

MEDIATION FOR URBAN ART: THE CASE OF *MEU BAIRRO, MINHA RUA*

Ana Luísa Castro

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal
Conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft

Ricardo Campos

Centro Interdisciplinar de Ciências Sociais, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa,
Lisbon, Portugal

Writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

ABSTRACT

Urban art is increasingly used as a means of urban regeneration by the municipalities of several Portuguese cities, noting, however, that sometimes urban art projects are developed with the simple purpose of “beautifying” the urban landscape, disregarding the communities that use or live in the targeted spaces. This type of intervention raises questions about the role of urban art as a form of public art developed in certain urban territories. This expression has often been used in territorially and socially deprived and peripheral urban territories. In this sense, it plays a role that is not exclusively artistic but also communitarian and social, aiming at certain neighbourhoods’ territorial, symbolic and identity rehabilitation. Through this article, we intend to raise awareness about the importance of using participatory processes in developing urban art projects in the public space, encouraging the involvement of communities. Assuming that in the public space, art mediation must play a greater role, we decided to focus on a case study — the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* (My Neighbourhood, My Street) — that invited the community to participate in the decision-making process of a set of micro-interventions in public space in 10 locations in Vila Nova de Gaia.

KEYWORDS

mediation, urban art, public space, participation

MEDIAÇÃO PARA A ARTE URBANA: O CASO *MEU BAIRRO, MINHA RUA*

RESUMO

Cada vez mais, vemos a arte urbana a ser utilizada como meio de regeneração urbana por parte das autarquias de várias cidades portuguesas, constatando-se, no entanto, que, por vezes, são desenvolvidos projetos de arte urbana com o simples intuito de “embelezar” a paisagem urbana, não tendo em consideração as comunidades que frequentam ou vivem nos espaços intervencionados. Este tipo de intervenção levanta uma série de questões acerca do papel da arte urbana enquanto forma de arte pública, desenvolvida em determinados territórios urbanos. Com frequência esta expressão tem sido empregue em territórios urbanos desqualificados e periféricos, do ponto de vista territorial e social. Neste sentido, cumpre funções que não são exclusivamente artísticas, mas também de índole comunitária e social, visando a requalificação territorial, simbólica e identitária de determinados bairros. Com este artigo, pretendemos chamar a atenção para a importância da utilização de processos participativos no desenvolvimento de projetos de arte urbana a implementar no espaço público, incentivando o envolvimento das

comunidades. Partindo da premissa de que no espaço público a mediação de arte deve ter uma importância acrescida, decidimos focar-nos num caso de estudo — o projeto *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* — no qual a comunidade foi chamada a participar nas tomadas de decisão sobre um conjunto de micro-intervenções, realizadas no espaço público, em 10 locais de Vila Nova de Gaia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

mediação, arte urbana, espaço público, participação

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban art is increasingly used as a means of urban regeneration, communication and promotion by public and private entities in various cities (Andrade, 2020; Barbosa & Lopes, 2019; Campos & Barbio, 2021; Costa et al., 2017; Goes, 2021; Grond eau & Pondaven, 2018; Schacter, 2014), thus seeking to contribute to the decentralisation and democratisation of culture, to promote the territory and boost tourism (Andrade, 2020; Campos & Sequeira, 2019; Pires, 2018). Although the use of this type of art has several benefits, it is also possible to observe that the political power has been developing projects in this area with the simple intention of “beautifying” the urban landscape, often disregarding the communities that use the targeted spaces (Campos et al., 2021; Raposo, 2018).

Thus, through this article, we intend to raise awareness about the importance of using democratic processes in developing urban art projects in the public space, encouraging the participation of the communities that use the targeted spaces and allowing them to participate and intervene. To do so, we focus on a case study that invited the community to participate in the decision-making process of the interventions created in the public space, including urban art. It concerns the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* (My Neighbourhood, My Street), promoted by the Municipality of Gaia (MG). The analysis of this case, and the reflections produced in this article, are part of an ongoing doctoral research that aims to study the connections between urban art and community participation.

In the first section, we will briefly review and discuss some of the concepts we believe are essential to sustain a reflection on the object under consideration: “public space”; “public art” and “urban art”; and “participation” and “community art”. This approach is inevitably brief and obviously does not exhaust all possible approaches, given the complexity of the conceptual framework at stake. We begin by discussing the public space from its political and democratic perspective and how it can be envisioned through the art produced or exhibited in it. Thus, we provide a brief overview of our approach to public art, describing it as an artistic expression that should be based on dynamics open to the community from a democratising and participatory perspective. Then we will discuss urban art, trying to relate it to the previous concepts. Finally, we will address the concept of community art and the importance of mediation in this type of art.

