

Design Collaboration for the Re-evaluation of an abandoned industrial city: The case of São João da Madeira - Portugal

João A. Mota, Pedro C. Almeida, Paulo S. Silva

University of Aveiro, Aveiro, P-3810-193, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Last thirty years of Portuguese urban experience brought intense changes to former rural and old-urban landscapes. The case study of “*Oliva*” factories at the city of *São João da Madeira* (SJdM) – Portugal, is an opportunity to discuss the evolvement of policies in design processes. This paper seeks to analyze the results originated by the role of order in planning, in an abandoned industrial site in Portugal, and calls for an enhanced participation between designers (urban agents, architects, urban planners) local stakeholders, residents and politicians (local government, endowments for the arts and research). The empirical material of this study was produced between 2002 and 2006 and comes from team work between the University of Aveiro and the municipality of the aforementioned city. This paper concludes that sites experiencing deep programmatic changes grounded in fragile planning agendas produce always unavoidable experiences with disorder.

The involvement of undergraduate students in research, young researchers, senior researchers, designers, residents, politicians was important for the outcome of this project and nurtured our association with a collaborative network in the northern part of the district of Aveiro (region of Entre Douro e Vouga), mobilizing a variety of agents and stakeholders representing the industrial, cultural, scientific and territorial systems of this region: enterprises, industrial chambers, municipalities, professional schools of different levels, training centers, technological centers (metal mechanics industry, shoe industry, cork industry) and the University of Aveiro.

Moreover, this research represents a contribution to the Museum of Portuguese Design: an estate and virtual museum in collaboration with the Portuguese Design Center - (CPD).

On a broader scale this study investigates: how local identities can foster new product developments and enhance the visibility of this region in the global market.

INTRODUCTION

For many years the city of São João da Madeira (SJdM) – Portugal (figures 1-2) refrained from any semblance of

comprehensive planning. Even considering the projects of the 1980's and 1990's – relocation of industrial areas and urban renewal in the city center represented isolated endeavours rather than parts of an overriding vision. An attitude in planning that is not grounded in comprehensive strategic visions informed with the regulations and opportunities for those European regions in the world context.

On the first stage of this research the CEIDET (a research center specialized in planning and local governance, resident at that time at the Environment and Planning School of the University of Aveiro) was asked by the municipality in 2002 to produce a preliminary study for the strategic plan for the urban area of São João da Madeira. A strategic plan that could support the ambitions for remaking much of the city, taking in account the region needs and potentials, and at the same time not being obsessed with the geographic, economic and social frame imposed by the limits of the municipality.

As a consequence of this study, the Environment and Planning School of the University of Aveiro took the opportunity to test the flexibility of the proposed strategic plan, hosting in 2005 an international workshop that produced detailed proposals for the city center (which includes the “*Oliva*” factories) taking in account the vision given by the Strategic Plan.

The intensive programme “*Strategies to reevaluate the architectural and urban heritage of the early 20th Century*” offered seminars and design courses, field trips, and e-learning facilities for the sharing and discussion of information still in the home countries of the six participating universities. Built on these foundations, the two week workshop offered by Aveiro University (April 3 – 17, 2005), brought together 36 undergraduate students (6 from each participating university) and 7 professors from Aveiro – Portugal; Budapest – Hungary; Frankfurt – Germany; Seville – Spain; Warsaw – Poland, bringing together as many different experiences and points of view, necessary to test the guidelines and flexibility of the Strategic Programme.

On the second and actual stage of this research (started in 2005) the strategies developed on the first stage, merged with other fields of design such as: Strategic Design and

Communication Design. The objective of this second stage is to explore and to demonstrate the idea of exploring existing cultural identity resources. From this perspective, cultural identity and its authenticity can be rediscovered by design, thus moving towards the development of sustainable contemporary products. From this point of view we can connect design practice, design teaching, local partnerships and a broad view of design research, to foster new product developments and enhance the visibility of this region in the global market.

