Culture-led urban regeneration and local expectations of urban void renewal in eastern Lisbon

A critical perspective on the social and spatial accomplishments of ROCK Pilot Projects in Marvila

By
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Abstract

This article will analyze the ongoing culture-led regeneration processes of abandoned, informal and vacant areas, often considered by residents, local associations, and public officials to be urban voids. Our territorial framework is in *Marvila,* a semi-peripheral riverside area in Lisbon, strongly affected by informal activities, high levels of youth unemployment, an elderly population, and the existence of urban spaces with non-planned uses, seen as undesirable by the local ecosystem of stakeholders and particularly by residents.

Our analysis will be centered around a social and spatial understanding of Lisbon's municipal urban policy (funded by the 3.5.6. program of the European Union on Cultural Heritage), which has supported the reoccupation of some these so-called urban voids. We will focus on the use of a Pilot Project methodology, its exploratory and prototype nature, the local bureaucratic planning system, and the soft Planning techniques implemented as new ways of addressing long-term decayed and informal urban spaces.

We will examine the regeneration results of two EU-H2020 funded pilot projects, under the ROCK project, which supports this research. The first pilot project "*Loja Com Vida*" ("store with life" or "store invites"), supports the municipal objective of creating a new urban centrality in *Marvila*, encouraging a diversification of its users, operationalizing the reuse of municipal ground floor spaces. The second project, "*Jardim para Todos*" ('Garden for all'), corroborates a municipal urban policy on environmental sustainability goals, promoting, with

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the help of local agents, a learning and sharing process centered around green knowledge and the creation of a future agriculture hub and leisure area.

The acknowledgment of these pilot project results will constitute an interesting case study for other urban areas with similar conditions, incorporating a better understanding of participative urban regeneration processes, outside the traditional and formal planning perspectives and achievements.

Introduction

Within contemporary Lisbon, *Marvila* was seen by public officials as an enclave, fragmented and dissociated from major tourism and leisure activities (Historical city center and *Parque das Nacoes*). Lisbon touristification was started around 2011. *Marvila* had been integrated in a Strategic Plan for Tourism for the region of Lisbon of 2020. In that tourism policy *Marvila* was seen as a "young and trendy oriented zone, in harmony with its local traditions, strengthening the offer of contents in these ways – craft beer, show rooms, art galleries, "edgy" shopping and sustainability" (CML 2020). It was predicted that *Marvila* would become a new gathering area for an extended community, where its users could experience local culture as a commodity. In a city such as contemporary Lisbon, where the continuous commodification of urban space is necessary to respond to an increasing consumption of cultural enjoyment (Lestegas, Seixas & Lois-Gonzalez 2019), it is important to create new cultural poles, particularly in communities stigmatized as dangerous, marked by youth unemployment, indulging in informal economic activities, having aged populations, and being areas of poor economic and cultural capital.

The reoccupation of municipal ground floor spaces, as well as the creation of a new agriculture hub (with a restaurant, its theme promoting sustainability), is seen by Lisbon council as a strategy to create a new center for cultural interaction (Pratt 2018). *Marvila* was repurposed as a new location for gatherings and consumption, with the aim of becoming more appealing to visitors, integrating the space with the rest of the city. As expressed on several occasions by public officials, in public statements to the media, and in public gatherings, they wish to "open the territory to rest of the city" (Pincha 2018), believing that these processes would support the urban regeneration of these spaces and communities.

Cultural-led regeneration in Lisbon, with the aim of so-called urban void regeneration, responds to an increasing demand for cultural centers from local and tourist leisure consumers, has been funded by the national state, local administration, European commission programs or private investment, aggregating a wide range of social actors. They were oriented towards Lisbon's consumers, those with influential professional profiles, and national and international tourists. From the 1990s until recently, we must acknowledge three main processes of urban regeneration in Lisbon. First, the 1998 creation of *Parque das Nacoes*, resulting from a post-industrial renewal process and resident relocation. The 1998 Lisbon World Exposition was used as a driver of urban change, creating a new riverside public space, new housing, commercial areas, a musical arena, and offices of major companies (Torres 2019, Guimaraes 2017, Pereira 2015). Secondly, from 2011 until recently, we have seen further major changes. In the *Alcantara* area (Xie 2015, Gravereau 2012), the former *Companhia*

de Fiação and *Tecidos Lisbonense* industrial spaces were reconverted with the creation of LX Factory, a cultural and consumption hub with its boutique retail, co-workspaces, restaurants, and urban events, owned by a real estate company called Mainside. In *Misericordia* and *Santa Maria Maior* civil parishes, we have witnessed the process of touristification and the promotion of nightlife, with an increase in short term rental apartments, and the commodification of tangible (old ruins, palaces, churches) and intangible (*Fado* music) cultural heritage, resulting in resident evictions and land value increases (Lestegas, Seixas & Lois-Gonzalez 2019, Santos 2019, Mendes 2018). Thirdly, after 2015, the culture-led regeneration of *Marvila*, based on the reappropriation of former industrial tangible cultural heritage for areas of artistic performance and galleries, nightlife, and restaurants, luxury real estate, innovative and creative co-workspaces, as well as public space creation on the Lisbon eastern waterfront (Verheij & Nunes 2020, Gennari 2018, Nevado 2015).

