

Type of the Paper: Peer-reviewed Conference Paper / Full Paper

Track title: *Track 4- Metropolization and the Right to the City*

Dialogues, tensions and expectations between urban civic movements and city administration. Lessons for urban politics evolution from two recent participatory processes in Portugal

João Seixas ¹, José Mota ²

¹ NOVA FCSH 1; jseixas@fcs.unl.pt; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4948-9113>

² University of Aveiro 2; jcmota@ua.pt; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8953-2027>

Abstract: This article presents a preliminary analysis on the evolutionary framework for new types of intersections, dialogues and conflicts between urban administration and civic movements in Portugal. The analysis is here based on two case studies developed around urban requalification processes in two central public spaces, in the cities of Lisbon – the Martim Moniz Square – and Aveiro – the Rossio Garden. In these cases, the conflicts and the interconnections between local authorities and social movements have been evolving in very interesting forms. Expressing not only relevant changes occurring on urban civic movements themselves, but also an inevitable although still quite limited and visibly thwarted political culture reconfiguration on urban governments and its administration.

Names of the track editors:

Caroline Newton
Lei Qu

Keywords: civic movements; governance; participation

Names of the reviewers:

Journal: The Evolving Scholar

DOI:10.24404/616ca02036561a00
099446b7

Submitted: 18 October 2021

Accepted:

Published:

Citation: Seixas, J. & Mota, J. (2021). Dialogues, tensions and expectations between urban civic movements and city administration. Lessons for urban politics evolution from two recent participatory processes in Portugal. The Evolving Scholar | IFoU 14th Edition.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution CC BY (CC BY) license.

©2021 [Seixas, J. & Mota, J.] published by TU Delft OPEN on behalf of the authors.

1. Introduction - Recent trends in Portuguese urban politics

Cities have become the epicentre of most of humanity's major issues, from climate change to social inequalities, from the dilemmas of the digitalization of the economy and urban life, to the formation of new cultures, identities, and communities. An evolution which is leading to an increasingly active combination of crises, pressures, experiments, and expectations.

In most Europe's urban territories, after several decades of continuous growth mainly associated with metropolization and urban dispersion, new trends in uses and experiences are now spreading. With a growing spectrum of individuals, institutions and companies assimilating differentiated habitat experiences, working capabilities, mobility, and consumption habits (Sennett, 2016).

These changes are having a strong impact on the fields of urban politics (Merrifield, 2013). Especially in terms of the cultures and dynamics of urban government institutions, there are developing different paradoxical realities. Being increasingly visible the overlaps of several initiatives, proposals, and innovative trends, with organizational and cultural structures that remain considerably classical and bureaucratic, as well as mostly dependent on internal or partisan stimulus. Overlaps that often develop into quite fragmented and unstructured results. Notwithstanding a growing positioning of a vast myriad of innovative strategic and political approaches, it grows the feeling of the limitations in the capacity building and governing action of several urban governance domains, in face of the challenges before them. These feelings and questionings developing, in turn, political reactions that allow the promotion of localist and even populist views.

In Portugal, these structural – and growingly paradoxical – developments are also occurring, combining global trends with specificities arising from an urban culture that historically has been poorly understood by society and policymakers (Seixas et al., 2019). The current dilemmas facing Portuguese cities and metropolises are strongly conditioned by the combination of structural weaknesses – particularly in terms of the limited capacities and resources of local authorities, in one of the most centralized countries in Europe –, with a long period of socio-economic crisis and following austerity policies. Even after the hardest austerity period, followed by a few years of some economic and social improvement, the majority of the main political and regulatory local systems have been maintained (Teles, 2015). Becoming growingly out of step with old needs and new challenges, and most notably on fundamental urban dimensions like in the current pressing housing and real estate markets realms.

This present article presents a preliminary analysis on the evolution of new types of intersections, dialogues and conflicts between urban administration and civic movements in the Portuguese cities. There were developed two case studies, concerning urban requalification processes in two major public spaces in the cities of Lisbon and Aveiro. In both cases, the conflicts and the interconnections between local authorities and social movements have evolved in some forms, expressing the changes occurring on urban civic movements as well as the still limited political culture reconfiguration on urban governments.

