



Designing public space in rebuilding the city without a plan: The example of the redevelopment of the Central Area of Cacém¹

Rodrigo Coelho

Architect, Master Metropolis - Universidade Politécnica da Catalunha e Centro de Cultura Contemporânea de Barcelona.

PhD in Architecture (FAUP).

Assistant professor at FAUP

To cite this article: COELHO, Rodrigo – Designing public space in rebuilding the city without a plan: The example of the redevelopment of the Central Area of Cacém. **Estudo Prévio** 1. Lisboa: CEACTIONAL - Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, 2012, p. 35-51. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Disponível em: www.estudoprévio.net].

Creative Commons, licenca CC BY-4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Summary

The issue or problem that is addressed in this paper relates mainly with recognizing the importance of public space in (re) building the contemporary city “without form” that, in general, is associated with urban peripheries. We will emphasize, from the analysis of a case study – the redevelopment project of the Central Area of Cacém -, under which conditions the public space project can act a posteriori, in recently formed urban sectors, where public space hasn’t had a structuring role in its urbanization, seeing its presence reduced to a residual character.

Inquiring about the factors that can lead to a consistent (re) configuration of public space in these areas of the city has become one of the main challenges architecture and urban design is facing. Especially since we are dealing with urban areas with great importance in the metropolitan context, whose recent origin, coinciding with the period we call urban explosion without form and rapid transformation (beginning in World War II), poses a problem of balance and future development of cities.

Keywords: urban project, public space, *urban development*, “city without a plan”

1. Introduction – The need to *make a centre* as basis for restoring urban peripheries

With this paper we will try to emphasize above all, from the analysis of a case study – the redevelopment project of the Central Area of Cacém -, in what term, and under what conditions, the *public space* project can be instrumental in (re) building the contemporary city “without form” or “without plan”.

Inquiring about the factors that may lead to a consistent (re) configuration of the public *space* in these areas of the city has become, in our point of view, one of the main problems that architecture and urban design face in the city nowadays. Mainly because we are dealing with urban sectors which are compared to medium size and large European cities, which recently, coincides with a period we can call *urban explosion without form* (starting in post-World War II), poses a problem of balance and future development of cities.



Figure 1 – Intervention on the Central Area of Cacém within Lisbon Metropolitan Area. (drawing by the author on a military map).



Figure 2 – Central Area of Cacém (general view). Source: Risco S.A.

Given the complexity and difficulty in determining the term *urban periphery*, we can say that, in the current situation of these peripheral urban areas, we can point out the lack or shortage of core functions and morphological and symbolic values (in many cases associated to the lack of a historical memory), as the main indicators or factors for its acknowledgement².

Linked to the shortage of *core functions* and the lack of a formal order (also expressed in the weak construction) or as part of this problem, we can also see, in most urban peripheries, the poor quality or shortage of qualified public spaces and capable infrastructures that can establish the necessary connections (formal and functional) to other points or urban sectors nearby (it is here that the *crisis in public space* is more noticeable).

Thus, and as several authors have stressed (e.g. Jordi Borja and Oriol Bohigas), without waiving the wish for (but surely utopian) an overall view and an integrated intervention in recovering the peripheries, the need to *make a centre* is not only necessary in facing dissolution processes of peripheral urbanization³, as it must be acknowledged, according to its symbolic and functional meaning, as the key concept to think and act upon the extended city.

The notion of *re-centralization* (which we see applied to successful cases of *restoring the urban periphery*, in Barcelona or Lyon), perceived from redefining mobility, the strengthening of core functions, and the creation or consolidation of frameworks, always linked to redevelopment policies and the creation of public spaces, seems to become one of the key strategies or operating principles of *making the city on the city periphery*.

2. Rebuilding the centre: Polis project for the Centre Area of Cacém.

Background and urban context

Committed to this principle of (re) *making the city on the city*⁴, of giving an urban meaning and *dwelling to the city without quality* from the public space, some national examples could be given. However, given its pioneer character, its consistency of methodological options, its formal and coherent quality of intervention in its whole, we believe that the example of the rebuilding of the Centre Area of Cacém is extremely important, designed and built between 1998 and 2008, under the responsibility of Manuel Salgado.

