Inhabiting the public space: Reasoning on four examples

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Resumo

A partir de dois exemplos de espaços públicos destruídos pouco tempo após a sua construção, e de dois projetos - um construído, outro não - no tecido urbano de Lisboa, discutem-se questões de transitoriedade e permanência, em diversas escalas espaciais e temporais, dos espaços que habitamos na cidade.

Palavras-Chave: espaço público, Lisboa, permanência, transitoriedade

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Abstract

Considering two examples of public spaces destroyed shortly after their construction and two projects in Lisbon - one built and one not built -we discuss the transience and permanency of inhabited city spaces at different spatial and temporal scales.

Keywords: public space, Lisbon, permanency, transience

Part I: Federal Plaza, New York[1]

I have divided this text into three parts. In part I, I will talk about two public spaces that had a troubled life, whose topic interests me a lot in terms of the intervention process in the public space and also given the discussions and reflections they give origin to. On the one hand, debates have arisen in the public sphere itself on how the city's governance can interfere in the design processes and question space's public character, in the sense that we can debate when a space is or ceases to be public considering people's free access to it, physically and otherwise.

My first example is often discussed in contemporary art, in particular, art in public spaces. This is the case of the Federal Plaza in New York, at the southern end of Manhattan. The so-called "plazas", usually located in front of skyscrapers, appeared in the 1970s and 1980s when New York's urban planning allowed buildings to have extra floors if they retreat the facade regarding the limit of the lot. They are what we would call squares. The plaza was not precisely the design of a square but the possibility of public space.

In 1979, Richard Serra was hired to design a sculpture for one of these spaces in front of a federal administration building. The piece, entitled *Tilted Arc*, was placed in the square to generate some tension. It was 37m long, 3.70m high and only 6cm thick. The work is not discreet and certainly not consensual. It is a political affirmation in public space and quickly became controversial, generating protest letters from inhabitants who wanted the sculpture removed immediately. What eventually happened was that, because of the protests, a panel of the General Service Administration was created that would be a kind of jury and would decide if the piece stayed or not, thus raising the issue of whether the size of the sculpture prevented the use of the square by the public. This discussion raises many questions about whether a piece of public art or art in a public space can determine whether or not space is public. One of the arguments of the GSA side was that the piece prevented several types of events from happening in the square (ceremonies, concerts, etc.). Still, the truth is that the square itself was extremely unpleasant long before Richard Serra's sculpture was placed there. The fountain had already been turned off because the wind was so strong there that anyone crossing the square would rapidly become wet with the gusts of water, which made the public not excited to use that space. After an 8-year battle, in 1989, Richard Serra's sculpture was dismantled or destroyed, according to the artist. In 1992, GSA invited landscape architect Martha Schwartz to work on the square. Although this project briefly references the *Tilted Arc* and its proposal, there was never a critical overlap to the dismantling of Serra's piece and what the location represented. However, it somehow responded to the GSA program, though ironically stressing how untrue the arguments that had led to the destruction of Richard Serra's work.

When you read the descriptive memory of Marta Schwartz's project, the only occupation she proposed for the square was a "place for lunch". The result was ironic since this prevented — unlike Richard Serra's piece — any other uses for the square. The square of the civic centre of the American administration in New York forbade any kind of demonstration or protest from taking place there.

Twenty years later, in 2011, due to a waterproofing issue in the parking slab, Marta Schwartz's project was destroyed and replaced by one by Michael Van Valkenburgh, which, in my view, is just a reiteration of Schwartz's project, perhaps more evident in terms of the square's possible uses, but still rather acritical in its approach.

This shows that the idea that space is public only and exclusively because it is public property is not necessarily accurate in the sense that we, as citizens, cannot be confident or sure that we can express ourselves there or have access to the place (i.e., have physical access and can demonstrate and express our freedom of speech), and that access is not limited by the very design of the square which somehow controls it.

Figure 1 – Richard Serra Tilted Arch, 1981 (Cave to Canvas, available at: https://thingsworthdescribing.com, Retrieved in May 2023).

Part II: Liberdade Avenue

When Restauradores Square was built in the late 19th century, the Portuguese cobblestone pavement (calçada portuguesa) was not yet used, so the sidewalks were made with concrete. Later, the calçada is introduced in the southern areas of the square, and only later is the rest of the avenue cobbled. At that time, the flower beds were created following a romantic model, which heavily depended on the ability and creativity of the gardeners, who were responsible for choosing, replacing and watering the flowers. It was costly to have permanent vegetation in the public space, only possible when the labour force was readily available, which would decrease over time.

In the 1950s, when a labour force was still available, the beds were already more simplified, and the avenue's development was already manifest. At this time, part of the avenue is widened to allow the metro to be built. This provided the opportunity for the avenue to be restructured. The central road needed to be enlarged because the traffic in Lisbon was already increasing, and all the avenue's landscaped areas had to be reconfigured. Gonçalo Ribeiro Telles and Francisco Caldeira Cabral propose a radically different view of the avenue. They suggested that pedestrians should be given the most relevance and that the central areas, where the flower beds were originally, should become areas for pedestrians to walk. The vegetation was diverted to the right and the left, maintaining its connection with the walks near the facades on each side of the avenue, and the parking was redesigned within the system of trees and planted areas to separate pedestrians from car traffic.

