

Artistic Urban Interventions, Informality and Public Sphere:  
Research Insights from Ephemeral Urban Appropriations on  
a Cultural District

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# Artistic Urban Interventions, Informality and Public Sphere: Research Insights from Ephemeral Urban Appropriations on a Cultural District<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Artistic intervention in cultural districts can be an outstanding viewpoint to understand the multiple layers of uses and segregations that bring everyday life vitality to the complex organisms cities are. Urban informality contexts can be fundamental for the expression of this diversity and to liminality strategies, particularly interesting in the case of artistic intervention, as artistic creativity is often about transgression, differentiation, and, therefore, conflict. Small initiatives that develop in an informal and ephemeral way by artists who choose the city as stage for their work, exploring the ambiguous and flexible boundaries between public and private spaces are particular interesting, evidencing the usual conflicts verified on creative milieus but being also important to keep these places as vernacular as possible and to avoid gentrification processes.

In this perspective, this paper aims to discuss this relation between urban interventions, informality and public sphere appropriation, analyzing the way informal artistic dynamics can contribute to urban re-vitalization and to the enhancement of real creative milieus. Drawing on a research-action based methodology the authors explore the results and impacts of three experiences of urban intervention that they developed in three consecutive years in informal urban contexts in Bairro Alto, the main cultural quarter of Lisbon, Portugal. These ephemeral artistic interventions introduced in the city new spaces of public use, performing different public and private spaces, and bringing them to the public sphere, creating also “new” zones that re-gain a utility in the city, contributing to the vitality and symbolic centrality of this area.

**KEYWORDS:** Creative Milieus; Conflict; Informality; Cultural Quarters; Public Sphere; Artistic Urban Interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws upon two previous versions, which were presented at several international conferences: “Artistic intervention in public sphere, conflict and urban informality: an international comparative approach to informal dynamics in cultural districts”, Paper presented at the International RC21 Conference 2013, Resourceful Cities, Berlin (Germany), 29-31 August 2013; and “Artistic Urban Interventions, Informality and Public Sphere: Research Insights from Ephemeral Urban Appropriations on a Cultural District”, paper presented at XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology “Facing an Unequal World: Challenges for Global Sociology”, Pacifico Yokohama, Yokohama, Japan, 13<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> July 2014 and at European Sociological Association Research Network 37 “Urban Sociology” Mid-Term Conference “Public spaces and private lives in the contemporary city”, Lisbon, FCSH-UNL, 19-21st November 2014. The authors acknowledge all the comments and suggestions made by the reviewers and participants on those sessions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural quarters have been widely studied in recent years as they embody broader structural transformations associated with urban change, but also as they are privileged arenas for tension and conflict, manifested both in spatial terms and in people's lived experiences. The wide variety of gentrified residential city enclaves, ghettos, gay villages, ethnic quarters, red light districts and creative quarters can be seen as a commonplace feature of contemporary urban landscape, which often brings vitality and vibrancy for many ancient or abandoned areas of cities, but also as an arena for frequent conflicts between residents and users, gentrifiers and traditional residents, new activities and traditional activities, night users and day users, and so on (Costa, 2007; Costa, 2008; Costa e Lopes, 2013). Public space is often the privileged sphere for these tensions and conflicts, with the expression of multiple power relations at the levels of the physical space, the experiences it provides and the symbolic field. In parallel, these are also frequently liminal spaces, marked by transgression and social and individual expression of the self.

Artistic intervention is in this context a particularly interesting way of looking at these neighborhoods and to understand the multiple layers of uses and segregations that bring vitality in everyday life to these parts of the complex organisms that cities are. Urban informality contexts can be fundamental for the expression of this diversity and to liminality strategies, particularly interesting in the case of artistic intervention, as artistic creativity is often about transgression, differentiation, and, therefore, conflict.

In contemporary cultural and social panorama, this reflection leads us to be interested in small initiatives that develop in an informal and ephemeral way by artists who choose the city as stage for their work. Artists whose interventions explore the boundaries between public and private spaces, suggesting a public sphere actuation; this micro scale of actuation brings the usual use conflicts verified on creative milieus but can also be important to keep these places as vernacular as possible and to avoid gentrification processes.

In this perspective, this paper aims to discuss this relation between urban interventions, informality and public sphere appropriation, analyzing the way informal artistic dynamics can contribute to urban re-vitalization and to the enhancement of real creative milieus. Drawing on a research-action based methodology the authors explore the results and impacts of three experiences of urban intervention that they developed in three consecutive years in informal urban contexts in Bairro Alto, the main cultural quarter of Lisbon, Portugal. These ephemeral artistic interventions introduced in the city new spaces of public use, performing different public and private spaces, and bringing them to the public sphere, creating also "new" zones that re-gain a utility in the city, contributing to the vitality and symbolic centrality of this area.

With this analysis, we aim to provide better understanding on the relation between artistic intervention in public sphere, conflict and urban informality, in order to assist a new planning agenda for dealing with urban creative dynamics and cultural quarters.