Integrated in the first group of cities that benefited from the Polis Program, the detailed planning of the Central Area of Cacém has a quality and a specificity that makes it an exemplary case, particularly within this program.

While being a “bedroom community”, with a fast, violent and partially unregulated growth, mainly in the last 40 years, Cacém has detected a clear lack of order and hierarchy in structuring the urban space, particularly in the road layout – extremely disorganized (worsen by a rugged topography) and a lack of facilities and qualified public spaces⁵.

In this respect, one could not mention, before the intervention in Cacém, the existence of a public space with a readable and social meaning, but only a set with residual spaces, a direct consequence of the lack of criteria for urban design, where private interests and neglect, incapacity or lack of control by the authorities, determined negatively and relentlessly the quality of open public spaces⁶.

However, in this urban and physical perspective prior to the intervention, extremely conditioned and degraded, there are signs of an inevitable and recognized urban vitality, reflected in the movement surrounding the facilities and the most important services, the streets, and where trade has meaning.

The first studies appear in the late 1990’s (commissioned by the City Hall of Sintra to Manuel Salgado/Risco) which seek to establish principles to act towards a more global and thorough redevelopment of the Central Area of Cacém. On the baseline study submitted in April 1999, the main ideas and the base matrix that guided the Detailed Planning were defined, carried out under the Polis Program⁷ that allowed the intervention strategy outlined in previous studies to be faster and more consistent, comprehensive and ambitious, facilitating its implementation in lesser time⁸.

The redevelopment of the public space as the main purpose of the Plan: the street as a key element and generating continuity.

We will not be detained by the details or the description of the Detailed Planning (DP). We are mainly interested in highlighting how the strategy set out in this Plan materializes and depends on a strategic and thorough action on public space.

The connection from the public space of five *micro-centralities that were going to be rehabilitated*, based on the intention of connecting in a *qualified way* the *key-urban* sectors

is in fact the main purpose of the Plan and that will define the public space matrix of the new urban reality of Agualva-Cacém (reinforced with the recovery of Ribeira das Jardas transformed in a greenway – linear park – that connects the city north - south, which in turn intersects in the centre with another vital axis that the proposal recovers – (street) Rua D. Maria II).