Urban regeneration processes, such as urban renewal and re-functionalization exercises (Morgan & Ren 2016), have been performed in underprivileged social and economic communities and their spaces. These new urban processes were designed to be drivers of positive urban change, rearranging territories punctuated by forms of urban crisis (Tulumello 2016), to create more urban continuum spaces, answering the demands of local social actors, social movements and smaller organizations interested in local territorial changes, using creative solutions as drivers of urban change (Couch, Sykes, Borstinghaus 2011, Pratt 2008, Laundry 2000, Scott 2000).

Culture-led urban regeneration (García 2016, Evans 2005, Miles & Paddison 2005) has become a trademark of EU and national publicly-funded urban policies to replicate creativity (Oliveira & Paulino 2017, Breitbart 2013), to transfer knowledge (Engelsman 2017), to socioeconomically renew (Tallon 2013, Carmon 1999) and to physically re-qualify (Andre, Estevens, & Leandro 2016, Nevado 2015) pre-existing socio-territorial units affected by the maintenance of socioeconomic exclusion, particularly in the peripheral, traditional and former industrial landscapes (Loures 2015). These closed, fragmented, and vacant spaces have become a contemporary focus of urban, social science research and EU-funded programs, combining culture and creativity, towards the creation of economic revitalized urban areas (Pratt 2008, Evans 2005, Laundry 2000, Scott 2000).

> In this model, cultural activity is seen as the catalyst and engine of regeneration—epithets of change and movement. The activity is likely to have a high-public profile (…) a mean for creating (or rediscovering) distinctiveness and for raising awareness and excitement in regeneration programs as a whole. (Evans, 2005, 10)

This paper is divided into three sections. First, we discuss the methodological steps taken in this research. Second, we will examine the theoretical nature of the processes of socio-spatial change herein labelled as urban void regeneration, the contemporary characteristics of abandoned and informal spaces, and the components of pilot projects as objects of an intervention prototype and soft planning development. Third, we will analyze the application of these pilot projects in *Marvila*. These discussions will give rise to the main research question of this paper: Were these pilot projects successful in creating new long-term forms of social and spatial urban regeneration in eastern Lisbon, considering local agent and stakeholder participation, towards a major understanding of contemporary abandoned, informal and vacant spaces referred to as urban voids?

H2020 ROCK Project and Urban Void Regeneration

This paper results from research developed between April 2019 and July 2020 under the ROCK project in Lisbon - Regeneration and Optimization of Cultural Heritage in Creative and Knowledge Cities - hereafter referred to as H2020 ROCK. The project consists of a consortium of seven Role Model cities and three Replicator cities, pursuing the objective of promoting "the development of a shared multi-cultural, multi-heritage and multi-stakeholder's city vision, which integrates heritage-led regeneration, sustainable economic development, city promotion, and knowledge sharing" (ROCK official site). Addressing a culture-led regeneration process, the project chased the objective of creating new spaces of social encounter for different social backgrounds, not only for residents, but also for other city users and visitors.

In Lisbon, one of the Replicator Cities, the responsibility for ground-level achievements was assumed by the Cultural Heritage Department of the Lisbon council. The academic partner, *Instituto de Ciencias Sociais*, developed research activities around the importance of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as municipal vacant spaces, referred to as urban voids. Simultaneously, an in-depth observation of participative processes around local associations intervention and residents' engagement was developed. The two H2020 ROCK pilot projects were developed around two areas. The first one is located in *Alfinetes* neighborhood, an area of social housing, which concentrates most of *Marvila's* municipal ground level spaces. The second one, the recently revitalized riverside, is where the new agriculture hub will be located, in a former garden.

To undertake this research activity, upon the identification of abandoned informal and vacant urban areas in *Marvila*, classified as urban voids, as well as the results of pilot projects, several methodological operations and tasks were developed. First, we launched a territorial diagnosis around the urban dynamics

of the populations, local economy, and cultural backgrounds. Second, we accessed, from the pilot project promoters, official reports detailing the main objectives and aims achieved during the project development. Third, we developed an in-depth ethnography, such as qualitative data collection over a period of 15 months, around the nature of the so-called urban voids present in *Marvila*, the reasons behind the non-formal use of municipal street-level spaces and the vacant land in this territory.

The ethnographic presence was a determining factor in contacting the residents and local associations *in situ*, initially with informal contacts, asking questions about the evaluation of these spaces, their contextual meaning, and possibilities. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents, those responsible for pilot projects, social assistance agencies, and local associations, as well as municipal officials involved in the process of participation and the future use of *Marvila's* so-called urban voids. All these interviews began with the general perceptions of the participants about the contemporary visibility of *Marvila* and concluded with their visions of the possible achievements of the H2020 ROCK pilot projects in social and spatial regeneration.

