

## **The (non) diversities of Baixa in Lisbon**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses how socio-cultural, economic and functional diversity can promote revitalization and safeguard historic centres. As an example, it examines certain characteristics of Baixa's socio-spatial organization and use in Lisbon, seeking to highlight the potential interest of an intervention that promotes a diversified social, cultural, economic and functional occupation.

**Keywords:** diversity, revitalization, safeguard, historic centre.

## Full Article

### Introduction

The starting point for this reflection is the historic centre of Lisbon, where, given the urgency of dealing with the issues of population loss, ageing, socio-economic slowdown, degradation of the built-up fabric, and conservation of heritage, intervention strategies were adopted, which generally favour the rehabilitation of buildings, requalification of the public space and socio-economic revitalization based on a strong investment in the tourism sector, in the cultural economy and in the attractiveness of the middle/high income economic sectors.

The transformations induced by these strategies appeared soon and fast. In the unleashing of these transformations, and in terms of the public sphere, there is growing questioning about the present urban setting and what is desired for the city in the future. After all, for whom and for what purpose is the city, namely its historic centre?

This reflection takes Pombaline Baixa as an example. The paper examines certain aspects of its socio-spatial organization, seeking to highlight the pressing interest of an integrated intervention that promotes a diversified social, cultural, economic, and functional occupation (Menezes, 2010, 2011).

### Socio-spatial organization of Baixa

In her analysis of the city's daily life during the 16th and 17th centuries, Teresa Rodrigues (1997: 57) points out that the diversity of urban life in Lisbon was concentrated in Baixa, especially near Terreiro do Paço and Ribeira do Tejo: (...) where houses and shops doing business with the Empire also stood and where the Court and the most affluent and influential groups in political and socio-economic terms resided. To the interior was Rossio, another area of intense activity". The author also points out the diversity associated with the modes of human occupation of the soil, since "they corresponded to distinct economic activities and particular forms of association and daily life" (Rodrigues, 1997: 57).

The city of the post-earthquake period, however, represents a break with the pre-Pombaline city. In particular, this break is reflected in the adoption of an orthogonal urban morphology, in the functional specialization and in a social occupation that was intended to be equally specialized. In addition to corresponding to a distinction between the medieval/baroque city and the modern city (França, 1989) [1], the new city that was to be built from Baixa was characterized by a separation between the bourgeois city and the popular city - mainly the eastern part associated with an old Lisbon (Malet Calvo, 2011) [3].

The "enlightened" city reflected in the post-earthquake Baixa, "was then conceived as a commercial, utilitarian and bourgeois city, oriented towards economic development, whose goal was the modernization of Portugal" (França, 1989: 34). In other words, this defined "replacing a life at court of the past by a «modern» life, that is, by a «useful», commercial life, cleared of a palace of a king rendered useless" (França, 1977: 123). A modern and commercial city that, however, would force the displacement of the most popular commerce in the north-eastern direction, especially the Rossio-Praça da Figueira axis (Malet Calvo, 2011).

As noted by Matias Ferreira: "In such a context, it is important to emphasize the socio-urban components resulting from that movement of urban centralization of the country's capital, a centralization that is based, on the one hand, on a marked social differentiation – through a process of "arts and crafts" corporate specialization in Lisbon's Baixa - and, on the other hand, in an urban differentiation, with the social and symbolic demarcation of the Praça do Comércio, the "royal square par excellence", and Rossio "the people's place", translating emblematically the own socio-urban model that would determine, from then on, the "urbanization mode" of the city of Lisbon" (Matias Ferreira, 1987: 84) [2].

The Pombaline Baixa expanded in an orthogonal layout organized in blocks, whose modular shape is mirrored in a network of longitudinal streets - linking Praça do Comércio (former Terreiro do Paço) and Rossio - and of cross streets that intersect at right angles, Rua Augusta being the central axis. Baixa's functionality identifies specific patterns of space organization, where urban buildings were primarily intended for renting and organized so that the ground

floors had a commercial function and the upper floors (3 floors with a left/right typology) a housing function and a roof with alternating dormer windows.

