

# on the w@terfront



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## **Urban Design and public art - portuguese perspectives**

In Portugal there are some signs of changing of attitudes regarding cities. These changes are happening by reason of economic and social changes, of State functions, of lifestyle expectations and, at technical level, by changing in perceptions about plan-design relations.

It is now obvious that urban anarchy is no longer controlled by countermeasures of more and more plans, neither by defense measures regarding heritage or environmental values...

Several factors are pointing to upgrading public space as a important design area. As it frequently happens with us, hazardous factors have also helped in that direction: the fire of Chiado area in Lisbon some years ago, due to a public space intervention by an amateur that didn't allow the firefighting vehicles to pass by.

Since some recent years, urban festivals have included art interventions and propositions of upgrading public environment. The Metro company led a policy of caring it's own public space (it was awarded the National Design Award for basing it's image on a strategy of public art in the station spaces). But it was with EXPO'98 that Public Spaces became a popular subject regarding city debate, with Public Art gaining an exemplary and demonstrative value.

In this text we'll evaluate this process and describe a specific example.

## **Diagnosis of public spaces in Portugal**



1. The time of absolute priority to basic needs such as roads and housing, starts to be somehow overpassed
2. Cities are now competing, at international and at national level, using public space as a charismatical and representative function

3. There's a new pattern of social expectations, due to the new political and economical space of EU that arised terms of comparision regarding quality of life

4. To several parteners, such as professionals, companies and institutions, public space is no longer seen as the result of urbanizing operations or road network

But less promising aspects must also be considered:

5. Bad quality of spaces that limit public spaces (architecture, resulting spaces in the margin of road schemes, voids) still are everywhere;

6 Degradation of existenting public space in old urban areas, due to changing in traditional uses or bad maintainance leads to abandoned and vandalised efects ;

7. Most of interventions criating new public space is of bad quality and inexpressiveness (dead ends, highways, parking lots...);

8 The impact of car infrastructure: elimination of useful pedestrian and free space, more distance, barriers, unequality between those who are and those who aren't car owners;

9 Agressiveness and lack of space identification criates poor socialization habits and little social sofistication of life interactions in exterior activities;

10 Comunication and advertising devices in growing quantity, have not only a polutting impact but represent privatization of a colective property \_ sight ;



### **Glorious days of Expo 98**

Controverse about Expo'98 before it happened was conducted over the theme "how the money is spended" and not "how to build a city" that the event should have motivated. However today it is commonly agreed that regarding the poor quality we are getting with public spaces in the rest of Lisbon what happened in Expo public spaces is still the best show case in town.

I recall some of the elements of success

A dockyard as the center place - Expo most protagonist public space had a contraditory program in a big non-walkable open space that gave to everything a meaning surplus \_ water.

Boundaries between different designers \_ playground \_ and the established rules by Manuel Salgado's masterplan, cultivated a methodologie of partnership between different criators

Foreign architects, Shermayev's ceramic tiles ("azulejos") in Oceanary walls and Calatrava's roof for his railway station inspired in Lisbon trees, contextualised their cosmopolitan looks.

Gomes da Silva and Fernanda Fragateiro, portuguese landscaper and scultor, redraw traditional disciplinary limits of the arts of gardening with no concessions to decoration

Siza Vieira, most famous portuguese architect and traditional pavement design with the new "calçadas" interpretations by young artists, gave visual expression to national identity.

### From design's point fo view

Design's point of view in the questions of public space is frequently limited to urban furniture and signs, by the handing of functional or comunicational artefacts into a preexisting environment. Today this role is updated to more sistemic ideas about the city, that doesn't result from an adition of items.

Today design calls for a global approach and its contribution is not based only on new products but also on communicative and environmental performance, integrating interdisciplinary inputs from architecture to landscaping and public art.

We can say that the ideia of recentring a promotion strategy of design, in a user led basis results from Design Centers exprience, for many years triing with very little success to motivate industries to offer new products.



Not that manufacturing companies don't want de sign inputs but because very often they don't dominate user's expectations, they are mainly answering to demands from other companies and institutions that, with a more direct contact with the final consumer, really determinate design features. Design user oriented requires mechanisms of relation with the final destination (either directly or by means of representatives or interpereters).



It's with this frame in mind that recently Portuguese design Center has launched, together with Barcelona Centro de Disseny and the Universities of Lisboa and Barcelona, a postgraduate course in Urban Design, on an interdisciplinary perspective.

### **Globalisation and local condition**

Portugal has become in recent years a very opened country. The easiest diffusion of models, accessibility and mobility, has brought signs of an ever-increasing "global landscape" - simplification (resulting in a restricted, ever-present range of components), reduction (elimination of specific or "typical"), standardisation (referring to a model, repeatable), dislocation (indifferent to the context, virtual).