In the second part, this article analyses the implementation of the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*, according to public information obtained from the websites of the project and the MG and two interviews conducted in 2022. We based this article on the official statements of the project (websites, news and interview with the head of the project) and the methodology developed (based on fieldwork involving local communities) to reflect on how urban art can be used in participatory projects. This paper proposes a reflection on democratic ways of conceiving the public space, showing that some projects in Portugal are based on these principles. However, it refrains from analysing the project's impacts, as it would require a broader methodological design involving a survey of the communities studied.

2. ART IN PUBLIC SPACE: CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

2.1. PUBLIC SPACE

The concept of public space can be employed according to different theoretical interpretations or models. It is also worth noting that the multiple approaches contribute to the lack of a consensual perspective on public space. However, in this article, it is important to consider public space as a territory that tends to be open and democratic, where people and communities with different profiles meet (Campos & Câmara, 2019). That is a sociological approach, more aware of how space is formed as an environment constructed and lived by different people and groups (Lefebvre, 1974/1992). Public space is the stage and witness of multiple social, cultural and symbolic environments. In other words, it is a territory of fusion and various hybridisms, but also of tensions and negotiations, where various social practices, cosmovisions and ways of interpreting and using territory are expressed.

An eminently political dimension to the public space should be considered in the discussion. The political dimension derives from how the nature of the *public* within the territory is perceived. That refers to how the different social actors and institutions deal with (and appropriate) public space. The jurisdiction of public space belongs to the public powers, although there are different and increasingly powerful forms of privatising it. The powers regulate public space and use it to their benefit, according to a certain vision of the territory and how it should be inhabited and enjoyed. Public space is thus constantly exploited to serve economic, social and political interests. That has been verified throughout history, namely through the use of art in the public space to serve propaganda and disseminate hegemonic values¹.

However, we advocate that public space should play an eminently public role in a democratic spirit. It is a space “of exchange and dialogue, but also of conflict” (Campos

¹ The most paradigmatic example of this situation is the conventional sculptural monument that, over a long period, served to represent and celebrate dominant social values and enshrined power. Public art as a practice and concept has been established as anti-monumental, moving away from this perspective (Regatão, 2015).

& Câmara, 2019, p. 26). Rosalyn Deutsche (1992), an art historian and critic, also argues that public space is intrinsically linked to democratic ideals. However, she questions how democratic public space really is when it excludes certain social groups from deciding what happens in that space:

is it possible to speak with assurance of a public space where social groups, even when physically present, are systematically denied a voice? Does anyone “hold the key” to a public space? What does it mean to relegate groups to a sphere outside the public, to bar admittance to the discursive construction of the public, and, in this way, prohibit participation in the space of public communication? (p. 38)

This debate around the public function of space leads us to one of the central questions of this article. What to think about the artistic dimension based on public space? How to define what can be considered public art? How to distinguish public art from art in public space? Once again, we find distinct approaches.

2.2. PUBLIC ART AND URBAN ART

The concept of public art is far from being consensual. There are theoretical perspectives that support different objectives: “some focus more on exploring the physical-perceptive characteristics of the space aimed at the observer’s experience, while others defend its social and educational function by fostering work with communities” (Regatão, 2015, p. 67). The first debates on what is called public art date back to the late 19th century (Abreu, 2015a), although this is a concept whose main developments arise from a series of social, political and artistic movements and a paradigm shift triggered in the second half of the 20th century (Regatão, 2015). These trends, emerging in the second half of the last century, especially in the last decades, have definitively influenced the definition of contemporary public art. Borrowing, again, the words of Regatão (2015), who systematises the main premises of public art today, we can state that

this concept describes the full range of artistic interventions, from sculpture to installation, from graffiti to performance (among other forms of expression), undertaken in (or related to) the public space, whose design rejects the traditional commemorative form and function, seeking to establish a specific relationship with the environment and the public. In other words, this concept marks the end of the era of the traditional public monument opening the way to a new aesthetic conception, where the participation and sensory perception of the spectator is increasingly requested as a constituent part of the work. (p. 73)

This definition is based on a thorough analysis of the evolution of public art as an artistic manifestation. We would also like to highlight the political dimension of its existence, implantation and permanence. Therefore, we will always have to consider that,

as Miles (1997) mentions in his very generic definition, public art encompasses “works commissioned for sites of open public access” (p. 5). This perspective emphasises the formalist dimension, considering a regulated art that is, therefore, dependent on the authorities’ approval and management. This interpretation introduces a political vector insofar as it sees these manifestations as determinations “imposed from above”.