Our presence as urban researchers in *Marvila* initially started at open events (festivals, debates) promoted by different departments of the Lisbon council, in a social housing area, informally called 4 *Crescente* (*Marques de Abrantes, Alfinetes, Quinta do Chale and PRODAC* neighborhoods). Afterwards, to create a better understanding of the importance of these so-called urban voids, we started to participate as observers at neighborhood assemblies and the local communitarian group in *Marvila* library, an important gathering and participation space in the area, as well as in local association headquarters. In these participative arenas, the aims of the H2020 ROCK pilot projects and the reoccupation of urban voids were discussed, local aspirations for spatial change were expressed, and solutions were proposed by the local ecosystem of stakeholders and residents.

Urban Voids and Pilot Projects. An Urban Strategy towards a New Generation of Urban Regeneration

The classification of non-planned urban areas as urban voids, with no formal or permanent uses, outside public regulation or resulting from unexpected urban developments, is rather problematic. It creates the idea of total emptiness, when in fact there are various informal uses in existence that are not controlled by the landowner. This aspect of vacancy, of uselessness, of non-desirability, of being non-programmed, and therefore free to be reconverted and transformed, has been attributed by the formal landowners rather than the daily users of these spaces. For the municipal body, the space artificialization and programmed use of space

have a primacy towards non-centralized planned territories, so these so-called urban voids would inevitably be transformed. This process of government or property supremacy over dispossessed social actors results from the existence of an unequal social field of power, between landowners and the local users of these spaces. Although these spaces do not necessarily perform formal and municipality-controlled urban functions, they have several other informal uses, creating territories of social experimentation that lack a formal planning perspective. They are not completely empty, vacant, or without social interaction.

These so-called urban voids, as abandoned, vacant and informal urban spaces, and their future possibilities, are being endorsed by ground-level projects as drivers of social change, ecological and economic upgrades (Huang, Wu & Yan 2015, Lee, Hwang & Lee 2015, Heckert & Mennis 2012). They propose a change to traditional territorial achievements where, until now, programmed urban planning (by the state or municipal bodies) have been ineffective in creating sustainable, consolidated, and integrated urban spaces. With a multiplicity of stakeholders sharing responsibilities, these urban bodies try to respond to urban debilitation (declared by municipalities or pilot project promoters) with a strong focus on a micro scale of intervention and locally reduced outcomes: "This involves seeking new working methods, new coalitions, new plans and new organizational forms that must, in contrast to existing structures, be able to achieve breakthroughs" (Vanbuuren 2009: 377).

The pilot project methodology proposes new strategies to long-unsolved problems, prototyping initial steps towards future major processes of urban regeneration, master plans and urban policies, contributing to more sustainable and integrated cities. In these experimental projects, despite the skeptical attitude of some municipal officials towards non "technical and academic" (Vreugdenhil 2010:19) contributions; they must consider listening to accomplishments in urban living labs (Voytenko, McCormick, Evans & Schliwa 2016, Andre, Estevens & Leandro 2016), and other informal participatory processes, accepting the decisions made by citizens and local associations, adopting these decisions accordingly.

> Urban Living Labs are a method of action research that is based on the discussion and implementation of an innovation from the practicalities of daily life (…) this method allows for an intense and integrated engagement of actors who are often invisible and silent in the processes of discussion and deliberation. Thus, it is possible to move beyond a linear and top-down layout of diffusion of innovation, and to thus promote their democratization (…) Based on this idea, it is critical to emphasize the importance of this research method in the context of socio-cultural innovation in urban areas. (Andre, Estevens, & Leandro 2016: 44)

This attempt to prototype new territorial solutions for the reoccupation of urban voids (Murovec & Kavas 2018, Hughes, Yordi, & Besco 2018, Popering, Verkerk & Buuren 201, Vreugdenhil 2010, Arwin van Buuren & Derk Loorbach 2009, Buuren & Loorbach 2009, Schuiling 1996) can result from a single process, closed in time and area of influence, or can comprise a series of processes in several spaces. It was originally based on climate change themes and flood control in the Netherlands, but the themes and approaches have been changed to include other areas of intervention, namely abandoned, informal and vacant spaces, referred to as urban voids. We have observed in our research two main dominant dimensions of pilot project methodology: (i) the importance of the planning and local government intervention and its relationship with the local participative ecosystem of actors and organizations and (ii) the relations between the different scales of intervention, its outcomes on future sustainability and the innovation and knowledge levels achieved in these processes.

The first dimension acknowledges the importance of the local participative ecosystem of urban planning, social actors (public officials, academic bodies, private organizations, and local social actors) "mobilizing the relevant interested parties and arriving at a supported result" (Buuren & Loorbach 2009: 377). In most circumstances, such as the case of H2020 ROCK pilot projects, they are financed, supervised, or politically promoted by public partners, not only in terms of urban structure (officially responsible for urban planning), but also for the ownership of large areas of these decayed city areas. Perceived as preliminary tests and arenas of urban debate, to be successful and effective, they should motivate the participation by local stakeholders. Simultaneously, they should also strive to create a common awareness of the urban problem to be addressed, gather data to know more about the contextual urban framework, test alternative solutions and ensure the concentration of efforts to safeguard the best quality for the process. (Hughes, Yordi & Besco 2018, Karvonen & Huer 2013). Consequently, the power of the participants to interfere with problem-solving is decisive, the quality of personal backgrounds, and how much participants want to collaborate, adjust to each other, and interact, escaping from the "classical role of policy client and instead get down to work solving the observed problem directly themselves" (Buuren & Loorbach 2009: 78), promoting a sharing attitude, where common grounds are achieved, and mutual goals attained.

