

# Self-Initiated Practices in the Urban Community of Balteiro: Design Challenges in a Post-Pandemic Setting

Nuno Martins<sup>1</sup>, Daniel Brandão<sup>2</sup>, Eliana Penedos-Santiago<sup>3</sup>, Heitor Alvelos<sup>4</sup>, Cláudia Lima<sup>5</sup>, Susana Barreto<sup>4</sup>, and Ana Clara Roberti<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Institute for Design, Media and Culture, School of Design, Polytechnic Institute of Cavado and Ave, Barcelos, Portugal

<sup>2</sup>Communication and Society Research Centre, Institute of Social Sciences, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

<sup>3</sup>ESAD.CR IPL, ID+, University of Porto, Leiria, Portugal

<sup>4</sup>ID+, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

<sup>5</sup>ID+, Universidade Lusófona, Porto, Portugal

<sup>6</sup>CITCEM, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

## ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify, document, interpret and disseminate self-initiated practices in social housing neighborhoods, in the city of Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal. The study aims to assess the consequences that the COVID-19 pandemic had on these practices and how Design can contribute to the resonance of these initiatives in other equivalent social contexts. Two local initiatives were identified: Recreational Association Clube Balteiro Jovem (ARCBJ) and School Workshop of cartoning and sewing (Escola Oficina). Preliminary work has been carried out with the Vila Nova de Gaia City Council and the aforementioned residents' associations ARCBJ and Escola Oficina. Emic data is being collected through methods of direct and indirect observation, including ethnographic interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. This paper presents the ongoing research project and the results of the preliminary work done.

**Keywords:** Communication design, Community practices, Citizenship, Social housing neighborhoods, Inclusive design

## INTRODUCTION

The study presented in this paper is being developed in the scope of the research project “Echoing the Communal Self (ECHO)”, funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT), and aims to identify, document, interpret and disseminate current self-regulated community practices in social housing neighborhoods in the city of Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal, having, as a case study, the neighborhood of Balteiro. We present methodologies and the first outcomes of the ethnographic work developed at Balteiro, namely

an analysis of the origins, dynamics, needs and current challenges in face of post-pandemic scenarios in the present and future of two local initiatives: Recreational Association Clube Balteiro Jovem (ARCBJ) and School Workshop of cartoning and sewing (Escola Oficina); additionally, it presents a first set of hypotheses on how Design may contribute to the resonance of these initiatives in other equivalent social contexts.

We argue that COVID-19 pandemic regulations, as well as their economic consequences, have had a significant impact on the nature and viability of the aforementioned practices: as a consequence of social distancing and a phobia of the collective, long periods of lockdown and a radical emptying of public space, prior models of creative communal practice will need re-assessing and re-invention.

In turn, the proposal to document and disseminate these practices through Design aims to strengthen the mechanisms of empathy and social solidarity among citizens. The research intends to branch out into intuitive, practical and structural issues: preliminary work has been carried out with the Vila Nova de Gaia City Council and the aforementioned residents' associations ARCBJ and Escola Oficina. Emic data is being collected through methods of direct and indirect observation, including ethnographic interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Audiovisual and photographic content will be collected towards a bank of resources for further scrutiny and employment in exploratory approaches. The research is therefore aimed at providing strategic outcomes, future replication, contextual adaptation and upscaling to national and international contexts.

## **IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM**

Despite its original ambition as a means to provide affordable homes and a social integration to working class citizens, from its onset on the aftermath of the 1974 revolution, social housing in Portugal never quite fulfilled its mission of inclusion. In Porto in particular, a preceding tradition of self-sufficient communities (“ilhas”) may have contributed to a paradoxical tendency for self-exclusion among underprivileged demographics. These former slums built around factories survived the decadence of local industry to this day.

Inner dynamics in these neighborhoods have always tended to be highly suspicious of external presence and influence, often relying on self-initiated community practices: sports, recreational and cultural activities and professional training in crafts, all multiple examples of successful autonomous processes of civic development throughout the years. This contrasts with the broader socio-cultural context of Portugal, where the norm points to a high reliance on institutional tutelage.