Meanwhile, the housing function was gradually altered as a result of the increase in tertiary activity. Accordingly, Teresa B. Salgueiro (2004) drew attention to the functional segregation that reflected Baixa's own urban and orthogonal morphology, with the public and local administration associated with Praça do Comércio and Praça do Município located in a south-north direction, followed by the financial sector, then the commercial sector and, finally, the leisure activities (cafés, cinemas, theatres) connected to Rossio and Restauradores. At a higher point, there stood Chiado, whose leisure activities extended up to Bairro Alto. From east to west, there is a socioeconomically differentiated functional segregation related to the "clientele and points of sale".

In the first half of the twentieth century, the main streets of Baixa and Chiado "concentrate the top level of commerce", while the secondary and eastern streets of Baixa were mainly "used by services to support the employed population, had fewer financial services and less specialised trade, with units aimed at professionals, wholesalers and a popular trade, the centre of the poor and the humble" (Salgueiro, 2004: 215-216). A new way of making and using the city was reflected in the recombination of a set of social, cultural, economic, and functional aspects that would contribute to changes in terms of the intensity and diversity of urban life reflected in Baixa and which, along with Chiado, would become the central axis of the city, from a political and cultural point of view (Salgueiro, 2004). In those days, "(...) people went to the cafés in Rossio and Chiado, they strolled to window shop, to see and be seen in Baixa and especially in Chiado, they went down to Baixa to buy non-daily products, to go to the bank, to deal with various issues and many worked in Baixa" (Salgueiro 2004: 215). But as the author also points out, from the 1970s onwards, Baixa lost its importance due to the expansion of the city and the relocation of many of the municipal and administrative services located there to Avenidas Novas and to Marquês de Pombal. The fire in Chiado in 1988 was an event that definitively marked the acceleration of the devitalisation of Baixa, which was especially aggravated by the construction of the Amoreiras Shopping Centre (1985), followed by other shopping centres.

However, with the reconstruction of Chiado, urban life gained new vitality. In 2004, Teresa B. Salgueiro already pointed to the trend towards a top of the range trade in post-fire and already rebuilt Chiado, as well as a lower quality trade in

Baixa: "the Baixa trade had become accustomed to having a hegemonic position and did little to attract new customers and to modernize itself. And it was ageing, like the buildings and the atmosphere of the area of which it was part and to which it contributed" (Salgueiro, 2004: 221). The initial urban functions changed and also led to socio-demographic transformations that changed local urban dynamics. The functions associated with the services started to have a prominent presence, accentuating the tendency for the local tertiarisation. At the same time, there was a decrease in the residential area and a change in the predominant commercial, administrative and industrial functions. During the second half of the twentieth century, these trends were reflected in the reduction of the resident population, decline in services and employment and stagnation of traditional trade.

### **Some recent perspectives of Baixa's revitalisation: brief notes**

The work on Pombaline Baixa coordinated by Guerra (1999) considers that, from the 1980s, this area of the city was characterized by the following main problems:

- Change of functions, loss of the resident population and strong tertiarisation (with the generalized transfer of the residential function to other functions), with a trend towards the predominance of clothes and footwear trade, financial and personal services.
- Significant changes in the age structure of the resident population, with a decrease in the number of young people and an increase in the number of elderly residents, ageing of the buildings, which have become poor in terms of comfort.
- Decrease in the number of active population and increase in the number of retired persons.