According to urban planning procedures, pilot project processes tend to be less bureaucratic, and hierarchies tend to be relativized towards consultative governance styles, stimulating knowledge sharing, seen by all partners as a collective process. This space for liberty of intervention is expressed by the political arena in which institutional bodies promote forms of innovation and by the openness of public officials towards new proposals of change (Popering, Verkerk & Buuren

2017). Based on different periods of "transitions arenas, innovation workshops and other innovation-driven systems" (Buuren & Loorbach 2009: 377), different political agreements are in place, creating a "complex and seemingly chaotic and incremental process" (Vreugdenhil 2010: 19).

The interconnections among different urban bodies can promote two kinds of urban accomplishment: hard or soft planning. The first one, hard planning resulting from hard knowledge, a top-down governance process, is easier to spread and is structured around a replication model that can promote the same results in every chosen urban environment, thereby promoting urban standardization. The second, connected to the pilot project methodology, is soft planning, resulting from soft knowledge and is strongly linked to a micro scale. The associated network of local associations, interest groups, and social actors controls the process and draws strength and energy towards social and spatial change of deprived urban areas. It promotes forms of openness to new inputs from the local scale and the interactions between creativity, innovation, and interaction between social and natural systems (Vreugdenhil 2010, Hughes, Yordi & Besco 2018). They are not isolated from major planning but somehow have different levels of independence, they constitute forms of "contextual dependency" (Vreugdenhil 2010: 25), based on physical and social constraints, creating forms of "context dependent knowledge" (Vreugdenhil 2010: 26).

The referred second dimension states that, to promote the sustainability of the proposed intervention, it is crucial to understand which kind of urban scale is promoted. Here, we discuss the possibilities of scaling up, expanding to other areas of the city or higher administrative levels, namely regional and national, using the knowledge created locally and applying it to higher governmental levels.

Therefore, the scale at which a pilot project will intervene is essential for understanding the goals and accomplishments in terms of local policy innovation, as well as considering its positive role towards other contexts in the future. From small scale to larger interventions, with room for experimentation and possible failure (Popering, Verkerk & Buuren 2017), the major contributions are learning, gaining experience, and dealing with the pilot project designated dysfunctions, promoting the sustainability of the project at the local level and the reproduction of its local positive impact to other urban contexts which are addressing the same kind of urban questions, sharing good accomplishments created locally.

Despite being an initial process, most of the dysfunctions proposed (by the municipality and local ecosystem of stakeholders) are not solved by these pilot projects, related to the micro-scale of intervention, being occasional and limited to specific cases. Here, all the effort made by the pilot project promoters to persuade local institutions and particularly local citizens to participate could be lost if the project were to be stopped by financial or other constraints. If the public planning

system does not consider all the work done or if its members do not continue to work together, the positive synergies created could be lost, with negative effects in the future, not only at the local level, but also in other urban contexts where similar interventions may be required.

Finally, when promoting new forms of policy advance, creating innovative knowledge about these contexts is crucial. This pilot project methodology calls for an innovative attitude from within the local community, using their own resources and creation of ground-field knowledge. The key stakeholders should be those experiencing the consequences of the urban questions which these pilot projects want to sort out, or at least mitigate: "participants from very diverse bases are challenged to come up with innovative results. In this type of arrangement, the isolation from the existing institutional structures gives parties the room to come up with innovative insights and proposals" (Buuren & Loorbach 2009: 378).

After discussing the theoretical framework around pilot project methodology, it is necessary to detail the results of these prototypes in *Marvila*, acknowledge their use, and establish whether these funded initiatives were successful, adequate, innovative, and brought significant social and spatial improvements to *Marvila*'s abandoned, informal and vacant spaces, referred to frequently by public officials, local associations and residents, as urban voids.

Eastern Lisbon Urban Void Regeneration and *Marvila* H2020 ROCK Pilot Projects

Traditionally, urban planning and its accomplishments in the renewal of abandoned, informal and vacant urban spaces in Lisbon and Portugal have been developed from a top-down perspective (Costa & Ferrao 2010). Its nature has been somewhat bureaucratic, conducted by a closed group of public officials, centralized in municipal boards, responsible for all territorial planning and spatial uses. But the European Union guidelines on urban planning and spatial change are totally different, promoting local stakeholders and resident engagement, with their vast knowledge base, rooted in these spaces and communities.

This orientation is expressed on the structural elements of diverse European funding programs. To receive these European funds, the municipality had to change its traditional planning paradigm, accepting participative forms of community engagement, the inputs from this ecosystem of local bodies, creating a shared strategy to address a more open governance style, proposed by major financiers. Consequently, several Lisbon city council departments, from urbanism to culture, from housing to social assistance, which receive European funding, are developing participatory processes towards urban change, funding several pilot projects in Lisbon areas considered as priority, prototyping new solutions,

addressing specific urban questions which the traditional planning systems have failed to solve.