This definition aligns with most artworks in the cities’ public spaces. However, nowadays, we should consider the role played by non-canonical formats, borderline, unregulated, unpredictable and vernacular expressions, which often wander between the margin and the centre, between transgression and the socially legitimated. In other words, the public space is a ground where different desires for aesthetic expression may coexist, often revealing tensions. To public art, as a manifestation of commissioned works, we can oppose other gestures that arise unusually or even disruptively, challenging the dominant logic and cosmovisions. That is the case of what has fallen into the ambivalent category of urban art.

Several authors argue that urban art is a broad concept that includes different artistic expressions in urban space (Blanché, 2015; Campos & Câmara, 2019). This artistic expression, despite multiple influences, derives essentially from the urban graffiti of North American tradition, an essentially transgressive and illegal expression (Campos, 2010). However, since the beginning of the millennium, we have witnessed a gradual *artification* (Shapiro, 2019) and institutionalisation of graffiti and street art (Bengtson, 2014; Schacter, 2014), giving rise to urban art increasingly seen as a form of public art (Campos, 2021). That means a growing proliferation of projects associated with graffiti and street art that are sometimes tolerated and sometimes sponsored by public entities. Thus, we witness a growing attempt to regulate and exploit this expression which is, as we said before, originally transgressive.

In the Portuguese context, municipalities have been particularly active in promoting urban art as public art (Campos, 2021; Campos & Barbio, 2021; Grondeau & Pondaven, 2018). On the national scene, Lisbon emerged as a pioneering municipality by creating, in 2008, the *Urban Art Gallery*, a project that gained national and international recognition, highlighting the importance of urban art for the revitalisation and embellishment of the city’s public space. In this way, the potential of these expressions was proven at different levels: landscape, community, symbolic and economic.

Some of these urban art projects have been developed in underprivileged social and urban contexts, often marked by stigma and marginalisation (Campos et al., 2021; Raposo, 2018). Thus, urban art has been employed in urban embellishment and revitalisation processes, seeking not only to change the neighbourhoods’ external image but also to favour inhabitants’ self-esteem and improve the enjoyment of public space. Therefore, the community dimension of art is part of many of these ventures. This makes us wonder about the role of communities in producing works for public space.

2.3. PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY ART

The participatory approach is, for many, a requirement of art that wants to be truly public (Abreu, 2015b; Andrade, 2020; Correia, 2013; Deutsche, 1992). José Guilherme Abreu (2015b) argues that for art to be truly public, it must involve the community. Other authors (Bishop, 2012; Carpentier et al., 2019; Catellano & Raposo, 2019) also emphasise the importance of community participation in political decisions about public space. They emphasise that projects should be created based “on systems of participatory democracy, contemplating the multiple existing voices” (Madeira & Gariso, 2016, p. 7) instead of imposing “a system of signification and intentionality to the urban space, aside from the public and democratic participation of non-specialists” (Fortuna, 2002, p. 127).

An important term in this discussion is the *new genre public art* created by Suzanne Lacy in 1994, where the author “defends this new genre of public art as essentially an activism, often created outside the institutional context, which takes the artist to a form of direct engagement and relationship with the audience while evoking political and social themes” (Catellano & Raposo, 2019, p. 9).

According to the authors previously mentioned, it is important to meet the communities in their usual places for socialising and debate, seeking, humbly and collaboratively, to understand their wishes and needs for the public space. Thus, we believe it is important to consider “the integration of art in the public space also from a social point of view” (Correia, 2013, p. 32), working to develop a sense of community and involvement in political decisions of the people who live in these places (Grodach, 2009; Kay, 2000). Mediation plays a very important role here.