In 2000, when valuating Baixa in the book "A Baixa Pombalina: Passado e Futuro", Maria H. Ribeiro Santos stressed its state of degradation, later signalling the urgency of having "A Plan for Baixa" (Santos, 2001) [4]. The degradation and abandonment of the built-up fabric and the socio-economic devitalisation of Baixa would, in 2006, merit attention, culminating in the constitution of a Baixa-Chiado Committee. During this period, in a report prepared on the "Proposal for the Revitalisation of Baixa-Chiado" in September 2006, the term functional mix is

evidenced, within the framework of a revitalisation perspective to be implemented, as follows:

“Baixa is an area with a great concentration of activities where public and private services, commerce, cultural and religious spaces have a preponderant presence but where residence, permanent or temporary, plays an essential role in the vitality of the area along the whole cycle of the day. It is this mix of functions wisely organized according to strata - the subsoil of archaeology and the underground, the ground floor and the shops, the first floors of the services, the upper floors for housing and the roofs of the terraces and belvederes - which will provide an intense life to the buildings and the public space” (Proposal for the Revitalisation of Baixa-Chiado, Report of September 2006: 21).

Following the "Baixa-Chiado Revitalisation Project" presented by the Baixa Committee, the "Pombaline Baixa Protection Detail Plan" (published in the Government's Official Gazette 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, no. 55 of 18 March 2011) was made. Three basic ideas are defended in the Report included in the said Plan, namely:

“1) To confer Baixa-Chiado a relevant commercial and leisure function as a historic centre with a commercial and tourist vocation; 2) To stimulate the emergence of new activities, privileging the area with the installation of public and private decision-making and creativity centres; 3) To provide Baixa-Chiado with a specific residential space, overcoming the physical and mobility limitations and offering local trade solutions for the residents” (Report of 14.02.2011, p. 16).

These three basic ideas are operationalized in seven priority projects which, in the opinion of the writers, implied an integrated intervention. The projects mentioned refer to: a) Rehabilitation of the built area; b) [Creation of a water front; c) [Revitalization] A new Terreiro do Paço; d) [Revitalization] Cultural area; e) [Creation] Open space commercial area; f) Construction of a public space of excellence; and (g) Strengthening internal and external mobility.

In this report, Baixa's revitalization would experience different levels of intervention:

“ (...) repopulation, restoration of the buildings, qualification of the public space, creation of innovative quality activities, restructuring the road structure and mobility (...), involving three key ideas: a relevant commercial and leisure function, a renewed zone to place decision-making and creative activities, and a "specific housing model" that overcomes physical and mobility limitations and offers innovative solutions and close commercial solutions” (Report of 14.02.2011, pp. 137-138).

One of the driving forces behind the Plan is the "repopulation" of Baixa, explained in terms of its "demographic setting" and, interestingly, in terms of "tourism", which is an indicator of the ideas foreseen for the area and which interconnects with the idea of revitalizing the districts of Lisbon resorting to tourism. It should be noted that the idea of "Tourism Districts" emerges as particularly significant in the context of the Lisbon Urban Rehabilitation Week, which took place between 19 and 26 March 2014.

However, returning to the aforementioned 2011 Plan, one can see that the idea of repopulation is mentioned as follows:

“To bring to Baixa new permanent and temporary residents who contribute to its repopulation and balance from the age, socioeconomic, etc. perspectives, promoting various types of housing, university and senior residences, own houses and houses to lease, hotels and local accommodation, etc. is, therefore, a strong point of this plan since, as we believe that it is determinant to its revitalization. (...). At the same time, support should be given to people affected by disqualification, poverty and social exclusion” (Report of 14.02.2011, p. 139).

In the same Report (dated 14.02.2011, page 140), it is also pointed out that it is important that there is a "tripartite distribution in an equitable way among the three great functionalities" in Baixa, namely: housing, services and commerce. Regarding the driving force behind "tourism", the Report identifies Baixa's potential to stimulate this activity, as well as the problems that most affect visitors, and it indicates that the revitalization process should take into account the following aspects:

“(...) restoration of Pombaline buildings by turning them into small and medium-sized charming hotels (capacity between 50-100 rooms), creation of visiting cultural facilities and setting up quality restaurants and open air cafes”(Report of 14.02.2011, p. 143).