With the aim of capturing extensive visitor and consumer interest, Lisbon's municipal agenda supported the processes of urban renewal of its eastern waterfront. In this sense, the H2020 ROCK project was convened to create a better knowledge of this area and test new solutions for the reappropriation of so-called urban voids. The pilot project methodology was seen as the best option to achieve ground level changes, testing non-traditional planning solutions.

As the entity responsible for all planning processes of the City of Lisbon, the municipality is required to decide to what extent these processes must be implemented. In the case of the municipality ground floor spaces, it is important to discuss how many of these public assets will be reconfigured for cultural uses, and whether these uses will be limited to a circumscribed local area or be extended to include other urban spaces. Also, in the case of the creation of the agriculture hub, it is essential to discuss the extension of the intervention, if in fact it will only be promoted on the riverside, or if will indeed extend towards other vacant areas in *Marvila* and Lisbon.

Before the H2020 ROCK intervention in *Marvila,* these abandoned, vacant or informal areas, referred to as urban voids, had some non-planned usage. Some informal allotment gardens had been created, despite the existence of a municipality-controlled gardening area. A local graffiti crew created their own "wall of fame" as the backstage to a formal and municipally promoted Graffiti gallery, under the 2017 *Muro* festival. Residents gather snails to supplement their income. Roma populations use the space for community gatherings, an old local shepherd uses these non-programmed areas to feed his herd and some residents use it to walk their dogs.

To change and complement these territorial uses, the Cultural Heritage Department of the Lisbon Municipality, as promoter of the H2020 ROCK project consortium in Lisbon, financed and endorsed two pilot projects. First, the reoccupation of empty municipal ground floor spaces for cultural and community purposes. Second, the re-purposing of a municipal property on the riverside to promote an agriculture hub, after the failure to develop it next to the first pilot project, located in the urban interstices of *Alfinetes* neighborhood and the *Cintura* train line.

Figure 1: Urban voids, informal allotment gardens and new housing in *Marvila*.
Source: Author

Res do Chao and "Loja com Vida" pilot project. Creation of a cultural pole based on ground-level municipal space regeneration

The informally named *4 Crescente* area, where the *Marvila Alfinetes* neighborhood was created, is predominantly composed of several social housing buildings. At the ground-level of these buildings, at street level, the existing spaces were not created as residential spaces, but rather with other urban uses in mind. The Lisbon Municipality, which is legally responsible for the whole social housing neighborhood, decided to promote these ground-level spaces for commercial and social assistance purposes. There is a standard and bureaucratic procedure for their use, but for many reasons these spaces have been unoccupied. Some of them were occupied by squatters, namely youngsters consuming and selling drugs. The non-authorized use of these spaces, as well as the effect on the surrounding public spaces, has promoted a sense of insecurity among the residents, who consequently avoid the areas. As a result of this informal occupancy several residents expressed, in communitarian assemblies and informal meetings, a feeling of insecurity around these areas, addressing a problem to be solved by municipal powers and analyzed by urban researchers. The creation of local awareness around this urban void and the expressed desire from municipal officials for its transformation, were crucial factors for our interest in this process, constituting a culture-led regeneration process (Evans 2005).

Many of these municipal ground floor spaces are located around *Marvila* library, which was established in November 2016. This municipal structure, designed for the territory after the closure of the *Chines* shantytown in the early

2000s, reoccupied an old farm, the *Fontes* (Fountain) Farm. This was one of the first milestones in the creation of a new cultural center in eastern Lisbon. The library was created as a new gathering and participation space for a socially, economic, and culturally deprived community which had little access to cultural amusement, and aimed to strengthen local sociability, with a particular strategy towards children, youngsters and elders.

According to the pilot project promoter, the *Res do Chao* Association, since December 2018, of the 71 existing spaces, approximately a third of these were empty, managed by the Housing and Local Development Department of the Lisbon Council. Their monthly rents are clearly below market values in Lisbon, resulting from its location near a Social Housing neighborhood, as well as its physical condition, resulting from illegal occupations. The Social Housing nature of the area constituted a stigma for commercial entrepreneurs at first, who avoided these spaces. But, surprisingly, not far away from the Social Housing area, on the riverside, there are spaces which have become the focus of increasing real estate interest. So, we believe that we are experiencing a process of early-stage gentrification (Pratt 2018), which will inevitably reach these spaces in the future. Despite this, even with reduced costs, most of the formally occupied spaces today are being used as administrative spaces for local cultural and social assistance organizations, with little relevance in the area, and without the capacity to integrate local populations into their activities.

As expressed by the municipality responsible for Housing and Local Development in a public meeting in the *Marvila* library in February 2020, the Lisbon Council, after the completion of the library in 2017 decided, without the input or participation of any residents or local associations, to use these empty spaces for cultural and artistic purposes. This decision made clear the desire of the municipality to promote the activity of new social actors and institutions related to cultural and artistic promotion in *Marvila*, where their performances, resulting or not from local engagement with residents, would promote the creation of a new urban centrality in the city of Lisbon, a new visiting spot for visitors and other urban users – preferably those with higher social, cultural, and economic profiles.