After this introduction, next section will offer the main framework for the analysis pursued, relating the creative milieus development with conflict and with their morphological, symbolic and informality conditions. In section 3, a brief overview of main relevant issues on artistic Intervention in the public sphere is made. This leads to a brief analysis of the three artistic interventions held by the authors, on section 4, which sums up their purposes, results and impacts. Finally, a concluding note provides some perspectives towards policy orientations for dealing with urban creative dynamics and cultural quarters.

## **2. CULTURAL QUARTERS AND THE “CREATIVE MILIEU”: CONFLICT AND INFORMAL DYNAMICS AS DRIVERS FOR ARTISTIC VITALITY**

In recent years multiple territories have stood out as ‘creative milieus’ as they offer a specific atmosphere or certain conditions required to embed and develop sustainable creative processes in cultural activities (see Camagni et al. 2004; Cooke and Lazzeretti 2007; Costa 2007; Costa et al, 2011; or in a wider perspective, O’Connor and Wynne 1996; Scott 2000). This label usually congregates very diverse situations, which are generally based on specific governance mechanisms that play a key part in most of those success cases. Our study in this paper refers to a specific kind of these “creative milieus”, the “cultural districts” or “cultural quarters” (cf. Costa, 2008).

These cultural quarters, in their diversity, have been broadly studied as they embody wider structural transformations associated with urban change (Bell and Jayne, 2004; Cooke and Lazzeretti, 2008; Porter and Shaw, 2009). It is not our aim to describe or discuss here their huge diversity, concerning both their origins and their main characteristics (more central or peripheral, more or less gentrified, more inclusive or segmented, more diverse or coherent, etc. – see Bell and Jayne, 2004 on this). In effect, the diversity and complexity of these territorial systems is often recognized as the ground to their resilience, and to the capacity to develop specific governance mechanisms and symbolic attributes which enable their long term vitality.

Acknowledging the importance of “classic” factors (such as dimension, density and diversity of social practices – many times translated in expressions such as agglomeration, scale, interaction, networking, tolerance or other) to this, but also the crucial role of the symbolic sphere potentiated in cultural activities (cf. Costa et al, 2011), our aim in this paper is just to discuss how the characteristics and the informal dynamics verified in these places contribute to their vitality, through artistic intervention, relating those to their specific morphological and spatial conditions.

In effect, the diversity and density of activities and the urban design and morphological conditions clearly influence these areas' creative dynamics – as suggested by Hospers (2003), Gehl (2004) or Balula (2010), and verified by Costa e Lopes (2012) in some of these quarters. Urban material conditions, as the way they are appropriated and perceived by people, are naturally a key factor in the vitality and in the long term conditions for the sustainability of these spaces. Besides, the common diversity of rhythms and daily habits of its users, make us aware of their multiple layers of uses and symbolic codification.

As Costa and Lopes refer, in these spaces the symbolical sphere plays an important role and is fundamental to understand both their vitality and their fragmentation (Costa and Lopes, 2012), particularly if they are central nodes in the conviviality and sociability mechanisms that are vital for reputation building and gatekeeping mechanisms on cultural activities (Costa, 2012). People who come to these spaces identify and many times deliberately look for a created image (of the place, of themselves, of their groups, of what they want to be), that is, for the symbolic meaning of that place. These are particular places for representation, for the assumption of specific lifestyles and ways of life (cf O'Connor and Wynne, 1996) and therefore, the concept of urban theatricality is sharp in these territories. Consequently, along with liminality processes, we can watch a natural segregation of practices and people in the different spaces (or even in the same places, each with several codified layers of representations, differently de-codified by their different audiences and users). Often, this process is based on auto-segregation, but sometimes naturally it involves also conflict between the diverse potential users and power relations that take place within that system or in the framework of its external regulation (Costa and Lopes, 2015).

In effect, the different interests and motivations of the diverse agents in these territorial systems are naturally often contradictory. The main use conflicts among them are one of the critical aspects for the development and long term consistency of these creative milieus. As expressed before (e.g. Costa, 2008, Costa and Lopes, 2015), the conflicts of uses verified in each of these particular spaces (e.g., between users and residents, night users and day users, traditional residents and newcomers, traditional cultural and new activities), are a unceasing dimension of its life (and even one essential dimension to certain kinds of creative activity, by its intrinsic liminal and alternative nature). This conflict manifests in different arenas (real estate market, public space appropriation, symbolic sphere, ...) and is perceived diversely by the users and the multiple art world's agents involved (e.g. the case of graffiti or urban intervention). These conflicts are felt particularly in two fields. On one hand, through gentrification, and the different power relations in appropriation of public and private space; on the other hand in numerous conflicts between the diverse individual or group interests, expressed in externalities (such as congestion of parking or traffic infrastructures, noise, urban cleanliness issues, etc.). However, despite all their problems and consequences, some of these conflicts may have an important role in the sustainability of these systems as creative areas, as they can inhibit

or postpone gentrification processes (e.g. most of these externalities are key factors in avoiding conventional gentrification processes in a case like Bairro Alto area, Lisbon, having a key role in the selective – more creative and specific lifestyles oriented – gentrification process verified – Costa and Lopes, 2012, Costa 2013a).