The concept of cultural mediation has various interpretations — from the German term *Kulturvermittlung* and the French *médiation culturelle* — however, it generally refers to the process of “gaining and negotiating knowledge about the arts and social or scientific phenomena through exchange, reaction and creative response” (Mörsch & Chrusciel, 2012, p. 14). This article focuses on the French ideas. In the 1990s, a “Cultural Mediation of Art” school programme emerged at the University of Aix-Marseille. This programme was founded on the idea that art is often created from an individual act in opposition to the collective and is, for that reason, rarely accessible to a wider public in the absence of prior knowledge. This current was followed by authors such as Jean Caune (1992, 1999), who advocated the democratisation of culture and art. Accordingly, *médiation culturelle* is understood less as knowledge transmission and more as the act of forming relationships of mutual exchange among publics, works, artists and institutions. The aim of “*médiation culturelle* is to place the various different perspectives involved in relation to one another (...) focus on the individual perception of artworks by participants” (Mörsch & Chrusciel, 2012, p. 18). The point is not to fill in lacunae in understanding with specialised knowledge but to understand the lacunae as a point of departure for dialogue and aesthetic experience (Caune, 1999).

We believe this type of mediation, which values the dialogue between different agents, is essential for art projects in the public space. After all, public space is attended by people from different backgrounds and knowledge. In this article, we argue that

political powers should play a more active role in establishing dialogue and mediation with their citizens in developing their public spaces. Such actions “can strengthen people’s commitment to places and their engagement in tackling problems, especially in the context of urban regeneration” (Matarasso, 1998, p. 74).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of community art emerged within social movements and as a form of struggle against the institutionalisation of art (Melo, 2015). This art favours community participation in all artistic creation processes, inspired by the cultures and identities of a place that values the positive impact of social participation in the arts more than the final artistic result (Bishop, 2012).

It seeks to be a truly democratic art and is “as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself; neither are legitimated in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context” (Bishop, 2012, p. 284). The participatory dialogue between the producing agents and the local communities becomes even more pivotal, and “mediation has, in this context, an increased relevance” (Nogueira, 2010, p. 25).

The project we present below — *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* — is built on a dialogue with local communities to listen to their problems regarding the public space and to develop solutions for them. By analysing the project’s official discourse, we aim to show that this case can be a possible reference for further research in these areas since it demonstrates the Municipality’s willingness for a relationship with the communities. However, its limitations and possible ways of improvement must be analysed.

3. CASE STUDY: *MEU BAIRRO, MINHA RUA*

3.1. PROJECT ASSUMPTIONS

The project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* (My Neighbourhood, My Street) was created in 2019 to solve micro-problems in the public space of 10 zones² in Vila Nova de Gaia through a participatory and co-creation methodology. This article focuses on two zones where murals were painted. They are the neighbourhoods of the Library and Cedro. This article is based on information available online (on the websites of the MG, www.cm-gaia.pt, and the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*, www.meubairrominharua.pt) and on two interviews we conducted on October 26 and 27, 2022. The first interview was with the artist responsible for painting both murals, Nuno “Third” Palhas. The second was with the person responsible for the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*, Cristiana Nóbrega, head of the multidisciplinary citizen support team at the MG. To write this article, we decided to rely on the information gathered by the *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* team through surveys and informal conversations to show both the work undertaken by this team and their vision.

Meu Bairro, Minha Rua (Figure 1) is a project run by the MG, aimed at promoting citizens’ engagement and active participation in public space management, and is

²The term “zones” is used by the Municipality of Gaia when referring to the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*. Each zone has about 1,000 residences around a public school.

divided into four stages: diagnosis, preparation/communication of proposals, implementation and monitoring.



Figure 1. Logo of the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*, the logo of Vila Nova de Gaia Municipality and the signature of the artist on the Library mural

Credits. Ana Castro

According to the website of the MG (Câmara Municipal de Gaia, n.d.-a), this project:

aims to contribute to creating a new way of community living through very close work with people, families and institutions, seeking to ensure that their concerns are synonymous with a process of permanent revitalisation participated by all. This project encompasses two areas of intervention which, though distinct, are inevitably inseparable: the material dimension, which includes small works in public spaces and the relational dimension, which promotes social cohesion and aims to create bonds of trust between citizens and institutions. (paras. 1–2)

Through the interview with Cristiana Nóbrega, it was possible to understand that this project is put into practice by the Multidisciplinary Citizen Support Team, which is the result of the Open Presidency sessions that “are moments when the Mayor visits each civil parish and talks to the people” (Nóbrega, personal interview, October 27, 2022). As the interviewee explains, since 2019, there have been two different services connecting the citizens of Gaia to the public authorities:

- *Presidente Direto* (Direct to Mayor) is a passive service: an email channel where people’s concerns and complaints are received, classified and forwarded to the service concerned for resolution;
- *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*, is an active initiative: a team of people who meet local people to learn about the communities’ problems and, with their participation, seek to develop solutions to implement in the public space.