To accelerate the reappropriation of these spaces, despite having had poor results in the last three years, these assets are today under the responsibility of the Cultural Heritage Department of the Lisbon Council, the same department responsible for all H2020 ROCK project ground-level achievements. As researchers in the H2020 ROCK area, we have had to analyze this pilot project as a prototype of future intervention to be developed in this territory and community and try to make sense of the municipal intention to diversify local urban functions, until now strongly related to social housing. Culture will be used as a key factor in rehabilitating this, until recently, socially poor neighborhood.

To start this process, the Lisbon Municipality have chosen the *Res do Chao* (Ground Floor) Association to promote the concept of a *Pop-Up* store, and secondly to be used as headquarters of their activity (reoccupation of vacant spaces and public spaces) and, in the future, to encourage the occupation of the remaining municipal spaces around the *Marvila* library. Its connection to the H2020 ROCK project started in May 2018, with a major achievement under the initiative "*Dias de Marvila*" (Marvila Days) in October 2018, when their *Pop-Up* store was opened.

Figure 2: *Res do Chao "Loja com Vida"* Pop-up store. Source: Author (2018)

The results of a consultation process conducted under "*Dias de Marvila,*" with existing and potential users of these spaces, revealed interesting conclusions that were expressed in formal reports. As an area with no consolidated academic analysis, with no literature around the use of these municipal spaces in Social Housing contexts, we had to examine the results from this prototype, with the H2020 ROCK project internal reports, by using data gathering during local assemblies and public meetings, as well as from several other sources (semi-structured interviews, formal and informal meetings). The results of this data research provided both positive and more pessimistic evaluations.

The *Res do Chao* manager informed us that the main advantages of this pilot project would be the reduced monthly financial costs for these spaces, the social and economic nature of the territory that would attract new participation-oriented associations and groups for the area (diversifying the ecosystem of stakeholders, and increasing resident engagement), as well as the existence of local institutional networks around poverty or cultural promotion. The surrounding area is easily accessible by car from the rest of the city, has many empty spaces and some of

them very large, integrated in a location with contemporary cultural visibility (Graham 2019), which has attracted cultural agents to the area.

In contrast, the main challenges arose from the slow response rate with regard to local bureaucracy, the high level of construction work needed in these spaces (which must be supported by the candidates), a negative view of the social housing area as dangerous and the lack of information surrounding these spaces. Simultaneously, despite some positive initial steps towards community engagement, and the opening of the community-oriented store, the subsequent processes did not benefit directly from the participation of *Res do Chao*. Somehow, an important element of the work done so far, namely the participation of local stakeholders and their direct intervention, has been lost. As has occurred in other urban contexts, the municipality asked these organizations to start the initial process, and then their official departments would take over and complete any major developments. The Lisbon Municipality contacted several associations to occupy the area (*Capoeira Beija Flor*, *Teatro do Vestido*, *Eira*, *Ibisco,* the *Marvila* Library and Bapa Dreams), without the participation of the *Res do Chao* Association, local associations, or the residents.

As a result, there was a resounding adverse response from the local community, expressed in the local community group, *4 Crescente*. The residents were uncomfortable with the lack of participation in the occupation of the renovated spaces, standing up against the appearance of more cultural organizations: "We don't want more culture!" an angry resident exclaimed. The residents and local associations argued, instead, for the opportunity to use these spaces for small businesses developed by the residents, promoting the economic development of the local community. A similar response was given by some residents during the last municipal open meeting held in the *Marvila* library, the local city assembly, with the presence of several elected Municipal Councilors and even the local Mayor. The politicians responsible have replied that a new participative process would occur with residents and local associations involved.

Today, under the COVID-19 pandemic, this pop-up space has been used as a support for the residents, namely for food distribution and support of school activities for youngsters, a new use proposed by the local community group, *4 Crescente*. Three years after the beginning of this H2020 ROCK pilot project, a first of the initial objectives was achieved, that is, a participative and collaborative process, reoccupying a former urban void. During this time, we witnessed several changes in the municipal strategy, however, there is still an absence of clear results from the regeneration of all ground-level municipal spaces.

Muita Fruta / Warehouse Collective and *"Jardim para Todos"* pilot project towards an agricultural hub creation

In the H2020 ROCK area, we have observed, from the outset of the pilot project, the awareness of some public officials, local associations, and residents regarding the reoccupation of the interstitial vacant spaces (Borghi, Falanga, Olori & Pusseti 2018; Gennari 2018, Baptista & Melaneo 2018) in *Marvila*. As a socio-spatial achievement in the H2020 ROCK area, a prototype intervention in green space creation, as well as a pilot project financed by the H2020 ROCK Consortium, we had to follow its ground-level achievements, evaluating its effects in the regeneration of that area. In the case of this agriculture hub, there was a failure in the implementation of the former planned use of most of the interstitial spaces in *Marvila*, so it was important to diversify these spatial uses. An innovative approach was necessary for the reconfiguration of these so-called urban voids because the current standard planning results have clearly been inadequate in preventing territorial fragmentation.