The Municipality accepted the project, and construction began. One of the issues that the project could also solve was one which still exists - the under-sizing of the tree beds, somewhat dependent on the artistic design of the sidewalk, which hinders their growth. When transplanting the species into the new areas, the tree beds would be sized correctly, allowing the development of the trees and a better organisation of the entire avenue. There would also be an understanding that, in topographic terms, the avenue works as a valley. This valley materialises where three streets (São Sebastião, Santa Marta and San José) meet and draw the valley line. The avenue is a little to the side of this axis, but we feel the valley's topography when we walk it.

When the project was implemented, it caused some surprise in public opinion, and some issues about its quality were raised. The Municipality supported and trusted the project, but when a new Mayor was elected, who gave in to public opinion issues, the project still needed to be completed. Gonçalo Ribeiro Telles was told to undo the project and restore the original situation, but he decided not to do it and was charged by the municipality and eventually dismissed. Gonçalo Ribeiro Telles's work was frankly ahead of his time….

This project was not much different from those implemented in other European cities but was seen as "excessively modern"; the Municipality gave in to public opinion and restored the old layout. Today, the avenue's west side is neither the project by Ressano Garcia nor Ribeiro Telles but rather a copy of a 19th-century drawing.

When Gonçalo Ribeiro Telles left the Lisbon Municipality, he was invited to do what is probably one of the most important works of his career as a landscape architect and one of the most significant spaces in the city of Lisbon - the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Garden.

Figure 2 - Avenida da Liberdade Av., project on the eastern sidewalks by Ribeiro Telles, 1950s (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation - Collection Estúdio Mário NovaisCFT003.000142).
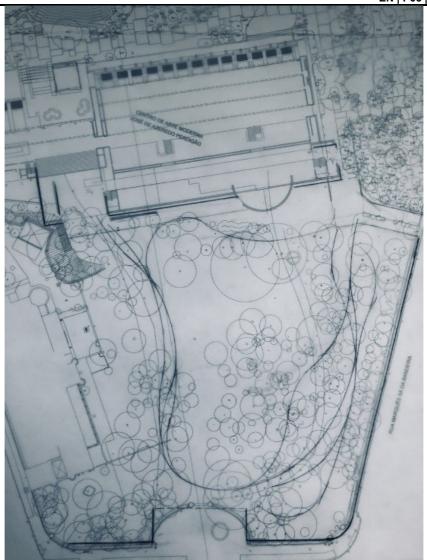
Figure 3 - Competition for the New Gulbenkian Garden (Southern Area) - sketches of the footways (Victor Beiramar Diniz, 2018).

Part III: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Garden

The land currently occupied by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation was part of the farm at the city's gates. Several since the mid-18th century mention the farm, but as it was so far from the city limits, its topographic register appears for the first time in the 1807 map.

The land was divided with the road construction around the city (Estrada da circunvalação). At the end of the 19th century, the farm was bought by the Eugénio de

Almeida family, who lived in the Lago de São Sebastião Palace. The park has had different uses throughout time; it was a private park and then a public one (Santa Gertrudes Park), housed the Zoo and, years later, it became a fair (feira popular); more recently, it was the location of the first RTP (state TV channel) studios. The park was many different things but always maintained its size and limits. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation bought the land from the Eugénio de Almeida family to build its headquarters.

Gonçalo Ribeiro Teles, together with Viana Barreto, Ruy Jervis Athouguia, Alberto Pessoa, and Pedro Cid, designed the architectural set of the Foundation´s headquarters, Gardens and Museum. The initial idea was to break down the barriers between the pavements of the avenues around the land and use green areas to define their limits, clearly opening the foundation to the public, despite it being a private space. However, this idea was set aside because the location was prone to flooding. Thus, the park's limit was drawn, now one of the most striking features of the whole set. By partially maintaining the walls surrounding Santa Gertrudes Park, the borders marked an edge over the walls and produced a double result: those inside the garden never saw its limits, so the park seemed to continue far beyond its borders. On the other hand, those outside the wall saw the garden as expanding the public space.

Another brand image of this project, which also was a product of chance, was the pavement made of large square-shaped concrete slabs.

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation wanted to buy the land to the south to extend the Garden. Ribeiro Telles made some draft drawings for the expansion. But the idea did not materialise due to the construction of the Modern Art Center, located exactly between the two areas.

The development of this process was almost "autophagy" because it began by being thought for *one* land, which was then divided, and one of the parts gradually began to engulf the other to the point of becoming one territory.

