Filipa Ramalhete, CEACT/UAL and e-GEO/FCSH, framalhete@netcabo.pt
Maria Assunção Gato, DINÂMIA'CET, magoo@iscte.pt
Sérgio Vicente, CIEBA, Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade de Lisboa (FBAUL), ateliersergiovicente@gmail.com
Gerbert Verheij, CIEBA – Centro de Estudos em Belas Artes, Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade de Lisboa /
CRPolis, Universitat de Barcelona, gerbertverheij@vfemail.net

A Participatory public Art Process in Almada – Agents and Values

The impact of public art on the territory has an undeniable cultural dimension since it creates new sensorial and visual agents, with potential social interactivity. In this paper we present and discuss a Portuguese case-study of participated public art, developed for the Caparica Civic Centre (Almada, Portugal) by a team that includes artists (sculptors), anthropologists, local associations and inhabitants. The territory and the community were the main pillars for the conception of a three piece monument, built in a multicultural neighborhood, through a progressive and interactive working methodology, between 2011 and 2013.

Keywords: participatory public art, public space, Almada

Introduction

The impact of public art on the territory has an undeniable cultural dimension since it creates new sensorial and visual agents, with potential social interactivity. The many, at times contradictory, opinions on public art have, however, given rise to much debate on its nature, goals and effectiveness. Public art is a complex concept, involving two ambiguous domains, art and the public, not necessarily resulting from the simple intersection of both. As Remesar (2003) says, the artist, when working in public space, cannot act as a demiurge sovereignly imposing his or her art on the public space, advocating instead a conception of public art as a means of citizen control over the aesthetics of their own environment. In this context the role of public art participatory processes (in opposition to traditional authorship processes) has led to recent interesting experiences, such as the ones held in Barcelona (Remesar, 2003; Remesar and Vidal, 2003; Aguilera, 2004; Ricart, 2009, Águas, 2012).

In fact, there is increasing recognition of the importance of public participation as a way to social cohesion and community empowerment, supplying tools that enhance the full exercise of citizenship, while providing better effectiveness of public interventions (Remesar et al, 2012; Seixas; Albet, 2010; Gomes, 2010). By facing knowledge as a shared resource (Hess; Ostrom, 2007), participation opens up a whole new range of possibilities regarding finding new solutions for old dilemmas such as the construction of more inclusive territories. In this context projects of public space are particularly relevant (Brandão, 2008) as mediators between the inhabitant's representations and their everyday experiences (Gato et al, 2012), as they may reinforce the relationship between populations and their territories, by creating pieces that may be, simultaneously, a reference to the past and a starting point for the future.

In this paper we present and discuss a Portuguese case-study of participated public art, developed for the Caparica Civic Centre (Almada, Portugal) by a team that includes artists (sculptors), anthropologists, local associations and inhabitants between 2011 and 2013.

The fact that we're in the presence of a multicultural neighborhood with a strong social and cultural diversity - where the resident population has generally low incomes and is mainly composed by people who came from Portuguese rural areas, immigrants from several African countries and Gypsies - led to the construction of a monument inspired in the concept of multiculturality. The territory and the community were the main pillars for the conception of a three piece monument, built through a progressive and interactive working methodology, having the Barcelona experiences as a reference, combined with the use of methodologies for the promotion of public participation in regional planning (Vasconcelos; Baptista 2002; Vassalo; Farinha, 2010). During the process, the Barcelona experiences in participated public design were adapted with new methodologies for the promotion of public participation in regional planning. Beyond the concept, this presentation proposes to discuss the different agents (which includes, besides the team, local associations, the municipality and inhabitants) and values implied in participatory public art processes

The Monument to multiculturality project: objectives and methodology
The monument arose from a municipal initiative for the new green space (Fróis Urban Park, later integrated in the Monte de Caparica Civic Centre) and the team's proposal to make a participatory art project in Almada. As multiculturality is one of the main social characteristics of that neighborhood, the challenge was to build a monument to multiculturality through a collaborative art process. The goal was to build an artwork resulting from the active participation of the neighborhood residents, from its conceptualization to the effective modeling of the object. This implied a participated process the final result of which should reflect local identity values and have the potential to be a future landmark for that territory.

Local agents were thus essential for the process, right from its conception and methodological design. The main partners were the local municipality (Junta de Freguesia) and the Clube Recreativo União Raposense, a local association whose headquarter is located precisely in the park area. This association supplied their facilities for the workshops and also a precious view and opinion on the neighborhood and on the participative process.

The Monument to Multiculturality was developed over a two-year period (July 2011–July 2013) in seven public workshops. Average attendance was about forty individuals, some of them returning to each workshop, others participating in just one or two. While participation was not statistically representative of Monte de Caparica residents, the average number proved to be adequate to the methodologies used. In fact, previous analysis of the territory and its communities had indicated that participation would be characterized less by the quantity of participants as by the diversity of their cultural references and their wealth of life experiences.

Fig. 1 and 2: Territorial approach to the neighborhood

The first three workshops were dedicated to the collective production and discussion of spatial perceptions, memories and speeches about the experience of sharing a common territory, which resulted in a consensual list of synthetic ideas about the community's territory (Fig. 1 and 2). This list included the community's social diversity, the intercultural universe of the local school community, the large presence of teenagers and the reflection of this presence and their actions (not always perceived as positive) in public spaces; the general environment of insecurity felt by the community and the lack of places of sharing and collective experiences; and the importance of exchanging values related to the area's material heritage, spatial memories and sociocultural diversity. Groups of participants were then challenged to transform these ideas into three keywords which, transformed in a narrative sequence, would translate their spatial and social reality.