The answer to this failure was to develop a green space regeneration process for vacant areas. Strongly integrated in the Lisbon 2020 Green Capital award agenda, the second pilot project promotes the use of vacant land for urban agriculture. This green answer is now part of the new urban agenda of the Lisbon Municipality for its waterfronts, which have been renovated to create attractive gathering and leisure areas along the banks of the Tagus River.

The pilot project was started by *Muita Fruta* (literally translated from Portuguese as "a lot of fruit"), a ground-level association, which started its work in central historical Lisbon around the reuse of fruit trees present in public spaces and personal gardens. Their ground-level achievements materialized in the form of vegetable products (jams, juices) and communitarian restaurants resulting from engagement with the local community, creating job opportunities in these areas. This association was contacted by the H2020 ROCK municipality coordinator to create an "edible garden" in the area, as expressed in a semi-structured interview. This proposal was accepted by the municipality, and *Muita Fruta* invited the *Warehouse Collective*, an urban regeneration association, composed of architects and urban technicians to join the project, "first as a consultant and thereafter as a promoter of a prototype" (interview with *Warehouse Collective* representative).

The activities proposed, as stated in official reports, were divided into three different steps, but only the first step has been started. Like the *Res do Chao* case, most of the activities already developed were established during the "*Dias de Marvila*" festival. In this community event *Muita Fruta* and *Collective Warehouse* started their so-called "*Semear*" (to seed) initiative, developing a consultation

process with the residents, local organizations, and urban farmers, as well as a mapping process of all informal allotment gardens existing in the area.

Initially, like the *Res do Chao* pilot project, this agriculture hub should have been implemented around the Social Housing area of the H2020 ROCK project, where several vacant areas remain because of the failure to create more public funded housing (Worm, & Costa 1996). Simultaneously, these empty spaces were devoted to the creation of two large urban structures nearby, a high-speed train line and a new Tagus River bridge, which were highlighted in the Lisbon Master Plan, discouraging even the temporary use of these designated areas. This programmed use of the territories has created major bureaucratic difficulties for the development of the pilot project.

Muita Fruta and *Warehouse Collective* never had a legal permit to install their training agriculture container on municipal land, a move that would have been a major milestone for the project. This pilot project did not receive formal acceptance from the municipal urban department that was responsible for that area. It is particularly interesting to note that a municipal board (Urban Department) has the power to deny the use of the space, even temporarily, when the project is promoted by another municipal department (Cultural Heritage), from the same city council. Despite being an activity agreed among all H2020 ROCK European partners and with a specific budget, which stated the use of these spaces, the internal contradictions among different municipal bodies and their bureaucracy have led to the complete cessation of the project, until recently. The creation of the agriculture hub and restaurant (with the products from a small allotment garden) had to be relocated, in this case to the riverside, inside a municipal property.

Figure 3: Former area in Social Housing and new area near
the riverside to introduce the Agriculture Hub container.
Source: Caption made by the author on open access Google Earth (2020)

In semi-structured interviews, both associations showed frustration because although the work has now started with some residents, some of whom are already urban farmers, the local administrative and bureaucratic systems have not complied with contextual developments and have not acknowledged the ambition of residents and local associations, to create fast, tangible, and final decisions regarding their vacant spaces. For the residents this was not a time to prepare, to debate, or to acknowledge urban dysfunctionalities, but a time to intervene with residents' ideas. Despite accepting the initial nature of pilot projects as a starting point, both responsible parties declared that to obtain better field intervention, it was necessary to ensure sustainability, simplifying the processes of spatial transformation of these urban void areas.

Since this discussion, both associations have struggled with the installation of the incubator where future activities would be developed, and the project was put on hold, until recently. In the last few months, the municipality decided to move the implantation spot of the pilot project's incubator to the riverside. Here, because of deindustrialization, there is a lack of residents to promote the necessary participative process. All the participative work and local community engagement garnered so far, has been lost, because this area is located away from the social housing area, discouraging the contribution from local urban farmers living there.

Currently there have been no further participative, or participation processes and the municipality will continue the activity with both associations *Muita Fruta* and *Collective Warehouse*, which have accepted this change. This obstacle has revealed an interesting picture of Lisbon urban governance. The major municipality in Portugal has different departments, occasionally not working in cooperation, obstructing the use of European funds and the effectiveness of collective decisions made by the project's consortium, showing how closed, standardized, and bureaucratic the planning system is in Lisbon.

Conclusions: H2020 ROCK pilot project achievements in *Marvila*'s urban void regeneration

This paper detailed the urban nature of the H2020 ROCK pilot projects, as an innovative approach to solving long-term municipality declared dysfunctions in urban spaces designated as urban voids. We discussed the relevance of planning and local government intervention towards a participative ecosystem of actors and organizations, as well as the importance of the scale of intervention and the future sustainability of this prototype mediation, discussing the innovation and knowledge levels achieved in these processes. In fact, we aimed to discuss the effectiveness of this European funding and the role of public administration in contemporary urban change in Lisbon.