This latent conflict nature in these areas can be creatively explored, being artistic activities themselves intrinsically the expression of innumerable conflicts, and that is naturally enhanced by the informality and the potential for public sphere appropriation verified in these districts, where the possibility for interventions and artistic appropriations in the public sphere is more flexible. The informality and liminality that mark these territories is vital for its sustainability as part of their daily dynamics and contributing to a strong local identity (Costa and Lopes, 2012). In effect, on a scenery in which the boundaries between public and private sphere constantly blur, and where the ephemeral gains its space, new creative possibilities emerge. Mostly, in a more open, tolerant and un-institutionalized framework, new fields for developing and explore new sorts of creative processes and informal-based dynamics materialize. So we assist all over the world to all sort of processes of this nature, though with diverse patterns: artistic appropriation of public sphere (e.g. graffiti and street art, but also the aperture of private space to public and contamination strategies, through performing or visual arts, for instance), informal appropriation by users (including sociability and reputation building mechanisms and gatekeeping processes), performativity in public space, many times associated to liminality processes or to expression of identities or of the self (e.g. multicultural or gender expression). After all, this is particularly remarkable also because informal and ephemeral appropriation of public spaces in the city can have enough interest in a historical era that embraces time delays caused by economic interests (such as property speculation) or bureaucratic processes (such as licensing procedures) that can often lead to cities' death. These informality-based behaviors are certainly a way to maintain (even if temporarily or ephemerally in some cases) the creative vitality and the liveliness of those spaces.

The “creative milieu” concept, in line with the GREMI approach (Camagni et al, 2004), helps us as a theoretical backbone for analyzing this variety of situations. Each one can be seen as a combination of three intertwined layers: a locally embedded production-consumption system, rooted in the territorial characteristics; a governance system, mixing the formal and informal endogenous and exogenous-based regulatory mechanisms in a specific way; and a symbolic system, involving both the external image(s) and the self-representations of the area. This triple perspective is fundamental to understand the specific conditions and ambiances that seem to be determinant to embed sustainable creative processes in these areas, as well as to relate them to urban socioeconomic and morphological dimensions.

Having this broad framework in mind, our specific aim in this text is to understand how informal dynamics can be seen as drivers for artistic vitality, in a diversity of “creative quarters”

situations. Re-thinking city through micro-scale systems of action, instead of just large projects and flagship interventions is essential for planning the city attending to urban creativity and to real creative dynamics. Understanding everyday life and the role of more informal and ephemeral initiatives for cities' planning is fundamental, requiring (re)focusing our attention to this specific issue and the use of new methodologies.

### **3. ARTISTIC INTERVENTION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: FROM THE SACRED ART FORTRESSES TO THE WORK WITH URBAN MATTER**

The cities are changing every day, people are connected in a network that is driven by different rhythms and habits; It generates different layers of codifications and uses, not always pacific between all the users. However, it is this diversity and the critical masses associated (dimension, density and heterogeneity arguments) that make the cities being so appellative organisms to a constant change of experiences, ideas, opinions and knowledge. The spaces of the public sphere are the stages where people meet each other and where the artistic interventions have been developed in the different layers of the city.

The places of the public sphere are composed by private and public spaces. In this paper, and following the ideas developed in Costa and Lopes (2012), we propose to look for the public sphere as a “space” that could be “appropriated”, breaking the “traditional” boundaries between both concepts, in an era that many of the happenings that used to be developed in public spaces are being developed in private ones. Throughout the years cities are being transformed, it is a natural process. More than to reference a concrete physical space, it is to assume that any space can become a local belonging to the public sphere, whether it is the room of our house or the old neighborhood grocery store, according to the use that is developed in it for a period of time. A good project to illustrate this situation was developed in Berlin, in summer of 1992, entitled *Berlin 37 Räume* (Berlim 37 Rooms). The exhibition took place during a week in the quarter of Mitte, inviting 31 curators, international artists - as the musician John Cage<sup>2</sup> - and local artists, to develop site-specific interventions in 37 rooms of unoccupied buildings in the city. The exhibition extrapolated the “traditional” concept of art gallery, transforming the inside areas of the houses, traditionally private spaces, into spaces belonging to the public sphere for everyone who wanted to visit the exhibition. In some of the rooms where the project was developed and led by the curator Klaus Biesenbach<sup>3</sup> remain today art galleries. In this way, they

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<sup>2</sup> John Cage was one of the most important artists of the 20th century. He was a pioneer in the way that had introduced sounds of everyday life in his compositions as well as in the production of musical instruments made with objects of the quotidian.