In theory, the anticipated initiatives involved - a few times more directly, others more indirectly - a mixing perspective, mainly as promotion of the functional mixture [5]. However, these initiatives are not necessarily explicit as to what is meant by these mixed-social and functional perspectives.

### **What is urban revitalization about?**

Many historic centres that are or have been subjected to urban intervention have gone up in price due to the improvement of habitability conditions, and there are also cases in which the tertiary function tends to predominate over others, not always promoting urban sustainability and the protection of heritage in a more comprehensive and medium-long term perspective. Former residents are not always able to withstand situations of real estate speculation, while the proximity trade more aimed at satisfying residents finds it difficult to maintain itself.

On the other hand, potential young residents are not always able to afford the high rents and couples with children feel the lack of specific equipment (such as day-care centres and schools, playgrounds, varied local commerce). Even when due to revitalization the public and commercial spaces undergo structural changes, it is often found that they focus on specific social groups, often associated with temporary occupation, gentrification and tourism [6].

Returning to Baixa, whereas until the 1990s the focus was on building large shopping centres, especially at the edge of the city limits and even in its surroundings, along with its growing devitalisation, the turn of the century brought about another urban strategy that became closely associated with commerce. This new strategy considers consumption to be a structuring line of the "problem of territorial reorganization, noting that the location of commercial equipment is now used as an instrument of urban intervention" (Graça, 2007: 234). According to Miguel S. Graça, urban renewal began to focus on "promotion and historical and functional enhancement", starting another socioeconomic dynamics in the



Baixa-Chiado/Marquês de Pombal axis, as attested by the relationship between the Chiado Shopping Centre and the Tivoli Forum (Graça, 2007: 235).

The revitalisation of an urban-commercial nature in Baixa has contributed not only to emphasize local tertiarisation, but also to accentuate a tourism-cultural specialization. Public opinion has been both in favour and against this functional specialization [7]. In 2014, a report in newspaper *Público* titled "Are there too many hotels planned for Pombaline Baixa or not?" drew attention to this fact (Boaventura, *Público*: 2014.03.20). In this article, the then City Councillor for Urbanism defended "a mixture of uses involving residents, employment and trade". He also admitted that one could be "watching a perverse thing" in this area: the transformation of "a lot of housing into short-term housing".

Since then, the issue of "touristification of Lisbon", seen as something that only tends to increase (Gorjão Henriques, *Público*, 2014.08.31), became a recurring theme in the media. The Baixa area figures prominently in this news: "Tourist avalanche is destroying the quality of life in Baixa, residents say" (Alemão, *O Corvo*, 2015.03.16); "Lisbon inhabitants feel increasingly harassed by tourists" (Nogueira, *Público*: 2015.06.01); "Every second door is in the hands of tourists" (Soares, *Público*, 2015.11.08); "A whole block for yet another boutique hotel" (Soares, *Público*, 2015.11.08).

In June 2013, the President of the Parish Council of São Nicolau had already emphasized that:

"The idea behind the Protection and Detailed Plan of Pombaline Baixa [approved in December 2011] was the renewal of its buildings and the regeneration of its economic and housing activity. It was not transforming it into a closed condominium of boutique hotels connected to national and foreign real estate funds that are destroying the economic and business fabric of Baixa. (...). We are witnessing the gentrification of Baixa. (...) Everything is focused on the tourists".(cf.: <http://ocorvo.pt/2013/06/11/a-baixa-de-lisboa-esta-a-mudar-de-rosto/> )

It should also be noted that, along with a daily presence of immigrants and descendants in the Baixa region - especially Rossio and Largo de São Domingos, this social, cultural and economic dimension of space use and occupation is little

- or even not at all - valued in the revitalization proposals. As Daniel Malet Calvo (2011a) states:

“(...) currently, we find the daily and populated concentration of today’s popular classes in one of its corners, something that the conservative Lisbon Studies scholars refuse to recognize: the Luso-Africans knew how to resurrect Rossio as a meeting point and an area for socializing, denying the laments of the Lisbon Studies scholars about the decline of the historic role of the square”.

