop, rehabilitate, revitalize, reconvert, regenerate, rehabilitate, revive. Another set of questions in this discussion refers to the role that urban public space has taken in implementing the urban and cultural interventions.

The discussion must be initiated by reference to social dynamics and urban intervention as currently takes place in the neighbourhood of Mouraria (in Lisbon). Mouraria quarter is representative of popular Lisbon, urban heritage and multicultural places.

Object of a 'civilizing urbanism', it survived, although diminished, the devastating actions occurred in the thirties thru the sixties, becoming itself an object of urban regeneration since the mid-80's. We highlight here the recent *Mouraria Program of Action* of Lisbon municipality, whose "intervention with greater visibility and capacity to induce new forms of behaviour will be the requalification of the public space".



Photo 1

Among the scheduled activities, it stands out the "dimension of identity and integration," identified by the *Corridor Intercultural Action*, that "intends to act as a sounding board for the recovery of intercultural crossings".

In order to sustain this plan of action it was created a *Community Development Plan of Mouraria*. This context leads us to discuss here the following questions: In what form can the rehabilitation of urban public space induce "new behaviours", in order to promote local community development? What is the meaning of "new behaviours" knowing that, in principle, the existing behaviours contribute to the construction of a certain urban imaginary, such as multiethnic, multicultural and intercultural neighbourhood? Will there be an expropriation of the symbolic

'disreputable' city spaces? In which way does the spectacle of cultural diversity hides the triad: diversities-differences-inequality?

## **2. Mouraria neighborhood as an object of urban intervention**

Mouraria is a Lisbon neighborhood remembered as liable to the mob, recalled with narrow, winding streets, characteristic houses, bohemian singers and sad fate, and poor people. These images of the most visible part of the neighbourhood prevailed in the urban imagination of the first half of the twentieth century.

Images that justified the arrival of an hygienic urbanism, such as the New State urban policy, and that triggered a series of social changes - especially in the 30-60 decades of the twentieth century - following the demolitions carried out, especially in the downtown area of the neighbourhood.

The '70s were also marked by an ideal of urban renewal. However, the demolished area of the neighborhood remained at the mercy of a set of urban policies that, at the cost of their non-fulfillment, resulted in urban disqualified areas.

In the mid-80s there was hardly any construction in the space left vacant by the appalling destruction, excepting the construction of a services building and, later, the two malls, namely: the Mouraria and the Martim Moniz Shopping Centers.



Photo 2

However, due to the degradation of the local housing, in many cases at risk of imminent collapse - further aggravated by the precarious socio-economic condition and the difficulty to implement activities allowing the economic and cultural dynamic of the area - the neighborhood is, since 1985, urban and socially, endogenous and exogenously, constituted as an "object of urban renewal" (Costa and Ribeiro, 1989; Costa, 1999). The development of the urban regeneration process would influence the economic activities, social networks and dynamic of local identity. Simultaneously, the identity images of the neighborhood as traditional and popular became linked to history, multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism.

Since the '70s, the neighbourhood and the surrounding area attracted a retail trade mainly controlled by immigrants - Indian, Chinese, Pakistanis, Nepalese, among others. This phenomenon has contributed to consolidate the image of a multiethnic and multicultural Mouraria. Nevertheless the neighborhood of Mouraria did not

lose its connotation as interstitial: a place of different people, practices, music, artifacts, clothing and food, which excel a certain cultural exoticism, but also, because of the occurrence in the vicinity of traffic and drug abuse, homelessness, car ushers, prostitution, illegal immigrants, illegal sale of informal products and services.

The principles, logics and programs for local intervention have changed over the years. However, the neighbourhood remains a context for urban intervention aimed at reversing the physical degradation, social instability and insecurity in urban areas. Meanwhile, the neighbourhood is increasingly presented as a show-case of a supposed multicultural city, representative of culture and diversity; and at the same time remaining emblematic in the traditional context, particularly emphasizing the imaginary related to fado.



Photo 3

Therefore, the recent *Mouraria Action Programme*, as currently promoted by the Lisbon City Council (CML), is based on the following lines (CML site): (1) reclassification of public space, (2) improvement of accessibility and mobility and (3) urban hygiene.

Within this framework a *Tourist-Cultural Circuit of Mouraria* will be created. To that effect it has been announced the installation of "directional signs and identification of the landmarks" and the rehabilitation of certain buildings considered "identity structures". On the other hand, this will help the development of the action known as the "Cultural Corridor" that pretends "to function as a resonance box enhancing the intercultural crossing" with actions such as: the multicultural festival "There are worlds in the Moorish quarter", the promotion of Arabic and Galician cuisine and others "resulting from the ethnic and cultural miscegenation" and also "transmission of knowledge and cultural" actions (site in CML).