<sup>3</sup> Klaus Biesenbach is a German curator being actually director of MoMA PS1, in Queens, NY and chief Curator at The Museum of Modern Art, in New York City.



have entered again in the dynamics of Berlin and contributed to the revitalization of the buildings, as well as of the adjacent areas of the city.

In recent years, increasingly cities all over the world have welcomed ephemeral artistic initiatives that choose to leave the conventional exhibition spaces to have the city and other public as “background”. The concept of ephemeral artistic intervention and appropriation are understood, in this paper, as referring to a bunch of activities that happen in “unconventional spaces” of exhibition and production. With this, we do not intend to disregard the quality of initiatives that happen in the “traditional spaces” of exhibition or production. However, these interventions present a fix dynamic, in a concrete physical space and for a specific type of audience, often not adding new dynamics to the city. Thus, it is important to explore the initiatives that for its ephemerality and informality do not occupy the city in a fixed away, whether it is for artistic interests or economic constraints.

Although have always existed art in the public space, the relation between the city, the public and the artists changed in the late fifties of the 20th century, when the artistic vanguards starts to look at the spaces and objects of quotidian as sources of inspiration and as interesting places for new multidisciplinary artistic practices. These ideals brought to the artistic exhibition and production to more informal spaces, approaching the city and its dynamics of artistic practices (Lopes, 2012). That is what we can see in the description of *happening*, one of the new artistic manifestations, developed by Kaprow, the first artist to implement this kind of happenings in 1959. Kaprow defined happening as “an assemblage of events performed or perceived in more than one time and place. Its material environment may be constructed, taken over directly from what is available or altered slightly; just as its activities may be invented or commonplace. A happening unlike a stage play, may occur at supermarket, driving along highway, under a pile of rags, and in a friend’s kitchen, either at once or sequentially. If sequentially, time may extend to more than a year. The happening is performed according to plan but without rehearsal, audience, or repetition. Its art but seems closer to life”. (Kaprow, cited in Arnason, 1985, pp. 613). Thus, the places of exhibition are not merely to exhibit art and have become places of contemplation. Using ephemeral installations, the artists create modifications in the built space, proposing a different experience to spectator by that time. These changes cause alterations in the devices of work and exhibition: they stop thinking in an object to be exposed in a place and it is the exhibition space that becomes the art object itself.

Being pioneer in the development of these ideas “(...), the Minimal Art rejects the metaphysics of the art and thus changed the role of the observer, which is no longer required, an act of silence contemplation, to reflect on the unchanging significance of the work of art hung or place in front, to pass to reflect on the process of their perception, loading it of meaning” (Marzona, 2004, pp.11), the viewer is not more just an observer, he has an active role in artistic experience. These ideals initially emerged in institutional spaces, with the artist Robert Morris and the *Minimal Art*, but quickly become produced in unconventional spaces, through groups as the *Fluxus*. Several factors

have led to these changes in art, however we could refer that one of the aspects that more contributed to these movements was the background that the artists have been acquiring in multidisciplinary artistic experiences that started to be common in these vanguards. As it is referred in the work of Morris, through his experience as dancer and artist performance, “(...) the perception [of a work of art] was connected to the body and not limited to the sense of sight (...)” (Marzona, 2004, pp.23). Through the happenings, performances, installations and *Land Art* interventions, art get in quotidian life and is not more read only by the experts, that frequently go to institutional spaces - as galleries or museums - , to become available for a heterogenic audience without a special artistic sensibility (Traquino, 2010). Art become to be much more exposed and susceptible to different opinions, depending on the way it is observed by the different publics in the different spaces.

Such as what happens in the experiences that takes place in galleries or museums, the “new” artistic interventions will be introduced in the spaces of the public sphere and try to create a connection between the people who experience them. Kinds of different manifestations of what used to happen with the artwork present in the public space until that moment - that limited itself to present a “finished object” without any experience in which the viewer was an active part in the artistic construction. With this, the public art was confined in an “elitist” form to the “beautify” of the cities and its public spaces, as well as, in many cases, it is a vehicle to send politic or religious messages or to invoke some old happenings or characters (such as what happens with the name of several streets). If on one hand this factor can contribute to the creation of a local identity, so important to any city, on the other hand can also become a powerful ideological weapon, that has been used by numerous absolutist states throughout the history - where the monuments, that represented the majority of the public art until a few decades ago, assume an active political role over several generations, as refer Miles: - “(...)the monument becoming, a device of social control less brutish and costly than armed force” (Miles, 1997, pp.58).

With this, we conclude that the art that takes place in the spaces belonging to the public sphere can be significant to several aspects, between them, the dynamics of relationship that occur in the space. Attenuating the boundaries between work and exhibition space, these initiatives can contribute for a constant change of experiences where the city is the stage of everyday life. Another factor that seems to be important is the ephemerality and informality of these types of actions, leading to a constant (re) discover of the places where people walk daily; contributing to a strong dynamic in the city, in its different layers of codification.