The starting point for the extension proposal I, as a member of SAMI architects, developed for the competition was: How can we draw the expansion of this space without reproducing a mimetic form? How can we design a kind of "Companion Garden"? One of the things that we began to explore was the hierarchical logic that the pavements by Ribeiro Telles have. We realised that the tree cover was somewhat uniform on both sides of the walls. Therefore, our intervention should occur on the floor plan — on the ground. We studied Ribeiro Telles' drawings to understand the flow and be able to interpret it differently. Thus, we defined a kind of main structure that goes unaligned in the secondary and tertiary routes, which seem to disconnect and separate from the main course but keep on returning to it. We proposed to redraft the idea of a path as the backbone and structure in coherence with Ribeiro Telles's garden design.

Part IV: Campo das Cebolas (2012-2018)

This project is the result of a competition launched in 2012. At the time, I was working with architect Joao Luis Carrilho da Graça. One of the preliminary analyses for the tender was the variation of the borders of Campo das Cebolas, which included changes and permanence. One of the most exciting permanence is that the square is bordered by the wall built by King Ferdinand in the north.

The construction of the pier of the Lisbon harbour at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century was a significant event for the city and a key one for understanding and identifying this place; the limit of the city in relation to water was, until then, variable — it went up and down according to the tides. The limestone walls defined a stable border between the city and the water.

Another critical moment for this city area was the municipality's purchase of "Casa dos Bicos" in 1955. The building was rehabilitated in 1981 with a project by architects Manuel Vicente and Daniel Santa-Rita, which restored the building's size. Between 1987 and 2002, it was the headquarters of the National Commission for the Commemorations of the Portuguese Discoveries, and, in 2008, the municipality ceded the upper floors for the José Saramago Foundation, reserving the ground floor for the creation of an archaeological nucleus, creating a new public space in the city, which was recently named, partially, as José Saramago square.

One of the exciting moments in the life of this place is, in fact, the time when it was occupied by these buildings, namely by this triangular block of the so-called "senate houses". Nowadays, it is hard to imagine that the main entrance of "Casa dos Bicos" was in a street rather than a square that visually communicates with the river. It is also difficult to imagine all this space of Campo das Cebolas fully occupied by cars since, at a point in time, this square and Terreiro do Paço were substantial parking lots.

Our starting point for the competition, which included the construction of a car park next to the INPI building, was more than trying to turn the square to the river, as in the 1980s design, which opened a perpendicular axis to the Casa dos Bicos, the South and Southeast River Station limited that and therefore the square never reached the river. We consider it even more interesting that this square because it is next to the staged relationship between Terreiro do Paço and the river, opens to the city and looks at this facade of the city, which is one of the permanence in the development of this area.

Between submitting the project and knowing the result of the competition, the municipal assembly made the construction of the car park impossible (they argued that it would hinder the view of those living in houses on the hillside) and, therefore, when we won the competition, we were soon informed that this situation would have to be changed. We would have to find a solution for parking the cars at the intervention site (there would have to be as many parking spots as there were in the parking lot). The answer was to build a parking lot under the square and, at the same time, maintain our initial idea of raising the square quota to create an amphitheatre, both in relation to the river and to the hillside. The project also aimed to recover the layout of the old walls, but our maps needed to be more accurate. We were able to identify the location of the stones that make the walls, which was essential to define the shape and limits of the car park and

organise the public space. We recovered the memory of the place to design the present. Perpendicular to the river, we have a 3% slope which allows the wall to reach Infante Dom Henrique Ab. with a slope of about 1.20 meters. This allowed us to do what we wanted: to build an elevated square of Infante Dom Henrique Av. so that those in the square do not feel the heavy car traffic. The car park mainly occupied the perimeter of the riverside, using the walls we knew existed to minimise the issue of archaeology. We found several archaeological elements, such as parts of the floors of the houses in the triangular block and some old boats. These vessels provided essential knowledge since most were relatively well-preserved and could be studied. We realised many ships had been purposely sunk to stabilise the sludge near the pier's walls. We understood this for two reasons: the rudder was disassembled and placed inside the vessel full of stones. This was common practice at the time when the boats stopped working. During the excavations, we found a staircase, which did not appear in the studies. That finding established the location of the stairs that we had included in the project. All these elements were brought to the project, studied individually, and their reuse was analysed. Some sections of the original wall that was dismantled were used to complete the new wall, the same happening to the staircase that was dismantled and reassembled at the top of the slab.

In each of our interventions, there was always an element of difference in order not to create false historical pieces - the stones brought from dismantled walls were sawn so that their finish was different, and to evidence the reuse of the old stairs, a higher step was introduced. This work was rather detailed, identifying each element and defining its new location and use. All stone elements found, even without archaeological value, were used in the final pavement design on the car park roof.

Today, where once there were cars, there is now a square defined by a gently sloping plane towards the city, which offers an elevated view over the river while protecting its users from noise and heavy traffic. What existed there somehow shapes the whole space. This continuity seemed essential to us so that the parking lot could flow uninterruptedly from the public space and thus gain a character that was not strictly that of a structure buried and hidden beneath the surface.

Figure 4 - Campo das Cebolas - The sidewalk includes stone elements from archaeological excavation (Victor Beiramar Diniz, 2019).

[1] Lecture given on 22 December 2021 on "Inhabiting Public Space" within Seminar I and III courses. Conference coordinated by Barbara Silva.