A. Methodological Approach

First stage:

Between 2002 and 2004 a Strategic Programme for Urban Qualification was published. This Strategic Programme produced:

- 1- An analysis of land use and landscape structure, based on contacts with main stakeholders;
- 2- Based on the analysis of the identity and on the weaknesses, strengths, opportunities and threats of the city, an overview of SJDm was drawn;
- 3- Definition of strategies to achieve the urban qualification;
- 4- Meetings with the main local agents and technical teams involved in urban projects, discussion of the first proposals;
- 5- With the results of those meetings, the draft of the Strategic Programme was delivered;
- 6- Several public discussions followed;
- 7- After several months the Strategic Programme for urban qualification was approved by the municipality.

In 2005 the University of Aveiro took the opportunity to test the flexibility and the guidance of the proposed strategic plan by hosting the aforementioned intensive workshop.

Second stage:

Started in 2005 by developing and testing design process/methodologies inherited from the former stage of this research. We focused on the re-evaluation of patrimonial imagery found on Portuguese reference products and trademarks, produced at the region of this city from the early 1930's onwards. (figures 3 - 4)

- 1- During last two years, fourth year undergraduate students enrolled in the course Strategic Design, (a course offered by the Department of Communication and Art at the University of Aveiro) got involved in this survey / re-evaluation, which included three different phases that are sequential and complementary: identification, analysis and reinterpretation;
- 2- The reconstitution of Portuguese imagery related to products and trademarks, based on museology approaches to set up "The Portuguese Design Museum". A project launched by the University of Aveiro and the Portuguese Design Centre;
- 3- The reinterpretation of elements of identity in findings as a matter relevant for design, when fostering new Portuguese imagery and product developments;
- 4- Publishing of results aiming for a contribution to the Museum of Portuguese Design;
- 5- Format the results of this study to merge into an ongoing larger research project "Development Sustained by Design: case study *Entre Douro e Vouga*" a project involving other

teams of our research center: *Unidade de Investigação de Comunicação e Arte (UNICA)*.

6- Assessment of results and their impact in the sustainability of this region.

Hopefully this project will capitalize on a large vast social network built over the years and will have access to empirical and analytical materials that have resulted from a number of previous collaborative actions with some of the associated partners (municipalities, enterprises, etc).



Fig. 1. Europe - São João da Madeira is a city included in the conurbation of Porto, close to the city of Aveiro. It is part of the southern western European periphery in geographical and economical terms. (Photo courtesy of Google Earth, 2007)



Fig. 2. Detail showing "OLIVA" factories next to the city center. The mixture of uses, but also the mixture of scales is very evident inside the city. (Photo courtesy of Google Earth, 2007)



Viarco

Fig. 3. Established in 1907 at Vila do Conde, Portugal - *Fábrica Portuguesa de Lápis* (Portuguese Pencil Factory) purchased by Manuel Vieira Araújo in 1936, reborn as VIARCO at São João da Madeira. Produces 6.5 million pencils per year, including the traditional pencils for the industry and trades and, of course, crayons. Snapshot at the shop “Uma Casa Portuguesa” – Lisbon. (Photo courtesy of Pedro C. Almeida, 2006)

I. THE PORTUGUESE INDUSTRIAL CONTEXT VS. DESIGN

Portuguese products suffer from an image deficit in most international markets. This happened mostly due to the investments made in the 80's and 90's whereas Portugal turned to be seen as a cheap country for subcontracted production.

Between the 1930's and mid 1970's the right-wing dictatorial regime of “*Estado Novo*” induced a strong Portuguese visual identity, recognizable in most products of that time by establishing severe restrictions to imported goods. After the April 1974's insurrection that eradicated the right-wing dictatorship, the Portuguese market became open to foreign products offering other features and symbolic values as well as state-of-the-art technologies.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, Portugal lost a previous and interesting relationship between creative and productive activities. That happened because industrial and economic growth was anymore centered on image features (nor in propaganda for domestic consumption), but on the production's know-how and the state-of-the-art technology, seen today for instance on the footwear and textiles industries.