The head of the *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* team, explained that each of the 10 neighbourhoods has a school as its anchor. Furthermore, once the school has been identified, a territory of approximately 1,000 residences is defined. The school and the surrounding area together form a “neighbourhood”. Once the neighbourhood has been defined, questionnaires are sent to the community to establish its demographic composition. Once this preliminary work has been done, the first stage of the project begins, the diagnosis of each neighbourhood’s needs:

We talk to the chairpersons of the parish councils, the priest (if applicable), the school directors, and the shopkeepers (...), and we also listen to the residents. However, we also realised that it was important to listen to people who do not live there but use that space during the day. (...) The questionnaires are sent to people, and those who do not live there can answer through the website. (...) [These questionnaires are] built according to the reality of each space, without ever conditioning the answers. We have a feedback box where people can write what they would like to have available to use the public space more. Our intention here is that people use a space that may be less appealing currently. (Nóbrega, personal interview, October 27, 2022)

By analysing the two questionnaires for the zones mentioned above and according to Cristiana Nóbrega’s explanation in the interview, we understand that these questionnaires changed through time. The first, in the Library zone, asked respondents to classify eight aspects of the surrounding public spaces — lighting, street cleanliness, waste collection, car circulation, pavements, walkways, parking and public transport availability — and in the following questionnaire, they added another topic: safety. After this classification, there is an open-ended question about how to improve the area surrounding the residences. It is followed by two close-ended questions about how they commute and use the public space. The project manager explains that the open-ended question is where they get more detailed information and where the mural painting was mentioned.

The second page of the questionnaire refers to specific places in each zone:

- Library: municipal auditorium, the municipal library and the municipal library garden
- Cedro: urban green spaces

These questionnaires also aim to understand each location’s residents’ and workers’ habits in public zones and why they use these spaces. Here again, there is a feedback box where the user can write down what they would like to see improved in each of these places. The questionnaire ends with closed-ended questions such as “are you proud to be from Gaia?” or “do you relate to the neighbourhood where you live?” and other socio-demographic data questions.

The architect Francisco Saraiva, responsible for designing the space, refers in his interview with radio Antena 1 (GaiaTV Município, 2020a) that they “select a territory that had been identified with certain problems (...) and to solve them simply, also

respecting the local identity and doing so that people feel involved and feel that they are part of this place” (00:05:45).

This project follows the Ubuntu methodology, centred on local communities and using a participatory and democratic approach. As the website (www.academialidere-subuntu.org) of the Ubuntu Leaders Academy (n.d.) states, quoting Desmond Tutu: “my humanity is intrinsically linked to yours and, therefore, I am human because I belong, I participate and I share being in community. You and I are made for interdependence and to complement one another” (para. 1). Thus, this philosophy encourages participation and sharing to build a more democratic and participatory society.

When we questioned Cristiana Nóbrega (personal interview, October 27, 2022) about why they decided to adopt the Ubuntu philosophy, she replied that this project started by listening to people and understanding their physical needs for the public space. However, they quickly understood that there were also non-material problems, adding that “when we talk about transformation it is not only of the space, but also of the relational part”. So they teamed up with the Padre António Vieira Institute, which has been running the Ubuntu Leaders’ Academy since 2010. According to Cristiana Nóbrega, the Padre António Vieira Institute team has been working regularly in the municipality’s schools to “transform from a very young age the awareness that the relationship is very important. (...) They develop many activities with businesses, involving young people in helping the elderly. There is a great community awareness here” (Nóbrega, personal interview, October 27, 2022). On this subject, she adds that “it makes a huge difference having Ubuntu with us” and that it is the glue that gives meaning to this project: “the relationship is created not only by providing a practical response to people’s needs in the physical space but also by the relationships between people” (Nóbrega, personal interview, October 27, 2022).

In this same interview, Cristiana Nóbrega (personal interview, October 27, 2022) highlights the project stage she calls “transformation”, which seems a good explanation of the essence and mission of the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*:

transforming is to truly collect people’s contributions and step out into the field. (...) Here, when we talk about transformation, it is not only about the space but also about the relational part. Because when people realise that what they told us before is actually happening and is what they really need – that it is not just a project in an office without listening to the people – we are also transforming people who normally only complain, who do not feel any relationship with the public space, (...) to realise that after all, it is worth talking to the Municipality because we will endeavour, whenever possible, to meet their needs.

