Participative social work and urban change: two case studies in Lisbon and Bucharest

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Abstract

Focusing on two initiatives working within disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in Bucharest and Lisbon, we want to discuss the civil society's capacity to adapt to the changing social opportunities and difficulties, and its ability to create equal access to resources and opportunities. We propose to compare some aspects of both initiatives in these two historical and socio-political Southern European urban contexts, trying to better understand these processes: what they manage to do; what they find hard to do; who helps them; their relationships with different state structures (municipality, schools, national agencies etc.); their relationships with different people in the area of work; their future perspective, and so on. Our diverse social activist and academic background in anthropological, sociological, geographical fields allows us to a deeper understanding of the strengths and limits of theoretical and practical dimensions of social research process, witch we would like to discuss, also.

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1. Introduction

The classic discussion on the relationship between the individual and the city is never ending. A series of questions remains crucial to urban theory, exploring how urbanites interrelate with each other, through intermediate social structures – home, family and friendship ties, neighbourhoods and community attachments, professional and personal networks, religious, ethnic, linguistic belongings; exploring how cities are capable of building local and micro-local communities inside their frame; exploring how a sense of place can be created locally and not so locally; how diverse people negotiate and share spaces, activities, imageries, emotions in common urban places. The present paper is tangential to all these questions and explorations.

Particular places, particular people in different cities produce particular forms of social intermediation and cultural communication. In the following pages, we will present two "civic initiatives", one in Bucharest and one in Lisbon, both placed in the European extremes and at its political periphery. Around 20 years separate Portugal's entry into the European Union (1986) and that of Romania (2007); although the two countries are geographically, historically and culturally distant (Portugal with its Mediterranean and Atlantic heritage that links it to the Americas, Africa and Asia, above all India, and Romania with its Slavic and Soviet influences, more connected to the East), they are both Latin language speakers, with similar centrality of the country around big cities (Lisbon & Porto / Bucharest & Cluj-Napoca), and experiencing similar opportunities brought by European money. Today, Bucharest and Lisbon are of a similar size in terms of the population they attract to their metropolitan area – roughly 2.5 million, and, as recent statistics show, they have similar levels of optimism and similar levels of satisfaction with dwellings (Sandu, 2006). And, as it happens for cities all around the world, both Bucharest and Lisbon have large socio-spatial segregation problems, a lot of separated worlds, and only few initiatives to bridge them.

The parallel analysis of the two civic initiatives, in Bucharest and Lisbon, will reveal their similarities, their differences, and the particular patterns of social intermediation and cultural communication that they generate; it will also offer a reflection exercise

upon the social order of cities and how this order can be challenged, albeit at micro-social level. Both of them were set up by "well educated" young people, with an economic and locative "middle-class" background; both were developed as networks of social intervention, targeted mostly towards disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods – Ferentari, in Bucharest, and respectively Alta de Lisboa, in Lisbon.

The paper illustrates these two parallel experiences of social intervention in similar context of action, marginal neighbourhoods, some sort of social 'islands' in the social map of the cities. The aim is to reveal how they work at the local scale of proximity, how they impact the local society, and how the local society impacts them. Through descriptions, analysis and discussion of some specific features of these experiences, we propose a reflection on how the social networks expand horizontally and vertically, how the social segregation is challenged, how the local urban context changes, around the young people leading the two initiatives. And, also, we want to share information across country borders, learning from each other, linking the peripheries even further together, in the globalized world.

The challenge is therefore to compare the two experiences – one formally established as an Association, one informally functioning as an action Platform – in order to illustrate similar processes and situations of social mediation, beyond the differences in their national and local contexts. The experiences are here directly and personally revealed by the founders of each initiative: Ioana, Romanian urban sociologist and civic worker, and Tiago, Portuguese blogger, film maker, studying human geography; both activists and PhD candidates. Complementary, the analytic reflection upon these experiences is drawn by myself, Portuguese socio-anthropologist who has been teaching urban anthropology for some time.

