

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACE

Gonçalo Canto Moniz

The public space of cities is undergoing a considerable transformation in Portugal, in Europe and in the world. Today, the street, the avenue, the square or the garden that built the city centres in the last centuries are not necessarily public spaces, they are often spaces that have lost their character, use and public representation. On the one hand, tourism has occupied urban centres, mainly the historical areas, pushing city dwellers away to the peripheral ones due to the exponential increase in land value and the cost of services. On the other hand, the rapid growth of cities, with successive areas of expansion, has led to investments in road infrastructure, generating open spaces devoid of urban life.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this problem, as urban centres became empty due to the lack of tourists and city dwellers, and the peripheries also became empty, due to a lack of qualified and inclusive public spaces.

This represents a great opportunity for cities that seek a different model of development and governance, one that can be extended to all their urban areas, is more attentive to the needs of city dwellers and ensures greater density, connection, integration and inclusion.

Denser cities tend to make the best use of available resources and promote the intensification of urban life. A better balance is thus created between built-up and natural areas – forest, field, parks, rivers, sea – promoting a green corridor or ring that regenerates the city, bringing citizens closer to nature.

Better-connected cities establish a strong link between their centres through a fast mobility network for private and public transport and a slow mobility network for city dwellers travelling on foot or by bicycle. This slow mobility has a strong impact on the well-being of city dwellers, is socially more inclusive and makes the use of public spaces richer and safer.

More integrated cities develop a balanced network of services and public spaces, allowing city dwellers access to amenities within a short distance from their home or workplace. This way, the city promotes the city dwellers' right to housing, education, health and culture.

More inclusive cities establish a dialogue with city dwellers, particularly the most vulnerable, to ensure not only their access to the public spaces but also their involvement and empowerment in the planning and decision-making process. This way, more inclusive cities ensure that urban decisions and plans have an effective impact on city dwellers' lives.

The sacrifices imposed by the virus have thus raised awareness of the emergence of a new, more inclusive paradigm of public space, where city dwellers organise themselves to activate living labs and promote co-creation processes that respond to the challenges of their city.