2. Urban social movements in Portugal

Social movements organized around urban issues on European cities have a long history. The right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008) is perhaps one of the most relevant perspectives that still inspires the debate of living in the city and the right to housing. In the 1970's, newly environmental and public space qualification movements emerged, influenced by the energy crisis as well as by mobility and safety. Afterward's, collective associations mobilised for the protection of built heritage, stimulated by international organisations, such as UNESCO. Recently, a new generation of social movements has emerged that are concerned with the city and its transformation, in response to the crisis of traditional information practices, the erosion of state regulation, and the emergence of global economic actors with power to control decision processes, a situation amplified by the 2008 financial crisis (Mayer, 2009).

Focusing on this latest, it appears that the convergence of intervention in the city by groups of citizens that appeared through the emergence of a social and environmental awareness of collective life, the dissemination of technologies, and from multicultural and connected urban contexts. There is a fundamental motivation that characterises these groups, which transcends the markedly ideological or corporate dimension of previous generations, referring them to an action focused on the city as the object and its core elements (the neighbourhood or the street), as the focus of concerned collective forms of organisation, in response to a change in the scale of functioning and autonomy of local, public associations. Finally, the performance of these recent social movements stands out for its growing technical-scientific robustness, articulating the focal concerns of reflection with collective action (Hamel et al., 2000).

Most of these social dynamics happen when there are combined reasonable densities of sociocultural critical mass, the influence from qualified professions, and some sort of public support (Subirats, 2016). And now, with the development of the new crisis, urban landscapes of wider economic difficulties, qualified unemployment, and growing social and spatial inequalities. Most of the time these civic pressures were triggered by contesting actions of governments of cities and their public administrations. But there is a widespread nurturing, particularly in the urban tissue and from younger generations, in the main Portuguese cities and their vast metropolitan territories, of new cultures and forms of exercising civic politics and much more participated, transversal, collaborative and committed practices. They emerge with strong dynamism and social attention, although with a still relatively fragile capacity for political influence. Despite having been fostered mainly from reactive and protest dynamics, these new practices have demonstrated new propositional and organisational capacities, namely around more urgent dimensions, such as accessibility to housing, social inequalities, and the quality of public space.

Although these civic dynamics have been primarily fostered through reactive expressions and protesting, they are now demonstrating new propositional and organisational capacities, notably around most pressing dimensions such as housing accessibility, social inequalities, and the quality of public space. There can be understood a widespread nurturing of these movements, particularly in the urban territories and with a dynamism mostly geared by younger and qualified generations. Most of these social dynamics happening when there is a combination of reasonable densities of sociocultural critical mass,

the influence from qualified professions and some sort of public response or even support (Subirats, 2016).

Even so, it is possible to identify different types of movements, depending on their motivation, forms of organisation, practices, and results: (i) protest, (ii) reflection, (iii) collective construction, and (iv) tactical action (Diagram 1). Protest movements traditionally have a reactive stance on a given issue, whether it is an urban problem or an intention to transform the city, and organise themselves to influence the decision-making process, namely through petitions, interventions with media impact, and, in some cases, legal initiatives. They want short-term results and exhaust their action with the end of the cause. Its relationship with political power is tense and often conflicting (Mota & Santinha, 2016). Urban social movements of reflection, on the other hand, are motivated by diagnosing and generating ideas about the future of the city for which they organise debate forums, producing opinions, and taking positions. They do not act on the short term and act farther from the media effervescence, being those with the greatest potential to build bridges between antagonistic positions (Mota, 2014). As for collective construction movements, they emerge in response to civic innovation efforts, whether promoted by the administration or by the citizens. They aim to create new models for experimenting with public policies or citizen action, promoting spaces for prototyping to design experimental solutions. Citizen laboratories are one of the most recent instruments for applying this type of movement (Parra, Fressoli & Lafuente, 2017). Finally, action movements are motivated by the transformation of cities and public space through guerrilla urbanism or tactical urbanism. They intend to achieve this transformation through low cost and visible impact initiatives, desirably through participatory processes (Lydon et al, 2015).