#### 4. EPHEMERAL URBAN APPROPRIATIONS ON A CULTURAL DISTRICT: SOME EXAMPLES FROM AUTHORS' OWN EXPERIENCE

The ephemeral artistic intervention | appropriation introduces in the city new spaces of public use, performing different public and private spaces, and becoming to relate them with the public sphere, creating also “new” zones that return to have a utility in the city and contribute to the mix of happenings. By its ephemerality, the majority of these appropriations operate in the spaces without changing or damaging them. This is one of the characteristics of this kind of interventions: it beholds potentiality in the place that is appropriated, transforming its material identity to develop the work.

This can be illustrated by 3 examples of urban interventions conducted by the authors, in Lisbon's main cultural quarter, which aimed to test and to be a source of information to allow us to analyze and develop all these issues in practice.

In September of 2010, we tried to explore this kind of ephemeral intervention promoting a “photographic exhibition” in an old shop that was closed for many years in Bairro Alto, in Lisbon. The exhibition entitled *Espaços Liminares*<sup>45</sup> (Liminal Spaces) pretended to explore the limits between the public and private space of an old shop reintroducing that space in the city dynamics and creating a new spot on the public sphere during the period of the appropriation. The shop that was waiting for municipal licensing for property redevelopment was expectant for some years. After we contacted the property owner and explained what we would like to do - a project that don't degrade his property and add value to the space - he accepted to support the artistic intervention. For ten days it was developed in the space, in parallel with a photographic exhibition about public space appropriation, debates, concerts and other artistic demonstrations supported by several artists that used that space as a complement of the “traditional” public space of the quarter. The window of considerable dimensions in the façade allowed the interior to be in constant contact with the exterior contributing to create curiosity in the people who circulated on the street and gradually decided to “invade” that “traditional private” place and participate in the exhibition built with scaffolds and old doors that were stored in the interior of the space. A set made with couches, some chairs and an old TV, simulating a homemade scene, welcomed at first sight the ones who looked inside over the window, deepening the sense of invasion of privacy (cf. Figure 1,2,3,4 and 5).

In December 2011, we developed one another project, in the framework of the celebration of *Semana do Bairro Alto* (Bairro Alto Week). The exhibition | intervention, called *Bairros como nós*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Espaços Liminares* was a photographic exhibition realized in ambit of the *Creatcity Research Project* in Bairro Alto, Lisboa in September 2010, and that it was after also exposed in Gràcia, Barcelona, in November of the same year. Its authors, Ana Roldão, Cristina Latoeira, Pedro Costa, Ricardo Lopes e Samuel Dias, exhibited photos that were realized in the scope of a photographic study of three cultural quarters: Bairro Alto, Libon; Gràcia, Barcelona, and Vila Madalena, São Paulo.

<sup>5</sup> <http://espacosliminares.blogspot.pt/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://bairroscomonos.blogspot.pt/>

(*Neighborhoods like us*), proposed to show to the district users similar dynamics to those that happen in the quarter, without explicating it - using photos of different cities as Barcelona, São Paulo, Istanbul, Paris, Seattle, Florence, Copenhagen, São Francisco, Berlin and London that represented similar dynamics between them. It was glued a set of large format photos in 15 façades of the quarter, exploring the limits between public and private space debated in this paper. The photos that composed the exhibition created a route that surprised the users and the audiences that walk along the quarter<sup>7</sup>. The exhibition hadn't a fixed period of permanence, the ephemeral material where the photos were printed, as well as the way that they were fixed in the walls, didn't allow it to remain for a long time. As a consequence, some photos disappeared after some hours, while others kept for a long period. Not losing its ephemeral character, but remaining, such as what happened with an image of a young guy hanging in a window of Brick Lane, London, that keeps in the wall where was placed for more than one year. However, who develops these kinds of interventions in the city understand them as something that is ephemeral and can be vulnerable of intervention of other user, who would be appropriated of the artwork. Whether it is because they will be behold it, making part of the scenario that it is inserted, or intervene directly in the "object". In this kind of intervention, the documentary strand assumes an extremely importance.

Besides exploring artistic aspects and the limits between public and private spaces, the exhibition tried also to create one critical sense in audience who had been tempt to think about the quarter and its happenings from a different perspective. One photo of Grácia (figure 7) is a good example - to represent the protests of the residents against the excesses of the nightlife, an use conflict common to all the quarters. This is another important aspect that artistic interventions can have when developed in the public sphere: to create a critical sense between the art and its message (the graffiti and the stencil have been affirmed as one of the most active voices of population against the externalities in the last years) that will be interpreted from a different perspective by the different people. However, whereas that the artistic intervention will not have the same effect on all observers, it should be made and thought for the space it will be inserted, looking for answers for the intended function, whether it is for artistic proposes, or with academic or functional reasons.