We could say that Ioana and Tiago came to the experience of participative social work, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, in symmetrical and opposite ways: Ioana and her colleagues founded *Kommunitas* Association 4 years ago, after graduating university programs in social studies, because they wanted to bring their social science skills into the *deep city*, by doing collaborative ethnographies, by practicing (since then) a kind of applied and public science; on the other hand, Tiago recently enrolled as stu-

dent in urban studies, returning to university, after 5 years of interventionist work in the *deep neighbourhood*, among inhabitants and local associations, after dealing with the media, the local and municipal authorities, after creating the online public Platform *Viver Lisboa* and one documentary film.

This presentation is constructed around the reflection of the two initiatives and how they show that, in peripheral contexts (such as peripheral EU cities and peripheral neighbourhoods) the personal choices and initiatives – what we call "agency" – become platforms for action and mediation structures. We can say that these civic initiatives are "brokers" for these "islands", trough participatory community based research[i], like mediation structures trying to link the islands back to the city, trough participatory action-research.

We will continue by presenting each of the two civic initiatives and by highlighting the most relevant features of the work they involve:

a) The spaces/environments where they develop;

b) The micro-history of the people and groups behind them;

c) Their main actions and networking-actions, inside and outside the two respectively chosen disadvantaged neighborhoods (their central spaces of intervention);

d) The impact they try to produce on the surrounding urban realities;

e) Their expectations regarding the future and the developing alternatives available to them.

2. *Komunitas* Association

http://www.komunitas.ro/english/aboutus.html

Bucharest is a post-socialist capital-city, with contradictions and ruptures between its communist past and its capitalist present (Mihali, 2005). Its space is visibly marked by unsustainable growth and pollution, real-estate pressure and gentrification processes (Diaconu, 2008), the separation of "bad neighbourhoods" superposed with high levels of Roma discrimination and with the discrimination of the poor (Fleck and Rughiniş, 2008). In this context, a critical mass of NGOs and social initiatives is gathering, but it

does not yet hold enough power to influence the policy agenda; this weakness might be caused by the weak solidarity, still in the process of development among the different initiatives (Voicu, 2005).

Ferentari is Bucharest's poorest district. It covers former rural areas, transformed during the communist regime, in several stages, from the '50s to the '80s, into large working-class residences ("dormitories" as they are called by architects and urban planners); it also covers former industrial sites, now in ruin; it contains several ghetto-like neighbourhoods of blocks of flats, in former social-housing and poor working-class blocks.

Being the city's poorest district, Ferentari suffers from the lack of resources and investments directed towards the public benefit: precarious social infrastructure and environmental responsibility became visible; the district authorities, functioning on a poor budget, are overwhelmed by problems and refractory to alternative solutions, besides often police raids; improperly managed social benefits generated household dependency on them, as a perverse effect; precarious educational infrastructure, leading to low levels of school success and graduation.

Ferentari has a higher percentage of Roma population than the other districts of the city, reason why it is covered in stigma and homogenizing stereotypes (Fleck and Rughiniş, 2008). Beyond the stereotypes, Ferentari is quite a heterogeneous district (Florea, 2009): heterogeneous in its design (different blocks and houses, renovated streets but also abandoned lots), in its economic layers (poor, middle-class and rich people cohabiting), in its ethnic structure (Roma, Romanians, migrants from different countries).

The spaces/ environment where *Komunitas* works

The social realities of Ferentari are framed by separations, deriving from the stigma covering it: many young people don't have friends in other districts, many teachers refuse posts in the district's schools, only about two national NGOs work in the entire district (FOC, concerned with abandoned children, and ARAS, concerned with AIDS

prevention). These separations are most extreme in the ghetto-like areas; here, even the youngest children know that "they live in the ghetto", thus, when making acquaintance, some avoid saying where they live, while some use it as a means to attract attention and compassion.

Aleea Livezilor is such a ghetto-like neighbourhood, of about 20 large former social-housing blocks, now considered to be a "dangerous area". Still, it is a heterogeneous neighbourhood as well: some of the blocks are better-off, even renovated; some are squatted blocks, with dwellers living in extreme poverty; some are mixed blocks, each apartment with a different story and social background; there is a display of extreme practices, such as drug dealing, drug consuming, prostitution, thievery, but also of generally accepted practices such as children's games, elders' promenades, mothers' small-talk.