Related to the *Mouraria Action Program*, a *Disclosure Plan* is also provided: "cities within the city." The implementation of this Plan will focus on "multilingual" information in addition to a set of media broadcasting of the intervention operations and schedule of events to take place in the refurbished public spaces. These media broadcastings are of various kind, in particular thru outdoors installed in public spaces, but also via Internet sites and media.

The *Tourist-Cultural Circuit* provided by the *Action Program* encompasses an area of intervention that goes beyond what has historically been understood as the Mouraria territory. In fact, the area covered by this circuit exceeds even the socio-

symbolic meanings and spatial limits and boundaries of the district as traditionally considered by local populations (Menezes, 2004).

In fact, along with the amplification of the image of diversity (related to multiculturalism) and tradition (related to fado), the image of infamous neighbourhood assumes a new meaning via the urban marketing operations. Such operations convey images of greater centrality and attractiveness, repositioning the neighbourhood of Mouraria on the social map of the city. This way, Mouraria symbolically comprises a given facet of the city, intended to be comprehensive, because diverse and cultural<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. How does the public space changes behaviors?

Dealing with the question whether the "urban requalification of public space" induces "new behaviors" (in CML site), the following comments seem necessary: for the purpose of this rehabilitation a set of "structural principles" was defined that unfold the general lines of intervention, as identified above. These principles originate, meanwhile, a set of operations to be developed locally, namely: the "tourist-cultural circuit", "leisure centers", "education for the good practice of user-friendliness" and the "cultural corridor".

Within these actions, the following initiatives have been implemented so far: (1) a pin point intervention, almost urban acupuncture, in some nonlinear micro public spaces (eg: Largo da Severa), (2) the renewal of buildings considered as "identity structures", expecting they will become places of leisure and / or social support (employment, youth, etc..), (3) the intervention in public spaces of greater dimension, eg (a) paving, lighting in the pedestrian Largo do Intendente – an area traditionally related with prostitution, (b) creation of the "Merger Market" in Martim Moniz Square, an urban public space ceded to commercial exploitation with the rehabilitation / renovation of an existing set of kiosks. Also related to these last two interventions, there is a current occupation of these territories by cultural events.



Photo 4

On the other hand, the recent commercial exploitation of Martim Moniz Square, through the "Merger Market", aims "beyond the recognized brands, also to place in the market the small trade of the surrounding neighbourhood and help disseminate the cultures that make Mouraria a place full of diversity". In the words of the manager responsible for the company that will explore that market: "Not so much

the idea of the craft market, but a gallery of business" (in Dinheiro Vivo, 11.05.2012).

There are many changes and it is still difficult to say what will happen. However, it is possible to consider that some residents are satisfied with the change that currently takes place in that area of town, along with a number of critical voices questioning the urban-cultural intervention, sometimes excessively.

The "exuberant polychromy" and "agitation" of the busy streets of the popular neighbourhoods of the city, as mentioned already in 1929 by Gustavo Sequeira, is a good excuse to talk about the public space of Mouraria. This is so because the public space of the neighbourhood is one of the most visible aspects of their daily life, encouraging the creation of urban metaphors that contribute to the invention of some images of the neighbourhood, evoking it as a characteristic context, traditional, typical, popular or as a village, or as historical. But it can also denote the space as being multiethnic or multicultural, characterized as an area full of marginalities, thereby strengthening the processes of stigmatization and spatial segregation (Menezes, 2004, 2005, 2012).

At first, the planned intervention seeks to reverse the process of stigmatization and spatial segregation. It is nonetheless interesting to note two apparently contradictory aspects. The first is that the social and cultural vitality, as expressed in these public places, serves as a resource to the creation of a certain image for the local marketing. The second is that this socio-cultural vitality is paradoxically seen as lifeless, thus justifying its revitalization.

#### **4. Final considerations**

The cultural diversity of Mouraria is associated with differences and inequalities. This diversity is closely linked to a variety of contradictions and heterogeneities, such as: an aging population along with the renewal brought by immigrants, degradation and precarious living conditions, formal / informal business, traffic and drugs consumption, prostitution, illegal immigrants. Matters difficult to resolve and whose solution does not relate with "education for the practice of user-friendliness" in the public space.