In December 2012, we set up one other artistic intervention in Bairro Alto, entitled *Beyond Visible*<sup>8</sup>. The *happening*, that followed some of the concepts explored in previously interventions (as the relations between private vs public spaces; public vs artwork), intended to introduce in the quarter a "new living room" for one night in an expectant space of Rua da Barroca, although its main concept was to explore the idea of several layers of codifications that composed the creative milieus. Thus,

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<sup>7</sup> This open air exhibition was complemented by a parallel one, more conventional, on the same theme (by the same authors, at the same time, in a more conventional exhibition center). However, no explicit reference was made in each of these outdoor images to that exhibition, neither to the other photos of this urban intervention, which were disposed in certain walls in order that people passing by would be finding them randomly.

<sup>8</sup> <http://beyondvisibleba2012.blogspot.pt/>

along the night, different people that walked on the street were invited to enter in a “dark space” and built its own exhibition, without segregation of people or practices.

The intervention started with a projection of several photos overlapping in the opposite façade of the intervened building. The projection drew a diffuse image of Bairro Alto which suggested that something different was happening on that space. Closer to the venue, people started to see one door, where it was possible to enter in a “dark space”, and another one, where there were people going out on the rhythm of photographic camera’s flashes.

The intervention suggested an inverted route of exhibition. It started with images of people that had already been photographed projected on the wall of a “waiting room”, where they received “UV lights” that were invited to use in the interior of the *happening*. After people were invited to enter in a “dark space”, they started to discover sentences (the sentences were collected previously through interviews made with people in Bairro Alto in different periods of the day and represented the opinions and image of those citizens about it) that were wrote with “transparent ink” on the interior walls. The variety of sentences wrote, and the technique used, allowed that each visitor discovered different things and interpreted them from different points of view. Along the exhibition, the visitors were surprised by other artistic interventions, as a performing space where two actors (Nuno Antunes and Beatriz Henriques) talked with the visitors (one at a time) about Bairro Alto or the “background noise” constructed with sounds collected in the quarter (musicians: JPSheilaq / Geraldés / João). At the end, the visitors were surprised by four photographers (Thiago Feitosa / Carolina Mota / Alexandre Abreu / Mariana Cortes) that had prepared a replica of a professional studio to photograph them and, in this way, they become to make part of the artistic intervention - not just as spectator and a participative element, but also as an object exhibited.

With this ephemeral artistic intervention, we tested some of the concepts that we have been studying through participant observation and that have allowed us to analyze these informal initiatives from a nearest perspective, such as what we have used with the photographic surveys conducted in several creative quarters.

Naturally, that kind of informal initiatives can’t be set up with the same multitude in the different areas of the city, neither in different cities. Diverse places require different creative approaches, and more than that, diverse places enable and enhance differently the conditions for artistic appropriation of their public sphere. Morphological conditions are naturally diverse; symbolic references and their relations with identity mechanism are certainly different; agents motivations, expectancies and strategies are undoubtedly multiple and diverse; and after all, regulation mechanisms and governance mechanisms are dissimilar, and the way informality can be explored will be particular and site specific.

Our previous research on several cultural quarters (Costa and Lopes, 2013, 2015), based on desk research, observation and visual ethnographic approaches (diversly), providing a comparative

perspective of their public sphere, enabled us to question and to bring to discussion the characteristics of each of these districts, concerning their morphology, creative dynamics and informality, trying to understand the main features that can contribute to the development and vitality urban artistic intervention in each of these cultural quarters as well as their specificities. That is an essential matter, which was one of the fundamental aspects which was developed and analysed on these 3 urban interventions, for the specific case of Bairro Alto.