Nuno Palhas (personal interview, October 26 2022) did not know the Ubuntu philosophy before the MG invited him to participate in the project. He states that he became a fan of this methodology, adding that this type of project should “be part of almost all social services because many times people have problems because they do not have the

same easy access and the same knowledge that we have to look for information”. He adds that he believes it is very important “to create this approach to places and to take care of the public space again” (Palhas, personal interview, October 26 2022).

After learning what moves the Citizen Support Team with the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*, we tried to understand why they decided to include mural paintings in their interventions in the public space. It was explained to us that the Municipality proposed the first mural to the community and was not a proposal from the community to the municipality. Cristiana Nóbrega explains that “the mural was not originally planned”, adding that it was something proposed by the Mayor “because it creates a very impactful transformation in the spaces” and that “it was something that as we were making the interventions, we realised made sense” (Nóbrega, personal interview, October 27 2022).

Finally, we asked those responsible for the project whether they usually monitor the project after the interventions. It was explained to us that the work never ends and that they constantly revisit the intervened places to understand the impact of the actions and the possible improvements that may be introduced in future actions. For example, in the case of the Library neighbourhood, after the intervention in the public space was finished, the Citizen Support Team returned to the place and realised that the community was interested in having gymnastics equipment in the public space, and the municipality went ahead with its installation. Cristiana Nóbrega (personal interview, October 27 2022) stresses the importance of this constant contact with the local communities and adds: “we only keep people close to us if we are constantly [in] dialogue with them”.

3.2. LIBRARY NEIGHBOURHOOD — BUTTERFLY MURAL

Meu Bairro, Minha Rua included a public space intervention pilot project in 2019 in the municipal library block. The mural by the artist “Third” was only executed in the summer of 2021.

From February to May 2019, questionnaires were submitted to residents and shopkeepers, the school community and the block’s users. In the same stage, a focus group was, as can be read on the project website, held “where participants highlighted the main difficulties” (*Meu Bairro Minha Rua*, n.d.). The Mayor of Vila Nova de Gaia, Eduardo Vítor Rodrigues, underlines that the strategy for this project stems from understanding the problems and needs of the community to undertake then “micro-interventions that often do not have the magnitude of major projects, but have the magnitude of major consequences in people’s lives” (GaiaTV Municipality, 2020b, 00:12:01).

After collecting the surveys’ results and liaising with municipal services (works, security, environment, among others), studies and proposals were made to improve the public zones, “building solutions that meet the needs heard and promote participation and experience in the public space” (*Meu Bairro Minha Rua*, n.d., para. 5). In this diagnosis, the community did not express interest in a mural painting or the need for the rehabilitation of that wall. Cristiana Nóbrega (personal interview, October 27, 2022) states that “basically, we offered the first [mural], and from the moment that the first one

existed, people started talking. And now we already have chairpersons of parish councils wanting it in other places”. She said that even in questionnaires to other communities, the request for mural painting in those zones began to emerge in the feedback box.

The proposals for improvement were presented in a public discussion open to the whole community. One of the ideas presented (Figure 2) in that session was painting a mural on the stairs leading to Parque 1.º de Maio street, in front of Almeida Garrett Secondary School.



Figure 2. Draft of the Library neighbourhood intervention

Source. From “Presidência Aberta Meu Bairro, Minha Rua”, by Vila Nova de Gaia Municipal, 2019, p. 19, (https://www.cm-gaia.pt/fotos/editor2/meu_bairro/biblioteca/anexo_5.pdf). Copyright 2019 by Francisco Saraiva.

In the interview with Nuno Palhas, we sought to understand how he was invited to this project, how the communities were introduced to him and what he thinks about the paintings and the overall project. The artist explained to us that, for this first mural, he was told what the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* consisted of and how it was based on Ubuntu values. According to him, the Municipality was keen to properly explain to him everything that the project involves, “from the interaction with the population, and the institutions helping people, helping neighbours”, and he states that “this connection was the outset to start thinking about each project individually, but also as a collective” (Palhas, personal interview, October 26, 2022). Cristiana Nóbrega (personal interview, October 27, 2022) also highlights the fact that they wanted the artist to create something unique for each space:

we always want people to develop an identity with the spaces. It is not just any space. That space was made for those people. (...) Deep down, it is also a little of themselves because they realise it was made for them. It was

not the design of an architect who thought of doing some nice things and putting them there without integrating the people.