Fig. 3 – Discussing concepts. Fig. 4 – Making proposals

In the following workshops, these references were used as a starting point for the formal conception of a proposal for the monument (Fig. 3 and 4). A worktable with different materials invited the participants to start developing models in groups. At the end, rather than simply alluding to or representing cultural diversity, the models began to proliferate into various places of "meeting" and "sharing" which aimed at reinforcing the already existing diversity. These models, each explained by a group representative, passed in the following sessions through a process of selection, ending with three models, which had also gone through a formal synthesis and rethinking in terms of scale, materials and construction by participating sculptors and students (Fig. 5 and 6).
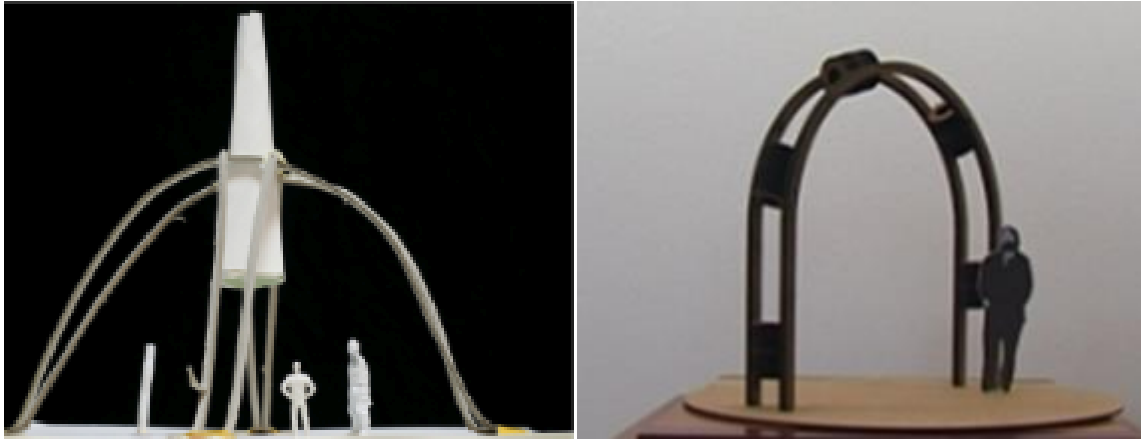
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Fig. 5 – A proposal for the monument. Fig. 6 – One of the proposals exhibited in the municipal museum

One of the most interesting aspects of this process was that each group had produced more than one model, but during the workshops several were abandoned, mainly because the concepts were present in models built by other groups. The participants were thus willingly to abdicate their proposals in favor of others, revealing a strong capacity of negotiation and reaching spontaneous consensus.

In agreement with the Almada Council, it was decided to execute three models, which together would compose the "monument". The interest and involvement of participants, the diversity of the presented proposals, and the interest of the Municipality can be credited for this multiplication. The last workshop)Fig. 7 and 8) consisted in the presentation and collective discussion of the three sculptures, to which the participants added a word (*estamos* [we are], *fazemos* [we do] and *sentimos* [we feel]) and colors (red, blue and yellow) as visual, symbolical and territorial enhancement. These were chosen in relation to the ideas each sculpture symbolizes and the active role participants desired the works would have. It was hoped they would not only be material and symbolic witnesses, but also places by themselves: a "meeting place" where dialogue among cultures could happen; a "place of reflexion" and of shared memories; and a "place of observation" of the surrounding reality, in order to actively enact and enhance existing cultural diversity.

Fig. 7 – Final models. Fig. 8 – Discussing and proposing around the final model

Results and conclusions

The Monument to Multiculturality was inaugurated on the 27th April 2013 in the Monte de Caparica Civic Centre (this space includes the new Raposense headquarter, a swimming pool, a library, and the green area where the sculptures are located). Meant to be a gathering point for the different agents in the community,

reinforced with the written message "we are, we do, we feel", the monument reflects a participated proposal and the values of the agents involved in the process. However, it is also a testimony of the local capacity and will analyze and conceptualize memories regarding the territory, proposing future solutions based on them, executing models for the proposals and discuss them, in an iterative and reflexive collective creation process.

Fig. 9 – Monument construction. Fig. 10 – "We do". Fig 11 – Inauguration day

The complexity of multicultural suburban territories represents a challenge to societies and territories. Normally, these neighborhoods are the result of public housing policies, which may partially explain the low levels of formal education, high unemployment and social disarticulation and social and territorial segregation. Within these contexts, the use of dynamic and innovative tools for territorial construction and management contribute to improve the urban quality of life, by helping to meet the community needs, interests and expectations.

This participatory process is currently under evaluation and three main questions arise: does this participatory public art process represent an added value for the agents and participants who were involved? Which kind of values did the participants wish for? Were the prime expectations converted in real benefits? The data already gathered show that all the partners involved feel strongly about the monument and have, to some extent, gained something with the participative process. The final goal of building a collaborative artwork was accomplished and new projects and are now necessary, in order to continue the dynamics created.

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