### “Espaços liminares” intervention



Figura 1



Figura 2



Figura 3

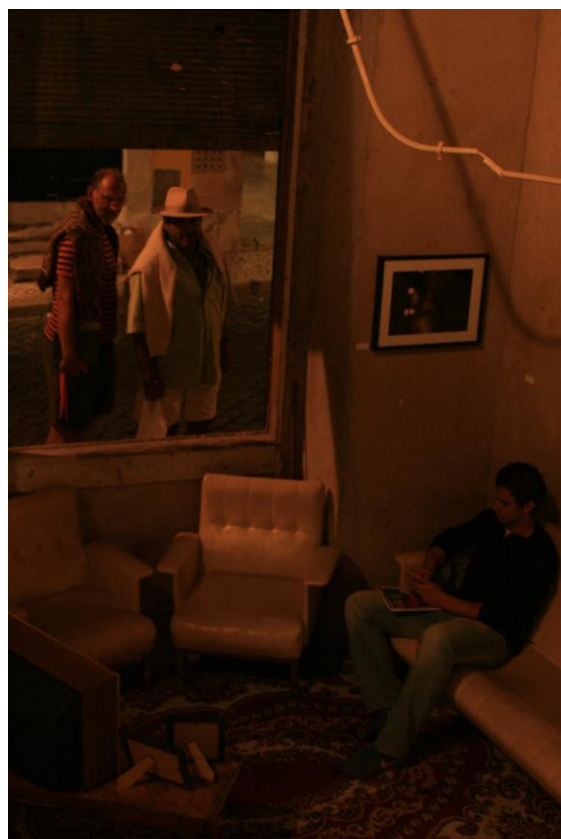


Figura 4

“Bairros como nós” interventions

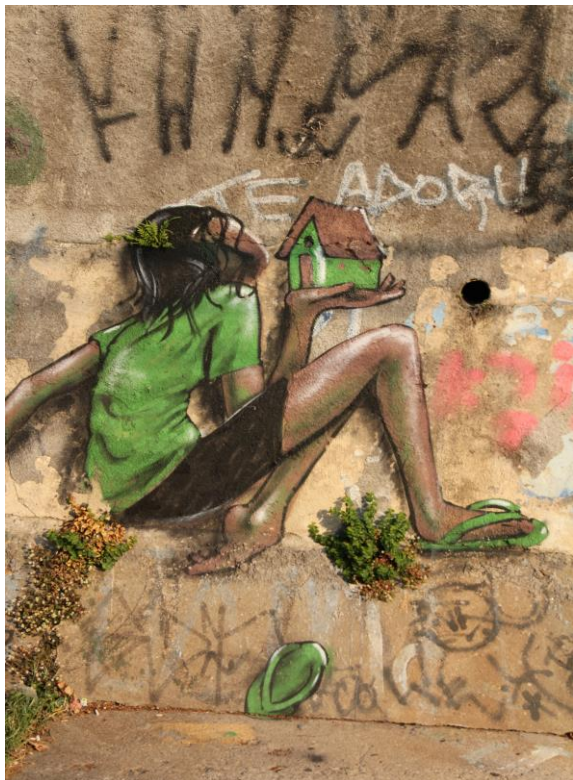


Figura 5



Figura 6



Artistic Urban Interventions, Informality and Public Sphere:  
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Figura 7



Figura 8



Figura 9



Figure 10



Figura 11

## Beyond Visible" intervention



Figura 12

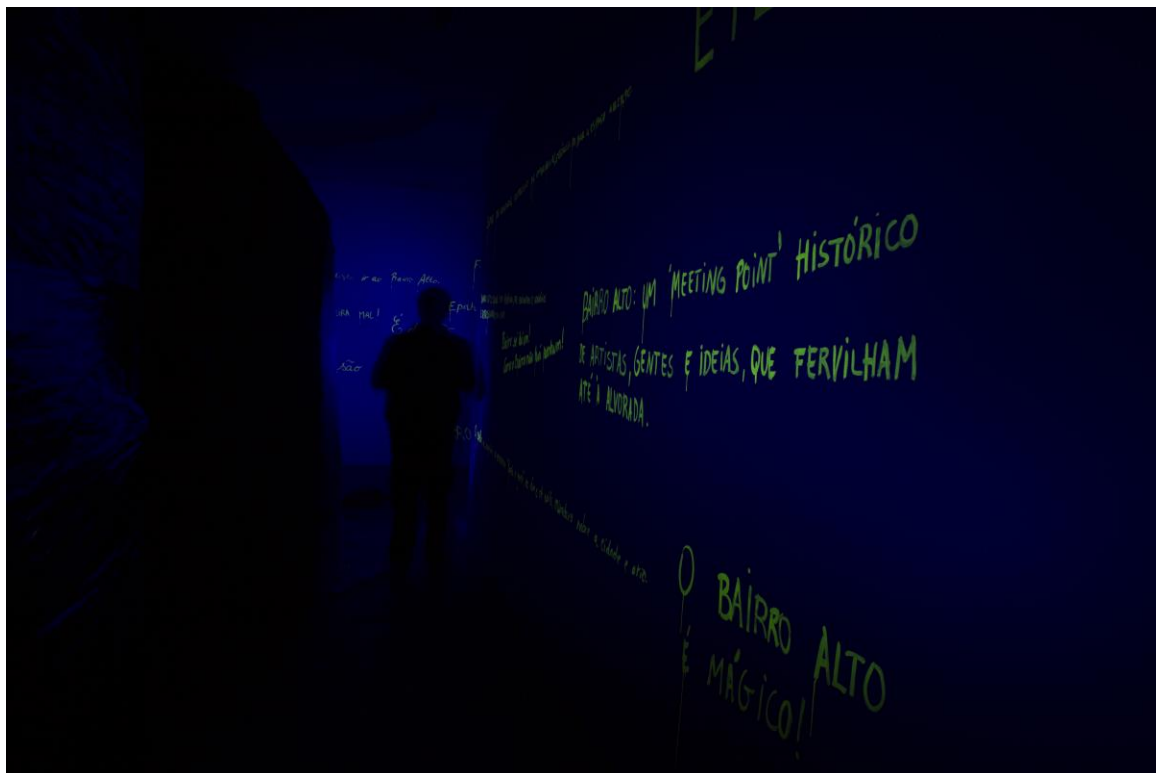


Figura 13 (“Bairro Alto was for me the smoky facebook of eighties”)