International brands did contract (and still do contract) high standard Portuguese companies, large scale producers, for almost three decades. This led to an industry concerned with production's performance and technology while design was (despite some good exceptions) produced in the countries that subcontracted the Portuguese industry.



Fig. 4. *Empresa Industrial de Chapelaria* (Hat Factories of S. João da Madeira) established in 1920 by António José Pinto de Oliveira. First references to Sanjo shoes and trademark are dated back to 1944. In 1996 the company was closed, and this trademark was sold. Today the main building of this factory accommodates the *Museu da Chapelaria* (Museum of Hat Industries).

The evolution of the trademark became instable after the 1980's. From left to right: 1940's to 1980's; 1980's to 1990's; 1990's; 1997 onwards. (Photo courtesy of Pedro C. Almeida)

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAME AND ANALYSIS: REDIRECTING OUR ATTENTION TO THE CONDITIONS OF THE CONTEXT

We can still learn about the way people lived and thought from looking at a factory. However, the idea underlying industrialization and global commerce is Calvinism and geographical indeterminacy - a kind of dissimulated voluptuous Calvinism, concerned with the idea of making money, doing things fast, being efficient and more recently being evasive. Most of the industrial architecture formerly produced derives from this idea. Evasiveness came later and produces today's global economy responsible for accelerating the process of abandonment, decay, and deep programmatic changes of industrial sites throughout the World.

Karl Ganser (Ganser 2002, 11-15) says that the early dynamics of industrial growth have supplanted after the 1960's by the dynamics of differentiation. The most obvious result was the creation of services outside the actual production process, which had impact on the urban structures producing clearly legible changes on the urban programmes. Those results were very dynamic and accelerated most of the situations of abandonment, decay, and transformation of old industrial areas to accommodate new programmes.

This was initially thought as a problem, however it also provided opportunities when a new model of analysis for the revaluation of old industrial areas was very convincingly discussed by Karl Ganser (2002), Thomas Sieverts and Peter Zlonicky (Hegger 2000) taking as a case study the revaluation of the Ruhrgebiet. This new model of analysis avoids the notion of the city and the surrounding landscape as two opposites (a former notion inherited from the 19th century idea of city), and allowed to perceive former industrial sites has opportunities for new programmes for the city that have not to be confined to labour.

A vision that took in consideration the singular changes on the identity of each city at the same time that did diligent work with the central and local government for launching new programmes, that for the first time considered the Ruhr as a overall region and not single cities competing with each other for supremacy, as it used to be since the industrial revolution era.

Past experiences such as the Ruhrgebiet or the new EU cohesion policy, emphasizes the role of cities for the period 2007-2013. This macro frame of the European policy, produced incentives for cities that during the past decades experienced fast and deep programmatic changes produced by the displacement and abandonment of industries to other regions of the world. This is certainly the case of our case study, but also the case of many other European small or peripheral cities.

On the other hand, this experience and knowledge merged planning with a vaster context coming from the social sciences and the arts, allowing transformations on the idea of public space and its symbolic potentials, brought by existing cultural identity resources. From this perspective, cultural identity and its authenticity can be rediscovered by design and regional planning, thus moving towards the development of sustainable and suitable innovation. From this point of view we can connect design practice, design teaching, local

partnerships and a broad view of research in Design and Regional Planning, to foster new social developments and enhance the visibility of this region in the global market.

III. RESULTS OF THE TEAM WORK BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY AND THE MUNICIPALITY

The collaboration referred in the introduction, first stage, had a heterogeneous group of undergraduate students involved in testing the flexibility of the proposed strategic plan. Most workshop participants came from architecture schools with additional courses in urbanism, consequently the task of considering into the projects a comprehensive understanding of a municipality, its embedment in the region and the overall cultural, economical and urban environment, posed a challenge to the students that for the most part were not familiar with these issues. The same applied to students coming from Urban and Regional Planning that were not familiar in thinking programmes and designs for single buildings. The students were asked to research strategies of re-evaluation of industrial architectural heritage in their home countries, during a semester, previously to the approach to the present case study. The students of Aveiro were asked to gather information about the Portuguese case study. All the information available was shared by around 36 students and 6 professors based on an e-learning platform created by the University of Aveiro. The results of the work produced by this group of students are published at: <http://www.reworking-the-factory.org/workshops/index.htm>

These results proved to be crucial for the Municipality and other agents involved foreseeing the flexibility of the proposed strategic plan, and, for the students to get acquainted with the complexities of testing applied research.

