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# Ambiance Is Key in Any Innovation Strategy

## A Case Study on Urban Design, Sensitive Ecology and Political Ecology

Diana SOEIRO<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, innovation became a key element to promote economic growth. Cities started playing a significant role in promoting it quickly becoming torn between authentic urban regeneration processes and gentrification. We argue that ambiance, and the concept of atmosphere, is a highly-relevant strategic element able to trigger city development that avoids gentrification. We take the inner-city parishes of Marvila and Beato (Lisbon, Portugal) as a case study currently undergoing significant changes due to strong investment after decades of neglect.*

**Keywords.** *Economics, Spatial Justice, Sustainable Development, Urban Regeneration*

### Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, innovation became a vital element to promote economic growth recovering the approaches of economists John Keynes and Joseph Schumpeter (Dosi et al., 2016). Against the previous free market approach and a policy that privileged austerity in order to reverse the recession, Keynes' tactic that combined fiscal stimulus and expansionary monetary policy was slowly favoured. Economics Nobel Prize winners, Joseph E. Stiglitz (2001) and Paul Krugman (2008) widely voiced their support for this approach. Across Europe, a mix of austerity and expansionist approaches varied from country to country. However, as stability increased, when looking for an alternative to promote economic growth Schumpeter's strategy seemed to find a wider consensus: innovation economics. While Switzerland, Sweden, Finland, Germany and Austria were forecasted to emerge from the crisis with a relatively stronger innovative capacity, the United Kingdom and France, and to a larger extent, the Southern European countries, were likely to lose additional relative positions (Filippetti and Archibugi, 2011).

This paper<sup>2</sup> takes Lisbon (Portugal) as a case study, in particular the inner-city parishes of Marvila and Beato currently branded as the city's innovation centre. After decades of neglect, within the framework of a neoliberal policy agenda, they were targeted by local authorities as the city's main large-scale property-led urban regeneration project, encouraging investment partnerships between private and public parties (Tasan-Kok, 2008). Due to a stark contrast between its past and future, we claim that

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the concept of ambiance is crucial to assess the strategy's success or failure. Our assumption is that ambiances can either promote or hinder urban development.

First, we describe the approach that Lisbon took in order to support innovation and what should we understand as innovation. Briefly, under the leadership of Lisbon's City Hall, a specific part of the inner city was circumscribed (Marvila and Beato) and decreed as the new innovation city centre. However, this particular territory over the 20<sup>th</sup> century went from a thriving industrial site, to an industrial abandoned site and since the 1980s it gradually came to accommodate different social housing projects. The experienced past and the decreed future of the territory embody a huge clash of ambiances. Both constrict each other, creating tension and bringing to surface vulnerabilities and inequalities. How to overcome this?

Second, we take as main reference Edward W. Soja (*Seeking Spatial Justice*, 2010). According to the American geographer space should not be perceived as passive but instead as an active element able to shape and define historical, anthropological, sociological and psychological circumstances. Expanding on this idea, the way-built environments are designed, create particular atmospheres that can either have a positive or a negative impact. In this paper we use 'atmosphere' and 'ambiance' interchangeably though we acknowledge that they stem from different schools of thought (Adey et al., 2013).

Thirdly, we evaluate up to what extent was Lisbon's territory-based innovation strategy well thought-out, providing a critical assessment that allows us to elaborate new solutions where past and present ambiances can flourish and grow. We argue that urban design and the creation of experiences where past and present ambiances are shared can be the key to demonstrate how sensitive ecology (Otálora-Luna and Aldana, 2017) and political ecology (Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2018) can positively influence each other.

### **Lisbon's Innovation Strategy in the Aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis**

In 1942, Schumpeter (2010) introduced the concept of innovation in economics, arguing that the core of economic growth were institutions, entrepreneurs and technological changes. Being perceived as disruptive for centuries, innovation experienced a resurgence with a positive connotation through the discipline of economics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century becoming associated with the idea of progress (Godin, 2015). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, innovation slowly transitioned to other disciplines, generating concepts such as "sustainable innovation," encompassing the economic, social and ecological realms (Boons and McMeekin, 2019) and the widely discussed concept of "social innovation" (Godin and Gaglio, 2019).