This reliance has become a major issue in the current scenario of a global pandemic: citizens have witnessed the evidence that former socio-cultural practices will struggle in current and emerging scenarios. As such, there is an inevitability in enquiring about the nature, purpose and impact of self-initiated community activities to be pursued in the post-COVID scenario. Furthermore, can we mediate this socio-cultural reconfiguration on a local scale towards a broader, networked process of regeneration?

The main problem in the present research therefore concerns the need to identify and activate emerging models of creative social dynamics in unforeseen, post-pandemic scenarios. This problem branches out into intuitive, practical and structural issues that the team is currently surveying: preliminary work was carried out with VNG City Council and residents' associations, where the aforementioned initiatives were identified. Despite the contributions of these initiatives to the inclusion and harmonisation of the social fabric, the City Council acknowledges a difficulty in their mediation: as such, we argue, design can develop strategies of communication and pedagogy that will carry citizen-led relevant practices beyond their tangible circumstances.

### **The Importance of Community Valorization**

The experience from ethnographic projects involving social neighborhoods in the district of Porto presents an issue directly raised by the residents themselves: the residents have a considerably more positive attitude when the living spaces, i.e. the common areas of these developments, are valued and 'dignified' (Roberti 2020).

These spaces are *formed* and *adapted* by the individuals who occupy and experience them, and, in turn, have a strong influence on the daily life and formation of these people. A kind of molding, two-way influence, that contributes to the construction of places and identities. "It is essential to understand that the fixed character space constitutes the mold that affects a good part of human behavior" (Hall 1986, p. 125).

We recognize the existence of *different cities within a single city* (Roberti 2020), cities that do not communicate. Places that act as microcosms - sometimes isolated, due to the stigma and exclusion of the very urban environment that surrounds them - with their own dynamics and rules, partly imposed by others, partly created and developed throughout the lives of their inhabitants. They are microcultures that coexist within a common space, in this case, more specifically, we are talking about socioeconomically fragile populations that inhabit social housing projects.

In some cases, the sense of community and the collective strength motivated by creative activities and initiatives, contribute to empowerment and a (socially and mentally) healthier everyday life for these people. For example, the construction of community gardens, recreational associations, neighborhood associations, and artistic activities. These are initiatives that are commonly little publicized, excluded, and isolated from contact with the world beyond the limits of these social neighborhoods.

As argued by Lefebvre (2000), the creation and appropriation of space speak about who planned and built it, but also, and mainly, about who lives in it.

It is fundamental in a study of this nature, a social research project, to "seek to understand the return, the retribution, and the value of the work for those involved in it" (Roberti 2020, p. 74). This is a constant concern not only for researchers in these areas, but for the participants themselves, in this case, the residents of these social neighborhoods. What, effectively, *remains*

for these populations? How can they put to use the study and the investment made?

## MAIN OBJECTIVES

This study, of exploratory scope, aims to design the dissemination and replication of self-initiated practices in underprivileged urban communities in the current post-pandemic scenario. Through the study of the cases of ARCBJ and Escola Oficina, originating from the neighborhood of Balteiro, it is intended, through Design, to know and document the success story of these practices; to ascertain the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had and what challenges it raises in the present and future; and how Art and Design can contribute to the dissemination and potential replication of these initiatives. In order to fulfill these main objectives, the following specific objectives steps are proposed to be developed:

- Identify key players and collaborators of each practice organized within the community for collecting data through methods of direct and indirect observation. This will include a set of ethnographic interviews: contextual video and photography towards creating a bank of visual material according to the informants profiles, the community and the project objectives.
- Analyze the documentary content (formal documents provided by VNG City Council and the social services) and the practices and methods of previous self-regulation initiatives for further development towards socio-cultural involvement and evolvement in post-COVID settings.
- Disseminate and revert the aggregated knowledge into public exhibitions and workshops on location and within the community.
- Lay the groundwork for setting up an international network of empirical knowledge and cooperation between citizens, designers, civic associations and institutional enablers. Through a set of creative and engaging activities aiming at community collaborations and reciprocal learning aims to contribute to the creation of opportunities in socio-economically disadvantaged communities and, consequently, to the reduction of stigmas and social inequalities.