The pandemic has put the plans for this project on hold. It was resumed in the summer of 2021 when the idea for the mural on the stairs (Figure 3) across the Almeida Garrett Secondary School was launched. Whenever Nuno Palhas (personal interview, October 26, 2022) plans to paint in public space, he tries to research the space where he will intervene, stating that he always looks for a middle ground between “creating something that does not distort [his] work, but that at the same time is well understood by people”.



Figure 3. Mural by “Third” in the Library neighbourhood, 2021
Credits. Ana Castro

According to the website *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*, the artist justifies the choice of the painting’s theme:

sunflowers, which I often depict, are seen as a sign of fortune and knowledge. Since this is a painting in my city and across the High School, I could not fail to represent them as a sign of growth, maturity, and wisdom. I also represent the elements of metamorphosis, the caterpillar that turns into a butterfly, which is also a reference to the expected and desired evolution in every human being. Knowing oneself and aspiring to transformation makes us capable of wanting more for ourselves and for those we see reflected in our own existence. (*Meu Bairro Minha Rua*, n.d., para. 16)

3.3. CEDRO NEIGHBOURHOOD — WASHERWOMEN MURAL

The second urban art mural (Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6) created for this project was also painted in 2021 by the same artist, this time in the Cedro neighbourhood. In the presentation of this project stage (Câmara Municipal de Vila Nova de Gaia, n.d.-b) in November 2021, the Mayor of Vila Nova de Gaia, Eduardo Vítor Rodrigues, explained that the Ubuntu methodology was adopted to listen to the citizens. They began by making the diagnosis which, according to him, is a “work of proximity”, which began in August 2019, intended to listen to people. The Mayor adds, “this listening is much more than a mere issue. It is an interpersonal relationship built from fieldwork that is truly door-to-door work” (GaiaTV Município, 2020b, 00:11:20).



Figure 4. *Washerwomen Mural, Cedro neighbourhood, 2021*
Crédits. Nuno “Third” Palhas



Figure 5. Two sides of the Washerwomen Mural, Cedro neighbourhood, 2021
Credits. Nuno “Third” Palhas



Figure 6. Two sides of the Washerwomen Mural, Cedro neighbourhood, 2021
Crédits. Nuno “Third” Palhas

The first step was to send out postal surveys to the residents, thus making it possible to compile the sample and understand their opinions about the surrounding area. The survey had participation of 27.3% of all residents. It was concluded that there was a need for improvements, such as the “construction of new public spaces and the maintenance (...) of the gardens and more” (GaiaTV Município, 2020b, 00:17:00). In this presentation of the project, the Mayor adds that “a paradigm shift is needed, and people deep down reflect that. We have a development model in the country (...) that is very much based on the moment of the inauguration” (GaiaTV Município, 2020b, 00:17:05). The project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* focuses, more than in the inauguration, on the pre and post interventions, involving communities in all these moments.

Regarding the urban art painting in this neighbourhood, Eduardo Vítor Rodrigues comments:

we are talking about an experiment, an exploration, of strategies that we may have to fit some mandatory urban furniture, like the TS (electrical transformer station), (...) involving in interesting artistic dynamics, which can be, for example, resorting to some of our most extraordinary artists for urban design. (GaiaTV Município, 2020b, 00:41:48)

As mentioned above, the artist selected for this action was Nuno Palhas, better known as “Third”, an illustrator and urban artist from Vila Nova de Gaia who has painted numerous murals nationwide. On the website of the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua*, the artist explains that he got inspiration from the popular neighbourhoods of the city, specifically in the Cedro neighbourhood:

I sought to represent these memories of a simple daily life, which currently has other routines, but where the sense of community is kept alive. The dichotomy between past, present, and future is purposely diffused, expressed in the saturation of colour and the transition to faceted forms. I have again used the sunflower as a decorative element and symbol of fortune, as the strong neighbourly ties. (Meu Bairro Minha Rua, n.d.-b, para. 9)

In this case, being born and living in Gaia, apart from previous research, he also made connections to his own memories of those spaces. Nuno Palhas remembers when he studied at Almeida Garrett High School (in the Library neighbourhood) and climbed those stairs every day, and when he was young, he spent every day in the Cedro neighbourhood, where there were always clotheslines with clothes hanging. Based on this memory, he decided to depict a washerwoman hanging the sheets to dry while a dog jumped up to grab them.