Closely neighbouring Aleea Livezilor neighbourhood, School no 136 serves most of the school-attending children in the area. It is a poor school (it did not have a surrounding fence and a school-yard until spring 2009, while all schools in Bucharest had), it is a school with low levels of school success (only about 4 graduates out of 40 each year are further accepted in high-schools), and a school with poorly qualified personnel (many of the teachers are actually "substitutes" with some pedagogical diploma).

About half a year after its establishment, *Komunitas* Association decided to focus most of its activities in School no 136, for the benefit of the children living in Aleea Livezilor neighbourhood and attending classes there. Since then, School no 136 is "the core of the core" for *Komunitas* projects, while most of the association's interventions take place in Ferentari.

Nevertheless, *Komunitas* developed and develops actions in other social frames, having in common their connection to educational institutions and their orientation towards children and young people: other schools in Ferentari, elite high-schools in the city-centre (working with teenagers from middle-class and upper middle-class families, with high spatial mobility); some faculties such as Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Faculty of Architecture and Landscape, Journalism, Arts.

How *Komunitas* began

In 2006, we were four fresh university graduates, all in social sciences (sociology and ethnography); we all knew the concepts of social justice, social equality, segregation, stereotypes, gentrification etc.; we wanted to fight social segregation and we wanted better life conditions for all people, but we didn't know exactly what target group to choose; we wanted to use our knowledge of social sciences in order to help other people, share some of this knowledge, empower people in need; we wanted to apply what we knew from theory and research, into action – following the principles of action-research and applied social sciences – but we didn't know exactly how.

But there were two main opportunities which guided the development of *Komunitas*, since its beginning: on one hand, I was working as a researcher in a national PHARE program (European funding program), assessing the situation of Roma groups in Romania. In this position, I could be in contact with Roma activists and through this network, I met the Romany Language teacher from School no 136; in addition, the research on the situation of Roma groups revealed deep issues of segregation, poverty, exclusion, and also revealed the social groups found in the most disadvantaged situation. For me and *Komunitas*, this information meant the identification of our main target groups – the ones found in the most disadvantaged situation, such as the dwellers of Aleea Livezilor – while the meeting with the Romany teacher meant a possible resource in the process of tackling such a situation. In early 2007, we started the partnership with School no 136 in Aleea Livezilor.

On the other hand, in early 2007, a partner group (of friends) from London wanted to organize a Mobile Cinema project in Romania, screening independent films, screening films on social issues in order to transmit social messages, screening films in areas where people never went to a cinema. This was our first real project and it lead to our decision to continue the non-formal educational work, facilitating the access to certain topics, information, cultural encounters, especially for young people.

These two initial opportunities – the meeting with the teacher working in School no 136 and the first partnership project – set *Komunitas* on its track.

Komunitas **as horizontal and vertical mediator**

Since the moment of our decision, **the main projects** are focused on teenagers (11-18 years) as main beneficiaries and are based on non-formal civic education, through film screening and short film production, through diverse creative workshops, sound and photo exploration of certain urban areas; recently, we developed non-formal methods of urban education, such as thematic walks, small participative interventions in the public spaces, simulators of participative planning.

Learning-by-doing is one key principle of *Komunitas* projects; another one is work-in-progress – meaning the adaptability of the course of a project or action according to the requests and needs of the participants. Throughout all projects, the key idea that the participants are exposed to is to try to understand their position in the wider social context (awareness), the ways others influence them, the ways they can influence others (agency), and the ways they can improve these processes, for everyone's benefit (empowerment). Associated to these key elements, *Komunitas* team uses the support of scientific (sociological) knowledge, in two interconnected manners: first, in order to asses the social needs and resources of the beneficiaries and participants, and thus to design the actions/ solutions accordingly; secondly, in order to help beneficiaries/ participants understand macro-social mechanisms affecting them (as explained through available social research), and thus to help them find the most socially-efficient answers/ reactions to such mechanisms.

In the four years of its existence, *Komunitas* organized a series of punctual actions, involving young people from all social strata, and implemented a series of more elaborate projects, involving pupils from Aleea Livezilor as main beneficiaries.