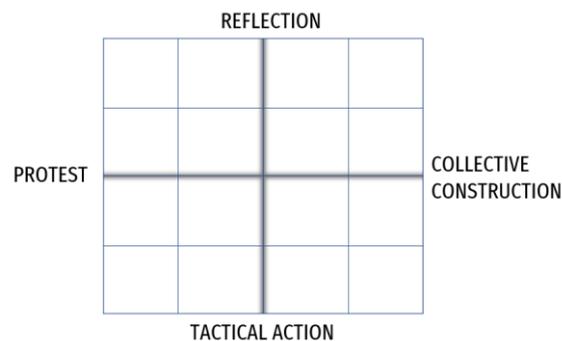


Diagram 1. Typology spectrum for urban social movements. Source: authors

These movements do not work in a watertight way, but influence each other, often forming civic ecosystems of combined action that aim to inspire and influence others, even when they do not work in the same geographical area of influence, taking advantage of their knowledge and experience. They aim to break down barriers and create a context of greater cooperation between public administration and civil society organisations (Polyak et al, 2021).

Following this resumed conceptual framework, an empirical analysis focused on two processes of urban public spaces requalification (in the cities of Lisbon and Aveiro) and correspondent civic positioning and expressions, was developed.

3. Two case studies of urban requalification (Lisbon and Aveiro)

3.1. The Martim Moniz square in Lisbon

Martim Moniz square (MM) is one of the most important public spaces in the city of Lisbon. In this large square there is a rare combination of important urban values, from its central geographical positioning to a significant landscape amplitude and a quite evident urban and intersectional potential (Figure 1). Furthermore, involving MM pulses a rich and diverse social and economic dynamism, thus conjugating a set of remarkable and unusual characteristics making this square a fundamental hinge space for the whole city of Lisbon.



Figure 1 & 2. The Martim Moniz Square in Lisbon, and proposed project for the MM Market (later rejected). Source: CML

Increasingly cosmopolitan and integrated in global avant-garde trends, Lisbon has distinguished itself in the most recent years by a vertiginous process of change. Being strongly visible the coexistence and the confrontation between several processes of innovation and change, with a parallel structuring of new types of inequalities and segregation. These dilemmas today take place in several domains and most notably in fundamental urban elements like in the housing accessibility, in the economic shifts, in the ecological pressures and in cultural and communitarian reframing. In view of the vertigo of change and an also growingly visible unbalanced capacity for political regulation, the risks of loss of both social and political perspectives have become notably evident. These risks showing to be particularly expressed around the most historical and central territories of the city, where MM is located. The historic center of Lisbon is today the scene of crucial confrontations and constant imbalances between the ‘city for the visitors and occasional consumers’, and ‘the city for the residents and everyday inhabitants’.

Growing appeals for a qualified green area in MM exist for several decades. However, until recently most of the requalification proposals have been commercial in nature and implemented through quite limited and unsuccessful public-private partnerships. With time, as well as with the new urban pressures, MM and its almost timeless expectant situation became an inevitable point of political confrontation. At the end of 2018 the municipality announced its intension to extend the commercial concession contract with the previous promoter (of a Fusion Market in force since 2012, planned until 2022 and in serious decline for some time), extending it until 2032 and now including a commercial requalification of the square with an open shopping center with about forty stores, renamed Martim Moniz Market (Figure 2).

The social contestation to this decision was immediate. The citizens – and several movements – complaining not only for the ever-forgotten green space, but also considering that the new commercial pole would have a great impact in terms of ephemeral and touristic pressures and growing concerns on noise and insecurity.

At a following town hall public meeting, the president of the municipality started to admit that the solution for MM was not the ideal. Unleashing a growing chorus of criticism from the various parties, both in the chamber meetings and in the municipal assemblies, now also focusing on the lack of transparency of the process and on legal incongruities. Meanwhile, at a public meeting organized by the local district, where the councilors as well as the concession entrepreneurs were present, a room by weight spoke out against the project and in favor of a qualified green area. In March 2019, a new movement called ‘Jardim Martim Moniz’ was born, aiming to bring together independent voices, as well as clearer information and decisive influence in the whole process. At the end of April, a civic petition for an urban garden in MM with almost 2000 signatures is delivered in the municipal assembly. At the same time, the local district of Santa Maria Maior publicly rejects the market project and demands a square for the residents.