That idea inspired me to (...) try to recreate that garden from the past in the future. It is funny that sometime later a gentleman came up to me and said that he used to bleach his grandmother’s clothes in that garden and that it was normal to have all the clotheslines in there (...) And so, that was also

funny because it was a coincidence that, from a memory that I had, also materialised in the connection of these people's collective memory. (Palhas, personal interview, October 26, 2022)

About the same mural, Cristiana Nóbrega (personal interview, October 27, 2022) also recalls conversations with the residents, stating that “people talk about what is on the wall” and that “it is immediately the motto for conversation and for sharing stories, memories and experiences, which the older people have a tremendous pleasure in passing on to the younger ones”.

4. CONCLUSION

The expression “small interventions with a big impact on people's lives”, used by Cristiana Nóbrega in her interview, encapsulates the mission of the project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* perfectly. By analysing the official speech of Vila Nova de Gaia Municipality about this project, we realise that the intention is to improve people's lives and increase the enjoyment of public places through micro-interventions. However, it is not possible to confirm that these actions have, in fact, the intended impact on the community's life. That would require further monitoring involving all stakeholders and an assessment by the resident communities.

In this article, we described the official perspective of the Municipality and the hired artist about their actions in the public space. Although we cannot assess the communities' real perceptions of these interventions, we believe that this case is an important reference for the research that may be developed on these topics. The project *Meu Bairro, Minha Rua* shows a predisposition of this municipality to develop a relationship with the communities, seeking, through mediation, to create an impact on their daily lives.

However, despite the municipality's good intentions and the commitment of the team involved, surveying the users of these murals is essential to understand what they think about these interventions in the public space. We could see, for example, that the first mural appeared not at the request of the communities but out of the Mayor's interest. Although Cristiana Nóbrega claims that the mural's impact was positive, it should be better evaluated to ensure unequivocal results. Considering the above, we believe it is important to survey those who use the intervened spaces, investing in external research on what local communities think about the work done. Only in this way will it be possible to understand the real perceptions of the people who use these places and thus measure the real impacts of the micro-interventions put in place by the MG.

As we have seen previously, there is a strong relationship between urban art and democracy. In the production processes of this art, it is important to create a constant dialogue between communities, political powers and artists. Art mediation has an added value in the public space, and the MG may develop community urban art projects that transform places at aesthetic and social levels. To this end, there should be community art projects that are socially committed and involve local communities in all stages of the project.

It was possible to conclude, according to the two interviewees' statements, that the community only participates in the initial surveys (in which they may or may not mention in the open-ended question that they want a mural painting) and in the open session, in which the Mayor presents the sketches of the whole project to be implemented in that zone. Regarding the murals, they had no say in who would be the artist or what would be the represented theme, nor did they see a sketch before the painting was done. As mentioned, the processes and the community's participation in producing community art should be more relevant than the final artistic result. Community participation, inspired by the cultures, identities, and histories of the place, should therefore be privileged to develop a truly public work of art, unique and with a strong meaning for that community.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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BIOGRAPHIC NOTES

Ana Luísa Castro, better known as Ana Muska, was born in 1990. She completed her degree in Communication Design and later her master’s in Multimedia, both at the University of Porto. In 2012, she created Circus Network, an agency, gallery, shop and co-work focused on urban art, illustration, and music. In the last decade, she has curated and produced dozens of solo and group exhibitions and developed several urban art projects nationwide. She is a PhD in Cultural Studies from the University of Minho. She

has a research scholarship from the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia to develop a study that aims to draw attention to the need for mediation mechanisms of urban art that are socially committed and involve local communities, making them an active part in the creative processes of this art.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4148-3753>

Email: anamuska.circus@gmail.com

Address: Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade (CECS), Universidade do Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga

Ricardo Campos is the principal researcher and board member of the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities and guest lecturer in the master's degree in Intercultural Relations (Universidade Aberta). He is a founding member and co-coordinator of the Luso-Brazilian Research Network on Arts and Urban Interventions. He coordinated the projects *Artcitizenship - Young People and the Arts of Citizenship: Activism, Participatory Culture and Creative Practices* (2019-2023), *TransUrbArts - Emergent Urban Arts in Lisbon and São Paulo* (2016-2020), both with the financial support of Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia/Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education. Over the years, he has researched in several research centres on urban youth cultures, urban art, digital media, visual anthropology and visual culture. He has several book chapters and articles in national and international journals on these subjects.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4689-0144>

Email: ricardocampos@fcs.unl.pt

Address: CICS.NOVA - Centro Interdisciplinar de Ciências Sociais, Avenida de Berna, 26-C, 1069-061 Lisboa, Portugal

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