Photo 5

The prolific urban imagination – as a technical-political reflection about what "the city should be" (cf. Gorelik, 2004) – enables to consider that now "there is life in Mouraria"<sup>2</sup>, as if before there was not. Partly this may be justified as an attempt to create a new urban center, thereby enhancing the neighbourhood ownership by a larger group, an important aspect for the inversion of the dynamics of segregation and socio-spatial stigmatization. Remaining, however, alert to the possibility that the "behaviour change" brought by the redevelopment of public space, could mean a change of the people. In another perspective, this may not contribute to the reversal from the social and economic adverse cycles that contributed to Mouraria remaining the "poor cousin" of the other neighbourhoods of Lisbon.

As noted by Kara Joseph (207, 257), it is important to be aware of the fact that urban-cultural interventions seek a "certain atmosphere of cultural sophistication" that change significantly:

"(...) the image of areas previously hidden because of uses deemed less noble, such as trade and housing. The reverse side of the coin is to hide with this atmosphere the planned replacement of social groups. The revitalization or redevelopment of public space assumes then meanings supposedly different, but complementary. It appears in speeches imbued with the idea of modernization of public space and cultural appreciation, but on the other hand, it means the exclusion of those who contribute to the degradation of the image desired to create, without any compromises. Culture, used as an instrument of symbolic revaluation, is present in the process to harmonize and social integrate, eliminating conflict, disharmony and segmentation".

Justifying therefore the caution with this "industry of the imagination" where culture protests against segregation and conflicts, promoting a contemplative citizenship, politically empty (Lacarrieu et al., 2006). These points out the importance of recovering the role of culture in the relationship between heritage, citizenship, political intervention and the city.

Emphasising the need for further attention to the particular cultural frames involved with the contexts and the targets of the intervention. Also important, the urban intervention should consider as a priority the resolution "of the issues that matter to people who relate with the area - their legitimate interests, problems, capacities, social relations and values.

Daily life difficulties, quality requirements, needs for information, sociability and economic progress - and the application of its resources, initiatives and organizational skills and achievement (Valente Pereira, 1987).

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## 6. Biography

M.M., is a geographer and anthropologist. She has a PhD in Anthropology (Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities – New University of Lisbon), and at present is a Research Officer of National Laboratory for Civil Engineering (LNEC) and Coordinator of LNEC' Social Ecology Division. She has 20 years of professional experience on studying the relation between built environment and social-cultural environment, through the analysis of practices and behaviours in the scope of the use, appropriation the daily spaces and leisure. She has also developed technical and methodological support to Portuguese social and urban interventions, where the main purpose was the use of socio-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives analysis that is supported by socio-spatial intervention processes. She also participated in other researches on post-occupancy housing quality evaluation for the Portuguese National Housing Institute. She, for example, participated on the research projects “Mixité sociale: une expérience européenne partagée” (C.R.E.T.E.I.L. - Université Paris XII) and “Landscapes of Memory: Migrancy,



Settlement and Urban Green Spaces (Portuguese-British Integrated Actions), "Technical Recommendations for Social Equipments" (National Institute for Social Protection), "Net Zero Energy School: Reaching the Community" (National Foundation for Science and Technology - FCT and MIT - on going) and "Conservation and Durability of Historical Renders: Compatible Techniques and Materials" (FCT - on-going). Also, she participated in the team that elaborated the proposal of "Old Ghettos, New Centralities" project (EFTA Funding) and later, in this project, she coordinated the technical and methodological support for social intervention team regarding social management in the scope of sustainable intervention program.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Muños (2004: 27), these dynamics of intervention tend to promote the "*urbanalization*" of territory, inferred from the "absolute triumph of the ordinary" by contrast to the minimization of the presence of the complexities and differences. As per Albet i Mas (2004: 23) reflecting on the example of Barcelona, "the apparent commitment to a multicultural city which is nevertheless only one functional image to avoid conflict and trivialize the differences." And that, as reported by Arantes (1996: 240), what seems to occur is that "the ideology of the Plan" is being replaced "by another no less integrated - the ideology of diversity - in which conflicts are subject to makeup by a sort of aesthetic of the heterogeneous".

<sup>2</sup> Sites: (1) Há vida na Mouraria: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/H%C3%A1-vida-na-Mouraria/250434398328678>; (2) CML - Câmara Municipal de Lisboa: <http://www.cm-lisboa.pt/?idc=661>.

### Legends

Photo 1. Related to the *Mouraria Action Program*, a outdoors installed in public spaces (2012).

Photo 2. View of Mouraria and Martim Moniz Square (2011).

Photo 3. Publicity for the sale of apartments on Martim Moniz Square: "Has a house overlooking the Fado" (2012).

Photo 4. Events to take place on Intendente Square (2012).

Photo 5. Graphite on Martim Moniz Square: "Nobody is illegal. Documents for all" (2009).