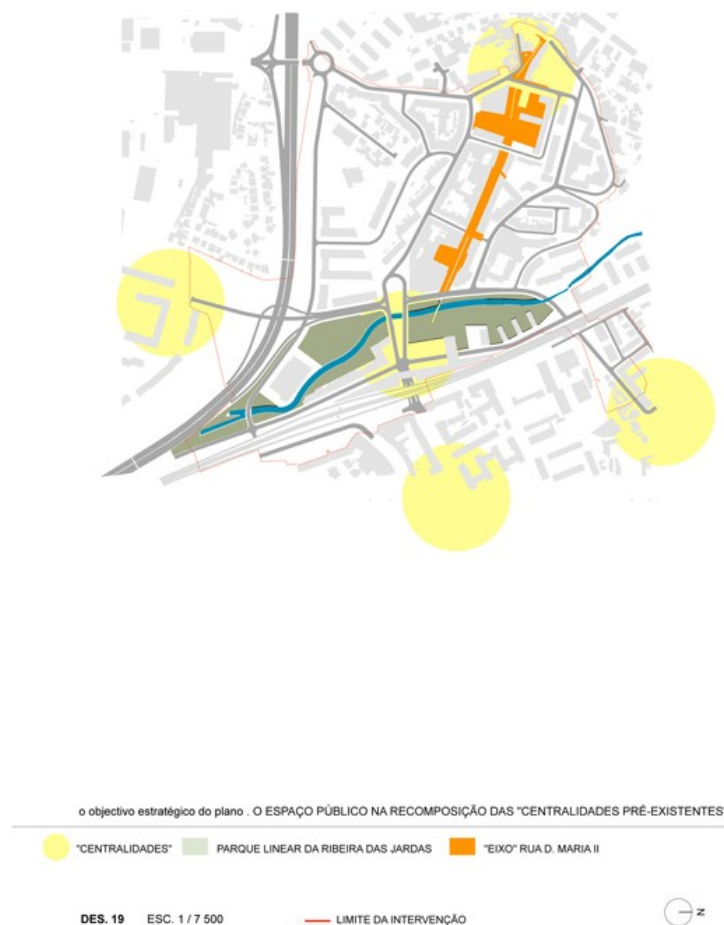


Figure 3 - The public space with the pre-existing central areas (drawing of the intervention according to the pre-existing central areas) (drawing by the author).

This matrix reflects, in a very direct and consistent way, the hierarchy that the recovered road system proposes (distinguishing *main roads*, *connecting roads* and *local roads*), clearly expressing not only the cross-section of roads reclassified or created, but also adopting different materials and building solutions, public lighting, etc.

It seems evident that the urban restoration strategy proposed by the “Detailed Planning” and confirmed by the “Public space Project”, valued the street as a structuring and coordinating element in the intervention. Establishing the continuities and solving the

disruptions and obstacles, the street appears as the main transforming and guiding element in the pre-existent urban fabric, on which rests, greatly, the role to restore hierarchy, legibility, meaning and identity to the area of intervention.

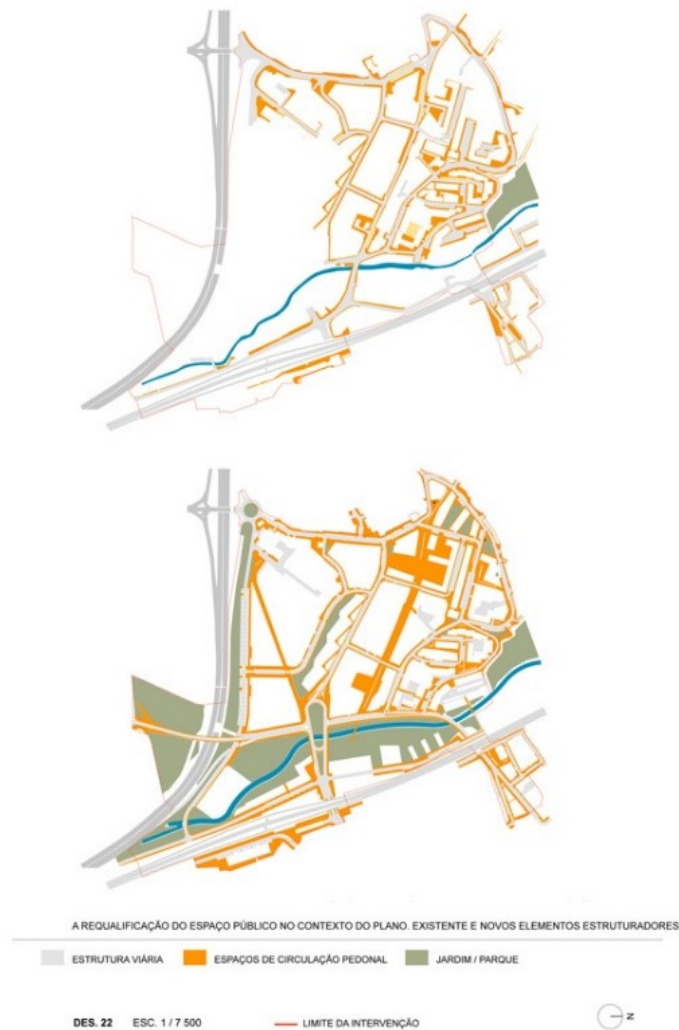


Figure 4 - Re-qualifying public space according to the plan (public spaces before and after the intervention) (drawing by the author).