The H2020 ROCK pilot projects had an unprecedented effect, not common in Lisbon's recent urban changes in these deprived urban spaces, promoting cultural uses for abandoned, informal and vacant spaces referred to as urban voids. The pilot projects have suggested new means of spatially changing the area, for its residents and other city users, creating forms of community engagement, useful knowledge for future local interventions and its dissemination towards other abandoned, informal, and vacant spaces referred to as urban void in Lisbon.

In H2020 ROCK pilot projects, the living labs methodology of intervention, such as participatory and governance procedures, was chosen despite the poor results, particularly in the *Muita Fruta / Warehouse Collective* case. Regardless of a putative attitude of listening to local stakeholders about the designated dysfunctionalities in *Marvila*, the intervention was somehow already closed. As a result of some skepticism from municipal boards in the outcome of a real participative process, and a bureaucratic vision and tradition of processes of urban change, the local stakeholders and residents received an already defined and closed approach to *Marvila* urban regeneration, with little room for experimentation or to propose alternative strategies to urban change.

As stated by a municipal technician in an official meeting, the objective of these pilot projects was to start to engage with the communities, identify the local leaders and organizations, and obtain their support for the intervention proposed by the municipality. As soon as this job was complete, the municipality would intervene and promote, if accepted by the officials, the methodologies and strategies discussed with the stakeholders and residents. Despite some opening up in the last year due to COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought a sense of uncertainty towards future urban change in *Marvila*; in global terms, the municipality denied the exploratory nature of the living labs methodology. It tried to develop a participative strategy, formally agreed by all partners, but their results did not achieve the expected process of culture-led regeneration of the whole area. In fact, despite a consultative attitude, which has promoted the free expression of local stakeholders and residents, there was a failure to take into consideration their alternative proposals for urban regeneration.

Clearly, the proposed bottom-up governance style has failed. The planned sharing attitude with local stakeholders, asking them for possible solutions to develop in this area and within these communities, thereby enriching the inputs for the benefit of the intervention, has not been completely achieved. It is important to acknowledge the different powers of intervention and influence that are in place, as well as the Portuguese and Lisbon traditional urban planning which is strongly bureaucratic, and which has managed to contradict the expected results of these pilot projects.

Despite referring to controversies surrounding the participative process, the

H2020 ROCK project pilot projects have promoted a new vision of the so-called urban voids. The common municipal procedure has been to simply sell these areas to private investors or to install heavy urban structures, such as bridges, roads, power stations, or train lines. Despite some acceptance of the local stakeholders' ideas on the part of the municipality, the results were somewhat disappointing. For *Res do Chão* project, it was the need for COVID-19 support to local communities that ensured the present use of the ground-level spaces. The *Muita Fruta / Warehouse Collective* project was not able to leverage the synergies created or take advantage of the involvement of the residents and other local associations. Whilst the chosen pilot projects organizations wanting to increase the scale of intervention towards larger areas, with more resident participation and a longer timescale for the projects, the municipal financiers just wanted an opportunity to obtain community support for the projects; and in the end, municipal teams would finish the process. After this initial test from prototype pilot projects, the municipality would use their own technicians and a larger proportion of funds to promote a more in-depth intervention in the area. It was not a completely top-down project, but there was difficulty surrounding the project's autonomy and more importantly, its sustainability as a process participated by local organizations and interested residents.

After discussing the nature of these pilot projects and their need for contemporary planning results in *Marvila*, we need to question whether they constitute, in fact, a new achievement in urban regeneration, namely of its municipal ground floor spaces and vacant plots. Despite having some room for experimentation and knowledge gathering, we argue that the results were not positive, revealed by the disappointment expressed by the organizations involved. To have a better process of urban sustainability and citizen participation, a more constant intervention was necessary, including the participation of all the local stakeholders that started the process.

In conclusion, the future use of these abandoned, informal, and vacant spaces referred to as urban voids in *Marvila* will be closely connected with the cultural and green agendas of the Lisbon municipality, which will inevitably transform the territory and its users, creating an urban continuum along the Lisbon waterfront. This will result in a vast increase in real estate prices, not necessarily in these spaces, but in others geographically close to this one, strongly affected by vacancy, which will also be transformed. The *Marvila* process of urban void regeneration using pilot projects is particularly important in a discussion of urban change in Portugal. Especially in the contemporary situation affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with its associated economic crisis and its effects on socially deprived communities. It is decisive that future processes of spatial transformation are oriented towards the needs and aspirations of local communities and their local

associations, promoting their participation. Local Associations and residents have extensive knowledge of the contextual backgrounds and can provide long term answers for local failures. It is important that these pilot projects, despite their initial and preliminary nature, have in depth developments, ensuring major interventions, and not merely operating as a simple listening process without major achievements in the future. Despite the difficulties expressed in this paper around the future sustainability of these proposed interventions, the major achievements of these projects were the creation of an awareness around the need for urban regeneration in *Marvila,* as well as the establishment of a network of actors, and the experimentation of new and innovative soft planning strategies, all of which will prove to be useful for future interventions, not only in *Marvila,* but in other spaces experiencing the same kind of abandonment, informality and vacancy.

Author

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