But the idea of the landscape as something to be conserved and reducible to a museological conception, is very strong in our cultural environment. It promotes an idea of landscape heritage that must be preserved even when it serves no purpose nor sustains a human activity anthropologically linked to the landscape.

The roots of the conservative and protectionist position in relation to the landscape and the role of art, design or architecture in city are very often simple fear, a reaction to the unknown.

New landscapes come into being in spaces like service areas, shopping malls or airports - they are intermodal, energetic, standardised - sometimes without a past or neighbourhoods. These places are perhaps a future typology of public spaces.

But even if they seem aggressive and inhuman as the new landscapes we can proudly integrate them in the new man-made patrimony which is offered to us by design, architecture, landscaping, art, and see how contemporary trends in these fields try to give a meaning to the places of our lives.

### **"Observatory", a public art experience by Vanda Vilela**

In the cultural and artistic background we referred, opportunities for public art, although growing are not so many for young artists. Lisbon's festival was, during some years, such an opportunity. Vanda Vilela presented her project for "Observatory" in 97, one year before EXPO. It was intended to face the river at a spot where children come to play, and at the same time express allusions to sea travel and appeal for interaction.

Temporarily placed near the Tagus river during the city festival of 1997, purchased by Lisbon City Hall and now located at the Urban Park "Moinhos de Santana" (now very vandalized), the "OBSERVATORY" is a public art object... Its iconography can be associated with concepts like "river", "watch box", "ropes":

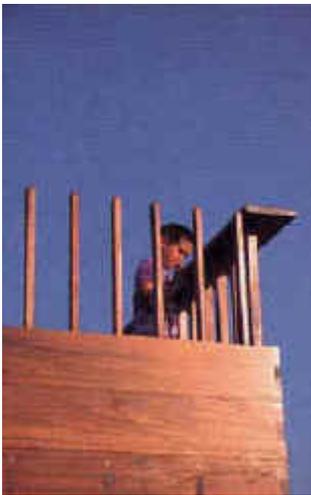
"Tower, Watch, Ship

As a place one can look out of, an observation room, it is a gap through which one can select and direct a magnified look, window, watch-box, trap door. The terrace is a platform accessed through difficult vertical ladders, where a rope awaits us to be woven."



"River Bank, Beach, Square

In front of National Rope Factory, the straight riverbank draws like a square the limestone slope. During one month, on wheels, the object was placed in different spots of the square with different orientations, facing the river. The hills of the opposite side of the bank exhibit, here and there, some green patches."



The fruition of this work is the possibility that it offers to observe in a different manner, being a sort of tower that enables new ways of feeling public spaces.

To enter one can choose between the door, too small for an adult, or the ladder-like wall up to the terrace to interweave the rope in a rudimentary weaving machine, and come back down through the trap door to the bench on which the observer may seat.

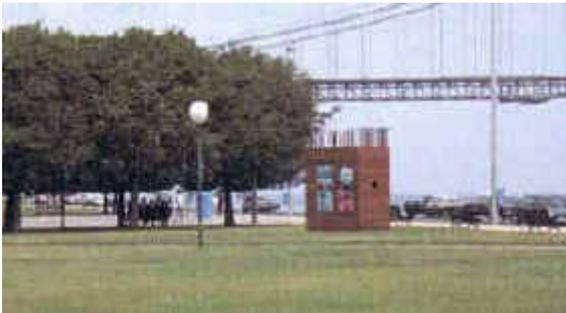
The inside allows the framing of different perspectives using the watch box or the pivot windows and depending on the object's orientation.

On the pivot windows one can read "Observe the river from the river" and "Weave ropes with other knots". The game of interpreting the unexpected presence of a new object, at the same time odd and familiar



The side walls hold four panels on each side, showing photos suggesting an imaginary voyage of the object through different places of Lisbon river bank.

The "OBSERVATORY" has 2,40m x 1,80m x 3,50m and is build of African "Kambala" and "Sucupira" wood. It is assembled at the carpenter's shop and has a polished finishing. Then it may be moved to different locations.



This object may have multiples, i.e. it is possible to produce other copies adapted to other local or temporal circumstances. As it holds graphic and local related poetical elements and because it is a moveable and fun object, allowing inter-action with the user, other cities, near Lisbon, have already shown interest in similar work, for its characteristics make it suitable for placement in public spaces of distinct nature, announcing events, memorials or projects.

*" It is like a watchtower without being so, a tower without a castle, a topsail without a ship. Finally it is an object between sculpture and outfit design and between an installation and the enjoyment of a children's playground."*  
(João Pinharanda, Público 25.06.97)