Figure 5 - Re-qualifying public space according to the plan (public space according to the hierarchy of the road structure) (drawing by the author).

Based on this methodological procedure, the treatment given to the elements that characterize the public space becomes relevant – the afforestation, (re)defining the streets, paving – and are able to define or introduce a *new spatial order*, essential in restructuring the urban set and the open spaces defined by the Plan.

With this purpose, a *set of rules* and clear typological principles are defined, and embodied in three main categories of roads (pre-defined by the Detailed Plan), which can be recognized very clearly, in the elements related to traffic, in the proposed afforestation, and the materials. These guiding principles are not only perceived in a functional dimension but are also used as a way to express a *formal order*, capable of organizing spaces, establishing continuities and giving visibility, identity and scale to the urban space.

The perennial and familiar nature of the solutions proposed for the *design of the ground* (e.g. choice of materials to cover the floor, that are different if intended for public space or for the different types of streets), as well as the correct dimension of the different elements (sidewalks, afforestation, traffic lanes, etc.) – *giving priority to the pedestrians* – as well as the ability to adapt to the many specific situations that can be detected, can be decisive, in our point of view, for (re) gaining the identity, hierarchy and legibility of the public space in the Central Area of Cacém.



Figure 6 - Rua D. Maria II (view from the west). Source: photograph by the author.



Figure 7 – View (from the east) of “Rua D. Maria II” from the pedestrian bridge connecting Aqualva and Cacém. Source: photograph by the author.

However, it is necessary to point out that the conquering identity does not result in an imposition from a sterile and unjustified formal order. On the contrary, the intervention on public space has even, in some cases, an (almost) anonymous nature, providing the necessary fluidity and articulating the system, given the several situations of discontinuity or even delay in roads and pedestrian paths.

It is here that alternative pedestrian connections appear, materialized in stairs, ramps, widening or squares, ensuring comfort and adjustment to human scale, diversity and ability to work in public space.

Some of these unfavourable situations are indeed intelligently used to allow to go through blocks, create activity spots (as sidewalk cafés) or exceptions (defining staging points), which turn out to be important landmarks in the reclassified public space system.

In addition to the elements (usually) used in the generic reclassification of public spaces

(afforestation, pavements, lighting, etc.), the *vertical surfaces* are also, in these situations, an important part of characterizing public space. Dividing spaces, directing pathways or solving existing gaps, the vertical surfaces (materialized in supporting walls, closing spaces, ramps, etc.) end up being an important focus on characterizing public space (close to what we consider afforestation, pavements or lighting, to the extent that they serve as elements that help standardize, organize and provide scale to the public space, providing an identity and unity essential to the project).



Figure 8 - View of the new roundabout (view from the west). Source: photograph by the author.

The equipment and unique public spaces in creating a “new centre”

If, as mentioned, the *systematic intervention of the street* is what allows a primary structure and an extensive recovery of public space in the Central Area of Cacém, we should also emphasize its *exception and articulation components* in the public space system, able to ensure the “*quality connections among micro-centralities*”.

These attributes are particularly visible in the redevelopment of “Rua D. Maria II” (project conceived by Inês Lobo and João Gomes da Silva). In this case, regardless of the final consolidation of the *axis* proposed by the Plan (which depends on building the complete northern front of the street), the public space has already acquired a remarkable character, by redefining its profile, treating the pavements, afforestation, boiler design and urban furniture (which allowed to have an image close to a side-walk or promenade).

Also related to exceptional achievements, we should consider interventions on public space developed in the south and east sector of the reclassified area. We specifically refer to the project Linear Park (authorship of NPK), which allowed the (re)conversion of “Ribeira das Jardas” in the main public space of Aqualva-Cacém (covering the lack of a true public space centre, appropriate to the urban dimension of this cluster), establishing itself as the main collective reference of the (re)created urban structure, and also as an organizer and a mediator of the several tensions in this part of the city.



Figure 9 - “Ribeira das Jardas” before the intervention. Source: Risco S.A.