### **Final remarks**

The case of Pombaline Baixa, in Lisbon, was the excuse to address the pressing need for an integrated urban intervention coupled with a perspective of promoting diversity - social, cultural, economic, and functional. Addressing some aspects of its socio-spatial organization throughout history, it was noted that the diversity there was not immune to the processes of social differentiation, which would reflect an unequal occupation of its territory. It was also shown that the change in its initial urban functions, with the consequent tertiarisation and significant alteration of the socio-demographic profile, combined with the subsequent devitalisation of its commercial activity in the last decades of the twentieth century, led to a loss of its position in the urban dynamics. At the turn of the twentieth century, its devitalised situation mobilized the public sphere, leading to attempts to renew its role in the wider context of the city. The renewal strategy points to an urban-commercial perspective in favour of an historical-patrimonial acclamation, not always reflected in the effective protection of the urban heritage. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the transformations are significant, as they are carried out fast. What is clear is the trend towards a tourist-cultural appropriation of Baixa.

In general terms, this can jeopardize a revitalisation which, coupled with an effective protection of cultural heritage, also embraces social inclusion through diversity.

To conclude, there is an indication of integrated intervention which, by protecting its heritage, is based on a diversified occupation of the territory in terms of its social, functional, economic, and cultural characteristics. And within this invention indication, it will be fundamental to consider a better understanding of the relation

between diversities, differences and inequalities, since here lies a chance for coming up with a social inclusion programme.

**How to cite this article:** MENEZES, Marlucci; The (non) diversities of Baixa in Lisbon. Estudo Prévio. Lisboa: CEACTION/UAL - Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, 2017. ISSN: 2182-4339 [available at: [www.estudoprivio.net](http://www.estudoprivio.net)]

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## Notes

[1] “The Pombaline enterprise, in its brutal surgical operation, marks a fundamental step, separating two “Lisbons” - the medieval and baroque and the modern one, that the 19th century will develop” (França, 1989: 53).

[2] The author then notes that, at the end of the 19th century, the rationality and functionality of the Pombaline urbanization model would be “blocked in its own possibilities of expansion and valorisation of the capital of the country” (Matias Ferreira, 1987: 84) to give rise to an urban organization that would include peripheral components inscribed in a centre-periphery logic.

[3] For a critical understanding of the social uses of Pombaline Baixa, as well as a succession of proposals for revitalisation, it is paramount to read the work of Daniel Malet Calvo (2011). Through this reading, one can verify the criticism of the excessive patrimonialization of the monumental characteristics of the territory, in that that this intervention perspective projects the urban fissure created by the Pombaline enterprise when reconstructing it.

[4] “For the area of the Plan, according to data from the 2001 census regarding the statistical subsection, the resident population was 1772 inhabitants, there were 1606 dwellings, and there were 698 vacant dwellings” (cf. Report which forms part of the Pombaline Baixa Safeguard Plan, 14.02.2011, p.140).

[5] The book “Mixed Communities: Gentrification by Stealth?” (Bridge, Butler & Lees 2012) makes an interesting reflection on the current tendency to replace the notion of gentrification, associated with a negative meaning, by that of mixture, meanwhile presented as a positive thing, namely by the political and technical discourse when revealing policies and new urban intervention perspectives. The authors demonstrate, however, that replacing one word by the other, that is, gentrification by mixture, does not necessarily change the type of policy and intervention sought.



[6] For further reading, see Luís Mendes (2006), as well as volumes: 1-2 [132-133] of journal “Espace et Société” (2008) on the topic of urban gentrification; 16 [32] in “Cadernos Metrópole” (2014) on “unequal development and gentrification of the contemporary city”.

[7] Dossier no. 256 of Newspaper Esquerda Net (2016.10.08) on “Tourism – City and Gentrification” contains 19 interesting articles inviting reflection on present day Lisbon.

### **Biographical note**

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