The **punctual actions** were performed in partnership with other initiative groups or NGOs, and included protests, entertaining events, producing thematic films. **Protests** such as bicycle "critical masses" and manifestations with ecological message were targeting and contesting the urban planning legislation; while the solidarity marches were aiming to bring people from different social categories together, to contest different

kinds of discrimination (ethnic, gender-based, racism, economic). All **entertaining events** had intrinsic social topics: one concert for peace, free street libraries promoting contesting-culture texts, free-shop events (exchanging personal items) promoting consumer responsibility. The **amateur films** produced by *Komunitas* team illustrated the precarious life of dumpster-divers (scrap iron collector) in Bucharest, the negative social effects of segregation, the traffic and legal conditions discouraging eco-friendly transportation in Bucharest.

The **elaborate, long-term projects**, based on the experience of the Mobile Cinema, addressed three main domains of civic education, necessary for the personal development of young people into conscious and active citizens – domains otherwise poorly represented in formal education: **self-expression through new media channels**, creative expression through different arts and crafts, urban education.

The first domain was tackled mostly in the projects from 2008, "School Cinema", "Cultures from around the Block" and "Images connecting people" – through screening films on social topics, in three poor schools and in four elite high-schools of Bucharest; followed by workshops teaching kids how to produce their own films, on the social problems they were experiencing or observing around them, and teaching high-school pupils to produce photographic essays and sound explorations of the city (record and then edit urban sounds, exploring the diversity of the city).

Creative artistic expressions were employed together with and for the children participating in "School of Creativity" (2008-2009), "*Ekomunitas*" (2010) and "Together we write the World" (2010): recycle-art workshops, creative writing workshops, painting, music, theatre, English, French, informatics, photography; in the frame of these three projects, all workshops were conceived and implemented by young volunteers from elite high-schools and humanities faculties, assuming the role of "trainers" for small groups of children from Ferentari schools.

Urban education was a transversal topic across all these projects, as urban social issues were always debated with the participants; but "Our city – our decision" (2009) and "Closer to the future" (2009-2010) were statutory dedicated to it; they were experiments of micro-scale participative planning and of collaboration planning among

pupils from School no 136, elite high-school pupils, architecture students, sociology students, professors.

All these punctual actions and elaborate projects created **occasions for interaction and socialization** between different social realities, on different levels.

Through indirect teaching, we stimulated the participants' **global** (supra-local) level of social awareness; showing films, photos, stories, online data about other places in the world, about other social groups, to the kids in Ferentari and to the better-off teens in high-schools, they became aware and curious about the cultural diversity in the world.

Through tactical meetings, we catalyzed **ground-base socializations** and the development of **a local contact-network**, beyond the symbolic group-borders; the tactical meetings involve taking kids from Ferentari to meet established social activists, to meet university professors, or artists and politicians (in order to take interviews of these "key" adults or to present them our work); guiding high-school pupils to take interviews of "key" social personalities but also of casual people from other economic categories (homeless, elders, home-maids and school genitors); inviting friends of ours and people we know (sometimes foreigners) to help organize or observe activities with Ferentari children; organizing project presentation events and open-air events, where different social groups (project participants, the public) meet and interact; inviting Ferentari kids to visit elite high-schools and faculties, in order to meet a different world of learning and different generations of young people, who could become role-models to them.

By working together, in mixed teams, we all benefited from personal-level socializations and enrichment of our personal social networks, **beyond the limitations of our personal social categories**; working together meant personal meetings between *Komunitas* team and all the participants (different age, knowledge, beliefs, ethnicity categories); between Ferentari kids of different ethnicities and different economic statutes, assigned to the same project group; between architecture and landscape students (the students being a rather advantaged social group) and Ferentari pupils, working together to imagine and build organic urban interventions; between sociology

and journalism students and Ferentari pupils, walking, playing theatre, writing together; between Ferentari pupils and elite high-school pupils, the latter assuming the role of non-formal trainers for the first, during creative workshops.

The global social awareness, the local contact-network and the personal meetings are **transgressions of symbolic borders** of economic, cultural, status categories and thus represent challenges to social segregation.

But, in the case of *Komunitas*, these border transgressions and enrichment of action networks are still **limited**.