## PLAN AND METHODS

Two case studies of success were already identified in the Balteiro social housing neighborhood, in Vila Nova de Gaia, in a preliminary approach to fieldwork, namely: the Recreational Association Clube Balteiro Jovem (ARCBJ), which has contributed, through sports, to reinforce the social ties and civic training among the youngest; and the Escola Oficina, an initiative that was born in 2015 by the community of Balteiro, which has been fostering the training of residents in the areas of sewing and cardboard making, helping them in the access to employment. In order to further study the historical background, understand the dynamics and the development process of these two initiatives and explain and disseminate all reached insights, the following methodologies will be adopted.

- Emic data will be collected through methods of direct and indirect observation, including ethnographic interviews and focus groups (Mata and Fernandes 2019). This is essential: to identify key players and collaborators of each practice organized within the community; to document changes in these practices after the COVID-19; to understand how these practices are perceived in the community; and the impact these practices have in the community (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007);
- Contextual video and photography will be elaborated towards creating a bank of visual material for further scrutiny (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015; Tinkler 2013);
- Critical and qualitative analysis of documents to understand the historical framework of each community activity (Fernandes and Giesteira 2017);
- Quantitative analysis of statistical data from preliminary work provided by the VNG City Council social services;
- Translation of complex practices and methods into explanatory visual media, through infographic and illustration techniques (Cairo 2019; Martins et al. 2020a);
- Design of an online platform where all the research outcomes and interactions with the community will converge. This will include a study on user experience and user interface design, as well as usability testing in order to ensure efficient use of the interface by its target audience (Norman 2013; Martins et al. 2020b).

The Design can play a key role in stimulating community life by translating and communicating empathy and social solidarity. The COVID-19 pandemic has put these values to the test, with a resulting need to understand how they are being regenerated among communities. The present moment in history requires listening, rethinking and innovation in the face of changes in different paradigms (communication design, social and cultural inclusion), based on the following ideas:

- 1) in auscultation to the problem, ascertaining how these communities have survived, reconfigured themselves and now look to the future;
- 2) in building the foundations of a network, mapping community practices, connecting citizens and bringing them together to build the common good;
- 3) in the definition of a standardised design and communication model (possible to be adapted and replicated into diverse contexts), including the creation of narratives and their systematization and dissemination.

The whole communication system created will be designed to be accessible to all. For this reason, the main means of dissemination of the community practices will be an online platform with free and open access.

The digital and interactive interface and respective contents shall offer usability guarantees to a transversal public, namely individuals with low schooling and literacy levels. The fulfillment of these objectives is intended to achieve the desired dissemination and international replication of the practices.

## **Contributing to the State of the Art**

Prior projects, by both the current team and external researchers, have been carried out in contexts where conviviality and the sharing of common spaces did not compromise the safety of individuals. In a pandemic context marked by self-isolation and social distancing, these practices were compromised, requiring new forms of implementation. Therefore, through direct and indirect observation methods, the impact of the pandemic on social dynamics is an ongoing inventory. Furthermore, canonical design methodologies are being adapted in order to suit these emerging realities.

Despite important essays already developed (Martins et al. 2021), study that reinforces this pioneering work front in design research is urgent. In fact, unlike in previous projects by the team, this project does not intend to intervene in practices carried out by citizens. Instead, it intends to move forward in a more rarefied approach: design research as a regenerating agent of dissemination, a network facilitator, and an aggregator between actions and citizens. The testing of this role for Design will be a key contribution to the state of the art in this field. We further argue that the fairly recent validation of Design as a scientific discipline requires the embracing of exploratory strategies. In the present case, we argue for the urgency to broaden a scientific overview of Design in face of the current pace of deep socio-economic changes deriving from the pandemic.

## **CONCLUSION: EXPECTED RESULTS**

This project expects to disseminate successful community practices and safe methods of implementing them through media accessible to less literate citizens, which will meet usability requirements. This is expected to build an international network of empirical knowledge and cooperation between citizens, designers, civic associations, and institutional enablers. Finally, the project seeks to contribute to the creation of opportunities in socio-economically disadvantaged communities and, consequently, to the reduction of stigmas and social inequalities. These results will be reached through the following outputs: Development of an online platform mapping initiatives, providing content access, and strengthening an international network of emerging self-regulated initiatives; Production of best practices manual for socio-cultural involvement and development in post-COVID scenarios; A set of Video documentaries of the research process, for analysis, replication and exhibition.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

This project is founded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology under the reference EXPL/ART-DAQ/0037/2021.

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