Figura 14

## 5. CONCLUDING NOTE

This paper objective was to discuss the relation between urban interventions, informality and public sphere appropriation, analyzing the way informal artistic dynamics can contribute to urban revitalization and to the enhancement of real creative milieus. Drawing on a research-action based methodology, the results and impacts of three experiences of urban intervention developed by the authors, in three consecutive years, in informal urban contexts in Bairro Alto, Lisboa, were explored. These ephemeral artistic interventions introduced in the city new spaces of public use, performing different public and private spaces, and bringing them to the public sphere, creating also “new” zones that re-gain a utility in the city, contributing to the vitality and symbolic centrality of this area. Blurring the ambiguous and flexible boundaries between public and private spaces, and evidencing the usual conflicts verified on this kind of creative milieus, it was also possible to launch the discussion on how to keep these places as vernacular as possible and to avoid (or at least postpone) gentrification processes.

Drawing on a conceptual framework which acknowledges conflict and informal dynamics as drivers for artistic vitality, we discussed the evolution of artistic intervention in the public sphere, and these particular experiences of ephemeral urban appropriations on cultural districts. Evidencing the importance of those dynamics to urban vitality, but acknowledging also the relevance of liminality processes and distinction-based mechanisms which are essential in the structuring and development of all art worlds, the artistic interventions enabled us to understand better the functioning of creative milieus, such as cultural quarters like this one, and its attractiveness and potential for public sphere centered participatory artistic interventions.

Ephemeral artistic interventions, in contemporary cultural and social panorama, are undoubtedly important, in a moment that is not possible to think in large projects such as happened in the past. Micro-scale projects developed often on an informal and ephemeral way can be fundamental contributions to the dynamics of each territorial system. Urban interventions and artistic appropriations like these, developed often by multidisciplinary groups, create "ephemeral architectures" that interact (physically and at the symbolical level) with more “permanent architectures”, and that can appropriate the city and test innovative solutions, while helping to boost these territories, promoting vitality and well-being, without expending large costs.

Naturally these actions are involved in complex mechanisms, considering their role as creators of symbolic attributes (for the artists, for their interventions, for the places), and the intense network of motivations, interests and use conflicts that are inherent to them. Moreover, many times they can be used and explored (but also instrumentalized) in urban development processes, in an era where bureaucratic processes and personal, corporate or public authorities’ interests have different rhythms and ways of working. Cases such as the Berlin one (cf Costa and Lopes, 2013), with the active public

policy towards the use of temporary “intermediate uses”, are example of how this public sphere can be explored by planning authorities, with private benefits for (at least some of) the stakeholders involved (land owners, artists, users, public authorities), at least temporarily (although at the long term some will gain more than other, as always).

Naturally these dynamics are very important to cities and are often used (or at least rhetorically appropriated) in name of its development. However it is of note that such actions - which are by nature "informal" and "alternative" - should work in this way because it is part of their nature to develop in this way and they would have much less interest if they lose the spontaneity and detract from their identity, that is the way how they appropriate of spaces that are not the most common. Thus, the most important thing is to not want to replicate things, but simply let them happen in the natural dynamics of cities. It is fundamental to understand the roots of these dynamics and, more than support or cherish them, simply to leave them space to flourish and to develop. Creativity is not at all a good friend of excesses on institutionalization and on planning, and as our case studies demonstrate, informality, and specific logics of governance, related to the openness and the tolerance towards the artistic appropriation of the public sphere are crucial factors in its development.

This analysis was expected to provide a contribution towards the development of a new planning agenda for dealing with urban creative dynamics and cultural quarters. In effect, the attendance of these ideas when dealing or intervening with territorially-based creative dynamics, seem to be fundamental. And this does not mean that each one of them can be fabricated for each intervention by urban planners, private investors or public authorities, but instead that each territorial system must be understood in all its specificities and in all its diverse potential. Then, these key factors should be valorized and worked with the local actors, seizing specific governance mechanisms, articulating stakeholders’ interests, managing their internal use conflicts, and understanding the vital importance of the symbolic system and place representation, for the diverse users of the quarter and the multiple art worlds. Places open to informality, giving freedom for less formal action and providing space for liminality, avoiding the excesses of institutionalization, seem to be the key for a successful planning activity, as the way pointed by these interventions seem to suggest. As an example, many of the small artistic interventions on urban space or initiatives based on appropriation of local public spheres verified in this kind of situations promote a vitality and an authentic connection to place and local dynamics which are much more consequent in terms of effectiveness and long term sustainability for local development than more “conventional” or “institutional” “creativity rhetoric”- led initiatives, branding creative quarters, supporting the attraction of creative people or promoting emblematic facilities or flagship events. And after all, they are much more affordable for planning authorities as well.

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