Figure 10 - “Ribeira das Jardas” after the intervention (Linear Park of Ribeira das Jardas). Source: photograph by the author.

The proposal contained in the Detailed Planning contemplated the recovery of this residual space into a central urban space. It was not only about creating a reference point, a privileged stage of the collective life of the City of Agualva-Cacém, permeable and accessible from a pedestrian route linking north-south, but also a space to organize and create continuity along and throughout both margins of the stream (Ribeira), simultaneously creating conditions for the alignment and articulation (possible) between Agualva and Cacém⁹.

At this level, the importance of the point of intersection of the Linear Park with “Rua D. Maria II” is already known, which extends east through the pedestrian bridge - towards Agualva – and in the future will connect the “*Praça Central*” (the main square yet to be constructed), which will truly be the point of articulation between Agualva and Cacém.

Implanted at an elevation of the park, and ending in the reclassified axis of “Rua D. Maria II”, the “*Praça Central*” (main square) will define the eastern side with the building “*Nova Baixa Cacém*”, an extensive linear scaling annexed to the railway line, which opposes a lower perpendicular building, for public facilities, which will define the north side of the square (Praça Central)¹⁰.

With a linear configuration, developed in parallel to the west with the railway line (an extension of about 270 meters), the (yet not constructed) *Building “Nova Baixa Cacém”*



reveals, in turn, the clear intention of building a new urban facade in Cacém, taking the form of an exceptional element, not only from the standpoint of the proposed uses, but especially for the clear intention to put an urban stamp on this side of the City¹¹.

Together, these spaces and the urban facilities will provide a civic, commercial and recreational activity centre – forming a central, dense and complex public space. In particular the implementation of the main square project (Praça Central), which will organize and give meaning to the pedestrian path system that crosses the railway line and to the other coordination that the Plan provides (especially for the north side).

3. Final remarks

The first aspect that we deem relevant to point out regarding the proposed redevelopment of the Central Area of Cacém is connected to the importance and novelty that covers the appreciation of the *periphery* or the *city without plan*, as the object of an extensive and coordinated intervention supported mainly on the redesigning of the public space. With this example, we believe that the urgency of looking at the peripheral sectors of the city is now clear (perceiving them as a fundamental key in balancing the *metropolitan city*), considering urban renewal programs from an overall, strategic and long-term view, and taking into account the recovery of public space as a fundamental pillar of these programs, in order to allow a re-founded intervention of these large urban areas, giving them an identity and an urban structure that was inexistent.

The global and intensive intervention on the pre-existing public space (in coordination with the Detailed Planning) allowed it to become an orderly system, generating urban continuity and collective activities that were developed in the city.

From this point of view, it was also decisive to have an anchoring plan of the public and collective facilities, in the “heavier” mobile infrastructures, as well as a network of green spaces, capable of making an urban space system and planning the city, so it can become clearer, more liveable and more functional¹².

Due to the fact that mobile systems strongly condition the public space planning, we also consider important to point out (in the new proposed public space system) formal and spatial coherence and control present in coordinating heavier infrastructure network with road layout, mainly with the linear park, providing the *infrastructure* (together with the green system / Linear Park) a key role in materializing a new identity for Cacém, namely with its building “*Nova Baixa*”.

Along with the development and implementation of the plan and the construction work, the role of public authorities was equally important – in this case, the Polis Program – as promoters and executors of short-term operations – as was the case of the public space project.

On the other hand, it could hardly be possible at such short notice to execute this type of public space project – for a considerable area and carried out following a Detailed Planning – without the assumption on the part of the same design team, of the coherent and effective coordination among the strategic decisions related to urban design, taken on a scale of 1/

1000, and its architectural embodiment seen on a scale of 1/1.

However, as it can easily be assumed, the intention of *making the city in the suburbs*, and consolidating the most important idea of the Plan – *building a centre* – is still greatly dependent on the ability to deliver a few planned projects, yet still to be done, namely for the building “*Nova Baixa*”. This leads us to recognize the importance of the factor time, proving that a process with these characteristics is essential to involve not only public but also private entities.