Confronted with the growing civic and political contestation and with a correspondent mediatic debate, the municipality eventually approves the termination of the contract. A decision giving rise to a compensation to the promoter; and triggering a completely new process. Starting with an auscultation to the population, through several forms (historical and sociogeographical information, extended surveys and focus-groups, meetings with the civic movements). This new process was organized with external scientific support and extended through different phases. The most mentioned responses clearly going towards increasing green areas, noise reduction, improvement in pedestrian access and soft modes

of mobility. Also being mentioned other relevant issues, like a diversification of multicultural activities, more spaces for children and intergenerational meeting, and the increase in urban safety. Several preliminary proposals coming from various citizens were also publicly presented (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Some of the proposals developed by participants in the recent public auscultation phases. Source: CML

From the auscultation phases, and in conjunction with the municipal strategies, a new set of principles were listed for the future of MM and for the definition of the preliminary program for a future requalification project. At a town meeting in May 2021, the participative report and the guidelines for the preliminary programme were approved unanimously. The municipality thus beginning the process for an international public tender, stressing the desire to enable innovative solutions. However, and none withstanding the notable change in the city's urban planning practices in this specific case, this new process could still be understood as dominated by a municipal culture of considerable control on the participatory processes and correspondent directions and decisions. Although heard, the movements were called only on the presentation moments on the final steps of each phase. An administrative and political attitude that still does not guarantee a fundamental change in urban management practices by the municipality.

3.2. The Rossio garden in Aveiro

Rossio is an iconic place in the heart of the city of Aveiro, located between the Bairro da Beira Mar and the central water channel. It accumulates two roles; it is the only garden serving the surrounding neighbourhood and the space where the city's most important collective events take place.

Today the Garden, due to lack of maintenance, has several problems that need to be solved. It is possible to identify five fundamental problems: of the need to clean and conserve the green spaces, urban furniture maintenance; tree species (palm trees); car parking in the surrounding areas, making the relationship between the garden and the neighbourhood difficult; social problems related to some of the user types; and, an imbalance between tourists looking for boat trips and residents looking for the enjoyment of the green space provides.

The requalification project for Jardim do Rossio in Aveiro emerged within the scope of the urban development operations that the Municipality and Aveiro integrated into the Strategic Plan for Urban Development of the City of Aveiro as part of the application for European Funds. The aim of «transforming [Largo do Rossio] as the great central public space of the city, stimulating its pedestrian use and providing it with functionalities for the realisation and organisation of various events in the City», (...) providing "this space with a subterranean car park, which will be the object of a construction and operation concession tender".



Figure 4 & 5. Rossio Garden Projects – phase 1 and 2. Source: Municipality of Aveiro

The project received criticism related to the destruction of the existing garden and the construction of an underground car park, even though it was intended to partially replace the existing ones on the surface, when in the vicinity there are several alternative car parks which aren't used to their capacity. The underground car park option has a fundamental contradiction with the program that finances the operation, since it aims at contributing to sustainable urban development and the decarbonisation of mobility, which apparently is related to the financing entity of the operation. Furthermore, the project contradicts the mobility principles advocated for the city, namely the existing technical studies. In addition, the commitment to an event venue raises fears of worsening the acceleration of tourist attractiveness factors, in line with what has happened in recent years with the growth in the offer of local accommodation, reducing the functions of supporting daily life, namely for residents of Bairro da Beira-mar (Figure 4).

The intervention also raised fears about the alteration of the water table in the surroundings, which could affect the old building of Bairro da Beira-mar supported by wooden piles" and the felling of all the trees was much criticized as "they play an essential role, both in terms of an environmental point of view and of urban comfort.

The choice of the modality of a call for ideas for the planning of that space was also criticised, as this instrument is an exercise in which the designers respond to a specification that they cannot contradict, they spend a limited time of research (which does not allow them to gain knowledge of the object they want to transform) and do a job without any contact with the local authority and the community.

The lack of a participatory process and the impact of the solution generated a huge civic controversy that gave rise to various types of civic movements, as referenced before. The protest movements organized petitions, several public events, which were highly attended, and legal initiatives. The reflections movements promoted public debates and made relevant technical recommendations.

Despite not having backed down on one of the critical issues – the car park – the municipal executive made significant changes to the initial proposal (Figure 5). It increased the green area, reduced the area of the event square, reduced and reformulated car traffic, resized the sidewalks along the urban façade. Even so, to respond to the need for access to the garden, is proposing to build a new access bridge through the lock zones (next to the estuary) which will certainly increase car traffic pressure in the Rossio area. From the initial project budgeted at seven million euros, the work was awarded for 12.4 million euros, in a concession contract that also involves the management of another car park in the city, plus up to 1.2 million euros for the second bridge.