Recently, urban environments and in particular the concept of 'smart city' (SC) highlighted the importance of innovation, in particular associated with information technologies (ITs). Some authors, like Yigitcanlar (e.g. 2018) have argued for a multi-dimensional approach of the SC beyond technology.

We now describe our case study based on knowledge produced in the context of the project ROCK - Regeneration and Optimisation of Cultural heritage in creative and Knowledge cities (2017-2020), funded by the European Union under the programme Horizon 2020. The project area focused particularly in the riverside area but for contextualization purposes we refer to the totality of both parishes.

In May 2011, Lisbon's City Hall President, António Costa, invited Paulo Soeiro de Carvalho to create, lead and manage a new Economics and Innovation department (which Carvalho did, up until December 2018) (Barbosa, 2019). During this time, a strong investment

in entrepreneurship became evident at first spatially spread out across the city. Slowly the inner-city parishes of Marvila and Beato became the privileged innovation centre and started undergoing a process of urban regeneration, led by the concept of “creative city” where artists, co-working spaces and start-ups started being promoted by the municipality reconverting old and abandoned buildings, factories and warehouses, breathing new life to an area neglected for many decades (Azevedo, 2019).

Once a thriving industrial area, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century it gradually became less vibrant and overtime it has lost its place as a relevant industrial site. In the 1980s, it started being used as an area to relocate inhabitants from informal housing that had settled in the area overtime to apartment buildings - migrants from the North of the country that came to Lisbon in look for a better life during the 1960s and onwards; migrants from the old Portuguese colonies in the African continent, from the late 1970s and onwards. Also, other apartment buildings run by the City Hall, available as social housing were built to house other inhabitants because the area had a lot of available space to be urbanized. To this day, though located in the inner-area of the city it represents the most available land space in Lisbon.

Due to its historical past, the area’s landscape is highly heterogeneous featuring old churches and convents that span from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards: urban farms, still some informal housing, apartment buildings spread out across the territory that seem to create small islands within the territory. Due to its low mobility and accessibility it feels like an area that has stopped in time - though one would have a hard time identifying in which century. Since 2011, having become the new innovation centre of Lisbon, many buildings were rehabilitated and a new use and a new crowd were attracted to the area. Permanent residents and temporary new residents are also very different. Original residents of the area are generally characterized by a low education level, old age, and above average unemployment rate (ROCK Survey, 2020). New residents are college educated and innovators embodying new technologies, state of the art knowledge and the future. These two processes undergoing in the same area create a paradox that one would describe in traditional terms as one that hesitates between an urban regeneration process true to its historical past and gentrification where “foreign” elements to the area are favoured over old ones (Couch & Fraser, 2003).

The concept of ambiance is useful to both describe the paradox and to solve it.

## Urban Regeneration vs Gentrification

Ambiance refers to a particular atmosphere, feeling or mood sparked by an environment. The archaeology of the concept of atmosphere, taken in this sense, has been undertaken by Soeiro (2020a) being traced back to J.W. von Goethe (1749-1832).

The Marvila and Beato area is currently characterized by a clash between two processes, urban regeneration and gentrification. This clash is palpable within the area both visibly and invisibly. Visibly, there are buildings being rehabilitated with a new assigned function; these attract a new crowd that features radically different socio-economic characteristics than its original residents; new cafes, bars and restaurants offer trendy and contemporary gastronomy; and a couple of luxury condominiums under construction signal the area’s ability to attract foreign investment. This creates a stark and palpable contrast with old residents that roam the streets and seat on park benches; social housing apartments; urban farms where animals can still be seen pasturing (mainly goats and sheep); old residents’ and worker’s associations, and *tascas* (Portuguese style pubs) are spread out across the territory where time seems to stand still.