Regardless of these and other circumstances affecting the construction of the city and urbanism, it is necessary to state that the deep requalification operated on public space was built as a structuring component and strongly characterizing the new urban space, capable of *triggering* urbanization processes and *giving form* to the city, becoming so important and indispensable as a starting point for the future transformation of Cacém.

Bibliography

- BOHIGAS, Oriol – “La plaza y la calle. El espacio público reivindicado”. In *La reconstrucción de Barcelona*. Madrid: MOPU, 1986, pp. 83-101.
- BOHIGAS, Oriol – “La Ciudad como Espacio Proyectado”. In *La Arquitectura del Espacio Público: Formas del Pasado, Formas del Presente*. Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía – Consejería de Obras Públicas y Transportes e Triennale di Milano, 1999.
- BOHIGAS, Oriol – *Contra la incontinencia urbana: reconsideración moral de la arquitectura y la ciudad*. Barcelona: Electa (Diputació de Barcelona; Xarxa de Municipis), 2004.
- ESPUCHE, Alberto Garcia – “La reconquista de Europa. Por qué el espacio público?” In *La Reconquista de Europa. Espacio público urbano 1980-1999*. Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporànea de Barcelona, 1999.
- ESTEBAN I NOGUERA, Juli – *Elementos de ordenación urbana*. Barcelona: Gaya Ciencia, 1981.
- GIAMMARCO, Carlo; ISOLA, Aimaro – *Disegnare le periferie : il progetto del limite*. Roma: Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1993.
- LANDAU, Bruno. “Espace public: une composante majeure de la politique de la Ville”. In *AMC* nº76, dezembro 1996.
- “Manuel Salgado entrevistado por José Adrião e Ricardo Carvalho”. In *JA* Nº232 (Política Jul-Set 2008), p.36-48.
- PORTAS, Nuno; DOMINGUES, Álvaro; CABRAL, João – *Políticas urbanas: tendências, estratégias e oportunidades*, Lisboa: FCG, 2003.
- RISCO – *Plano de Pormenor da Área Central do Cacém. Relatório*.
- RISCO – *Projeto de Espaços Públicos da Área Central do Cacém – Memória Descritiva*.
- SIZA VIEIRA, Álvaro – “Exterior Ciudad”. In *Sileno* nº 14,15, No ciudad, dezembro 2003, p. 52-56.
- SOLÀ-MORALES, Manuel. “Para una urbanidad material”. In *De cosas urbanas*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2008, pp. 146-153.
- “Recompor as periferias” (mesa redonda entre Manuel Salgado, Nuno Lourenço, Madalena Duarte Silva, José Veludo e Nuno Salgado). In *JA* Nº 209 (janeiro, fevereiro 2003), pp. 57-63.



Viver o Cacém, Programa Polis, Plano Estratégico. Lisboa: Ministério das Obras Públicas e Ordenamento do Território, 2000.

¹ Text based on the Phd thesis submitted to the Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto in January 2012.

² For this reason, as is known, these parts of the city are, in many ways, more often associated to *exclusion and deprivation* (and even marginalization) than to *geometrical distance* to which they are from the *centre* (which is the origin of the concept of periphery, linked to the idea of an “urbanized circle” around a pre-existing polarized core). While, from this point of view, from the different urban peripheries we can find in most European cities, where it becomes more evident the lack of core functions are precisely those where the residual function is dominant or almost exclusive (and therefore in most cases show a pathological condition – in many ways, mainly socially – for which urbanism and urban design has had difficulty in finding answers).

³ Jordi Borja e Zaida Muxi - El espacio público: ciudad y ciudadanía, Barcelona: Electa, 2003, p. 57.

⁴ We must remember, in this connection and context, that we take the II World War as the timeframe from which the “city no longer was made in the city”, insofar as the examples of expansion or creation of a new city corresponding to the 1920’s and 30’s, constituting additions or highlighted parts belonging to the former circles (as British satellite communities, Siedlungen, etc.), are designed in direct conjugation with the existing city, both the morphological and functional point of view.