4. Discussion & Conclusions

Our research, here presented in a very resumed form, has identified a set of key fields for an expanded interpretation on the recent evolution of Portuguese urban civic movements and correspondent urban governance attitudes. Not only concerning the more specifically focused urban planning and regeneration processes, but also around possible cultural changes developing on the political and institutional structures of local government, as well as in the evolution of urban movements themselves, and correspondent sociopolitical and civic cultures.

The two case studies here presented show that some decisive lines framing the evolution of urban governance are based on the activation of formal as well as informal inter-section processes in policy debate, confrontation, and production. Most notably when there are involved considerably distinct groups and universes, with very little history of encounter and dialogue.

By one side, these two case studies show an interesting evolution in the influence capacity of civic movements. The initial plans of the municipalities were changed due to the civic pressures clearly demonstrated. By other side, however, the decision-making processes themselves still remain not clearly open and participatory. Which seems to demonstrate that although the urban political power is becoming more sensitive to the pressures of civil society, what is changing within the political-administrative structures is not yet a structural process of connection and dialogue with each city's communities. Showing that there is still a long way to go, in the reduction of entrenched dichotomies established over several decades, and in the promoting a culture of more permanent communication between the different urban actors.

Overall, there are still quite visible several governance fragilities, decisively influencing the ways in which the transformation of the territory is processed, without a clear foundation in public policy principles – local national and European – and without a due and timely civic involvement. The dialogue between urban local administrations and the citizens, when it takes place, is almost always when it is pressed and stimulated by the latter. In one case opening a new although still unstable participatory process (Lisbon) and in other still clearly showing little willingness to properly position the citizen's perspectives, using the argument of political legitimacy (Aveiro).

Nevertheless, both cases also show the growing role of protest movements in the Portuguese cities, with growing impact in both the media and in the institutional contexts. Giving way, by its side, to the development of more reflective postures, thus contributing to both the qualification of the debates and to an expected improvement of future dialogue processes, and possibly to some forms of collective construction cultures. This analysis demonstrating the gaps, but also the potential and richness of the growing interrelationship between the social movements in the city and the local political institutions.

References

1. Hamel, P. (2000). *Urban movements in a globalising world*. London: Routledge.
2. Harvey, D. (2009). *Social justice and the city*.
3. Lefebvre, H. (1972). *Le Droit à la ville: Suivi de espace et politique*. Paris: Éditions Anthropos.
4. Lydon, M, Garcia, A., & Duany, A. (2015). *Tactical urbanism: Short-term action for long-term change*. Washington: Island press.
5. Mayer, M. (2009). The 'Right to the City' in the context of shifting mottos of urban social movements. *City*, 13, 362-374.
6. Merrifield, A. (2013). The urban question under planetary urbanization. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37(3), 909-922.
7. Mota, J.C.; Santinha, G. (2016). "Aveiro: Civic Movements to Promote Smarter Decisions for the Future of the City", en *Human Smart Cities*. Springer International Publishing. 2016, pp.219-227.
8. Mota, J.C. (2014). "Planeamento do Território: Metodologias, Actores e Participação". Tese de Doutoramento, Universidade de Aveiro
9. Nel-lo, O. (2015) *La ciudad en movimiento*. Días & Pons, Madrid.
10. Parra, H.; Fressoli, M.; Lafuente, A. (2017). "Dossie: Ciência Cidadã e Laboratórios Cidadão/ Citizen Science and Citizen Labs (pt/en/es)", en *LIINC EM REVISTA*, v. 13, p. 1, 2017. <http://revista.ibict.br/liinc/issue/view/244>
11. Polyak et all, (2021). *The Power of Civic Ecosystems*. Cooperative City Books, Vienna, 2021
12. Seixas, J. & Guterres, A.B. (2019). "Political evolution in the Lisbon of the digital era. Fast urban changes, slow institutional restructuring and growing civic pressures" *Urban Research and Practice*, volume 11, issue 3.
13. Sennett, R. (2016). *Building and dwelling: ethics for the City*. Allen Lane, London.
14. Subirats, J. (2016). *El poder de lo próximo: las virtudes del municipalismo*. Los libros de la catarata, Madrid
15. Teles, F. (2015). The distinctiveness of democratic political leadership, *Political Studies Review*, Vol 13(1): 22-36