In 2010, American Geographer Edward Soja (2010) proposed the concept of ‘spatial

justice' assigning space an active role. Space and the way space is designed has the ability to create and define historical, anthropological, sociological and psychological circumstances. In that sense, urban design has the ability to create different atmospheres that can either have a positive and negative impact, being able to segregate or harmonise. In the case of Marvila and Beato, how does the concept of atmosphere contribute to clarify the ongoing segregational process?

The area of Marvila and Beato is experiencing a clash of ambiances between the past and the present in such a way where each seems to be in each other's way. Having conducted observational research, engaged in informal conversations and participated in local meetings and workshops in the area during the project, it is possible to observe that a segregation process is undergoing at several different levels generating a fragmented territory where each element (or small set of elements) seems to exist on its own, cut off from any relation with its surrounding environment. This is physically visible and also very quickly perceived by the body and the senses that have a hard time making sense of the heterogenous landscape, constantly appealing to a sense of displacement.

1) Due to its low mobility and accessibility the area is cut off from the rest of the city; 2) Apartment buildings are placed with a sense of randomness, creating what seem to be small islands; 3) New rehabilitated buildings, temporary residents and luxury condominiums were carefully placed, either by the riverside (with a higher ratio of old buildings and less social housing) or inner-areas that cause a less intense clash; 4) Inhabitants are segregated from the rest of the city and from other parts of the area itself.

This spatial segregation creates also an atmospheric segregation. An accurate description of the area's spatial and atmospheric segregation is presented by Soeiro (2020b) under the concept of heterotopia, pioneered by Foucault. However, there are spaces within the area where atmospheres are starting to juxtapose resulting in a chaotic and directionless feeling. When walking through the area one feels torn and the mood is very unstable: is one touring Lisbon's past or witnessing first-hand the upcoming future?

### **Shared Ambiances as Innovation Strategy**

When decreeing Marvila and Beato as the new innovation area, we argue that because there was no transition strategy put in place to bridge the area's past (both its landscape and inhabitants) and the current innovation process, the area seems to be stuck, at a loss and at a breaking point. Original residents are suspicious and often unaware of the aim of the investment being done in the area. When they do, they feel threatened and unwelcome ongoing changes. As for new temporary residents, they feel disconnected both from the area and from its inhabitants which hinders a sense of orientation when establishing goals and going forward with the innovation strategy (ROCK Workshop 2020).

Being this the current situation, our proposal is to harmonise both spaces and atmospheres using as resources: urban design, sensitive ecology and political ecology. What all these elements have in common is that they focus on the surrounding environment and spaces that connect existing elements within the landscape (natural and artificial). Very briefly we address each one of them.

Urban design should prioritize mobility and accessibility, creating a transport system that encourages intermodality supporting the use of more than one mode of transport

for a single trip (Goletz et al., 2020). Also developing strategies that favour human scale mobility, to create a more flexible sense of space within the area, through plans that improve conditions for walking and biking (DesRoches, Russell and Guo, 2019).

Sensitive ecology is a key element to rebuilt a sense of place that can be addressed by recurring to its expression as ecological landscape. The goal is to elaborate a plan that connects existing natural elements in the area creating a sense of unit. This implies to carefully manage and craft natural elements, propelling them as landscape: horizon, sound, wind and movement (air), gardens and urban farms (earth), the riverfront (water), food/ cooking sites and careful public lighting (fire). These elements, when incorporated in the landscape, promote sensitive ecology.

Political ecology is the study of the intersection and relationship between the political, broadly understood, and environmental and ecological phenomena (Minch, 2011). It is a broad research area to which many different disciplines contribute where the ecological and environmental realms are always at the forefront keeping at its core human-environment relations. Research topics range from community engagement and governance to strictly biophysical ecology (Walker, 2005). Judging on the experience during the ROCK project, in the case of Marvila and Beato, to create a strategy that would be able to identify and engage relevant stakeholders so that each would be able to contribute to the area's future, aiming at its economic, social and ecological sustainability - where ecology would be at centre - would be highly desirable to achieve a renewed innovative ambiance that both embraces its past while looking into the future.

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