On the second stage, a group of 47 fourth year undergraduate students of the Design programme, enrolled in the course Strategic Design, inherited from the former stage of this research the social and political embedment of Design practice. This convergence become essential when considering the revaluation of Portuguese reference products and trademarks produced in this region from the 1930's to the 1980's. A study that had the following steps:

- 1 - Identification: Field research has proved the existence of a large amount of products and trademarks with strong potential for fostering new product developments. The students produced a digital data-base of collected findings;
- 2 - Reconstitution: Graphic Surgery to rebuild a postcard collection. First edition of these postcards sent in 2006 to the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) - Industrial Design Programme; students of RMIT attended a workshop on design and multiculturalism given by designer Pedro C. Almeida and sent design feedback motivated by those postcards;
- 3 - Reinterpretation: Selected prototypes resulted on the creation of two Typeface families and a book project (postcard series) used to promote this project in recent shows.

As a consequence these students realized the need in combining into the design process the methodologies inherited

from the first stage, as well as the methodologies based on museology approaches (due to the associated project “*The Portuguese Design Museum*”) and the methodologies published by Darrel Rhea (Laurel: 145-154) concerning predictable processes for innovation.

The results of this team work was a jump start for the municipality to be sensitive to attitudes in planning that are able to balance bottom up and top down approaches in planning, and the social transformations that may be triggered by Design and Innovation. One interesting result was unplanned, became bottom up, and is now in the municipality agenda: A group of designers, architects, visual artists, together with professors and researchers of Aveiro University (School of Planning and School of Communication and Arts) and in some cases residents, constituted a discussion group “Design and Sustainable Development – D2S”. This discussion group works in collaboration with two research centers of Aveiro University: CEIDET and UnICA, and the municipalities of the cities of Arouca; Espinho; and SJdM.

The approach of D2S to planning is not placed entirely in conventional planning tools but on the synergies between Design and Planning. This produced a multi-municipal project based in methodologies organized by projectual approaches in Design, Design Management and Territorial Planning.

These approaches take into the projects deductive and inductive methods common in Design and Planning. However, differently than in planning, take with ease into the project, qualitative methods much needed to combine with the conventional quantitative methods. This methodology helped in combining anthropological and cultural issues with territorial competitiveness.

In summary the proposal for the re-evaluation of *SJdM* is a difficult job, and a challenge for learning with the dynamics of identity and an opportunity for renewal. A renewal set in premises and products with significant symbolic qualities and visibility, easily overcome the ground of intervention to become a political statement concerning the future of a region. A renewal informed by the larger context defined by world competitiveness, education and culture, sustainability and local singularity. A renewal that takes cautious steps towards what needs to be kept and what needs to be transformed.

As conclusion it is important to stimulate public opinion and consequently the public sphere for the benefits (economical, environmental, aesthetic and social) in giving to those who inhabit or to the transients in our cities, as well to consumers a sense that combines the construction of the collectively symbolic with the dynamic identity of the place and culture. This is a subject that calls for an enhanced participation between Designers (urban agents, urban planners, architects, communication and product designers)

Design educators (the synergies between the university and the collaborative network referred on the abstract) and Politicians (residents, local and European government), a challenge that an outstanding number of small or peripheral industrial cities throughout Europe are now facing.

It is a complex task developed by multidisciplinary teams from a myriad of different governmental and non-governmental institutions that, for most of the cases, are organized accordingly to the logic inherited from the second half of the twentieth century. This context, the fragmentation and overlap of the competences of these institutions, fails to succeed on comprehensive actions that may deal (at the micro and macro level) with the rampant transformations that these cities / regions face today.

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