⁵ The city of Aqualva-Cacém (located roughly half way through this same urbanizing axis that connects Sintra to Lisbon – about 10 km from Sintra) originated from a dispersed set of locations, from where Aqualva stood – a relatively compact cluster, located on the eastern side of the railway line - and Cacém – the west side of this same line, which developed along the road to Lisbon - Sintra (currently Rua Elias Garcia) and crossing with the road “Estrada de Paço de Arcos”, was its “centre”. Showing in the first decades of the twentieth century (particularly in the 40’s and 50) a significant growth (that justified setting up the council of Aqualva-Cacém in 1953), it is however in the 60’s and 70’s (coinciding with the improvements in the “Linha de Sintra” and the deviation of “Estrada de Sintra” from the Centre of Cacém, and subsequent construction of IC 19¹), that begins the great transformation, leading to its integration into the metropolitan network of suburban centres around Lisbon.

⁶ Note that, just as an example, the absence, in many cases, of basic infrastructures and poor street lighting, afforestation, sidewalks, street furniture, etc. The diagnosis made by the planning team on the specifications that comes with the public space project reveals the precarious condition that characterized the public space before the intervention:

“1- *Discontinuity in the road and pedestrian paths, with several situations of dead ends, stops or interruptions, uneven between sills and roads, obstacles for pedestrian movement, narrow crossings and staircases;*

2- *Occupying the road with parking to the full capacity limits of the available space;*

3- *Undifferentiation or contradiction on the hierarchy of roads;*

4- *Many situations of courtyards, squares, or parks which being integrated into the public space, are not characterized as such;*

Very little afforestation and in poor development, without sensitive consequences on the experience and qualification of urban space;

5- *Lack of clarity in the implementation of the operational conditions of public transport;*

6- *Lack of micro-spaces for informal recreation;*

7- *Total lack of sidewalk cafés and restaurants;*

8- *Poor allocation, location and characterization of crossings for pedestrians;*

9- *Scarce and inadequate street furniture;*

10- *Poor public lighting”.*

Risco, *Projecto de Espaços Públicos da Área Central do Cacém - memória descritiva* (2004), p. 4.



⁷ The recovery of “Ribeira das Jardas” for the public space, as well as restructuring the roads or transforming downtown Cacém (keeping in mind its civic concept), are already perceived in this Study as a key action, considered and put into practice later in the intervention of urban regeneration of the city of Aqualva - Cacém.

⁸ In the specific case of Cacém, integration into the Polis Program enabled the intervention area to be extended, now covering approximately an area of about 45.5 hectares, centered on Baixa do Cacém, generically delimited to the north by the Urban Park, to the east by the Linha by rail, to the south by the IC 19 and to the west by the road to Paço de Arcos.

⁹ From the point of view of its design, the *Linear Park*, being essentially a solid green element, involves, on one hand, the recovery of a space frame and protection of the bank of the river (providing answers to the hydrological and hydraulic problems), providing, on the other hand, spaces for pedestrians, in order to allow a more collective and informal use (whether for contemplation and walking, or for crossing, taking advantage of the many pedestrian links that the project provides and implements).

¹⁰ The design of this equipment is of the utmost importance not only to achieve the strategy defined by the Detailed Planning (creating a new *urban centre*), but also for the quality of public spaces that will be built around it.

¹¹ The first version of the Plan envisaged the construction of an office tower with 18 floors (*Building “Nova Baixa Cacém”*) thought as *hito urbano*, which importance and symbolism would extend beyond its nearby surroundings, transforming it into a geographic reference that would at a distance make Aqualva-Cacém visible in its *new urban condition*.

¹² We should emphasize that the work done on redeveloping the public space created a great opportunity for carrying out important works at the infrastructure level, allowing rebuilding or building from scratch the water, electricity, telecommunication and gas networks in all the area of intervention.