The vertical networks linking *Komunitas* and its beneficiaries with decision-making institutions and civil-power structures are still unstable. The local authorities are absent from Ferentari (except electoral periods), so most *Komunitas* actions, even interventions in the public spaces, are performed without the formal assistance or approval – but also without any positive or negative reaction – from the local administration. The municipal and national authorities, who have been the subject of several *Komunitas* protests (in partnership with other groups and NGOs), concerning biases in the urban planning legislation, react rather through avoidance and postponing instead of an open dialogue.

On the other hand, there is one National Agency, responsible for the management of European funds in education in Romania, granting funds to local initiatives, through project competitions; each year, *Komunitas* projects wan the support of this Agency, which was vital to their implementation.

A stable relationship with, and support from the mass-media could have enabled the construction of a powerful pressure-group, demanding proper answers to local problems from the decision-makers, and thus opening a vertical dialogue. But *Komunitas'* relationship with the media has always been fluctuating: the state radio was always interested in our events/ actions, broadcasting short news about them, on all occasions – but the state radio has a weak "voice"; there is an online civic Platform where any NGO can communicate its events, but rarely receive feed-back; we can always advertise our punctual events through online platforms for urban events, but we find the dissemina-

tion of more complex project results to be quite a difficult communication process – and a challenge for the future of *Komunitas*.

Komunitas' impact on its surrounding urban realities

Except for the small improvements of public spaces in Ferentari and for the good social "meetings", the results of *Komunitas*' work are not very visible yet. But evaluations at the end of projects showed that they created a base for partnership – among different groups of young people, among institutions of education, among *Komunitas* and its volunteers.

Throughout the projects, we could witness participants turning into volunteers and conceiving their own actions or projects; we witnessed participants from the same activity group (especially children) continuing to act as a group, after the completion of the activities. Different people, coming in contact with the *Komunitas* work, voluntarily became periodic contributors to the activities, offering their help. All actions and projects finally involved more children from Ferentari than was initially planed in each case, due to their desire and requests to join the activity groups.

All these qualitative results and changes are indicators of first steps towards a participative attitude being taken by the young people exposed to *Komunitas* work. It is difficult to account for other changes generated by *Komunitas* in its surrounding social context; but if it didn't actually change anything else, at least it promoted the idea that change is possible. Thus, until now, *Komunitas* constructed possible bases for social change (partnership and participation) – and only the future continuities (or fragmentations) will bring upon a wider and deeper impact.

Future perspectives

At this moment, the *Komunitas* team plans to continue the actions in Ferentari and Aleea Livezilor, exploring new or improved methods of urban education and participa-

tive planning; as a general direction, it aims to continue implementing civic education projects for young people.

But the future is always a source of challenges, and *Komunitas* is not immune to them: on one side, the external challenges, derived from the global transformations, the instability of the contemporary Romanian context, the municipal decisions transforming the city of Bucharest, the schools and the dynamics surrounding their resources; on the other side, the internal challenges, of finding material resources (funds and equipment) and of developing human resources (the volunteers and their life trajectories), of becoming more visible (online, through events, through social networks, through distribution of informative materials) and more legitimized (in front of the authorities, children's parents etc.).

These challenges – faced also by other NGOs or action groups – show the fragility of independent civic initiatives such as *Komunitas* and their dependency on the social networks they create, in a symbiosis.

3. Viver Lisboa
www.viverlisboa.org

Lisbon is a south European capital-city, with a tremendous and disorganized urban growth during the last decades, spreading through out its metropolitan area, with a few urban plans; more recently, urban politics have been demolishing a lot of shanty towns, mostly in the periphery of the city, building social housing, sometimes in the same "slum areas", and resettling people in high blocks of apartments densely populated. Its space is also marked by a growth of a culturally diversified population, provoked by continuing flows of immigrants from Africa, Asia, Brazil and, also, East Europe (including Roma people), mainly in the peri-urban area (Pinheiro et al., 2001; Malheiros, 2009).That area is marked by high rising blocks, which characterize Lisbon suburban landscape. *Alta de Lisboa* is near this marginal area, but still inside the municipal limits of the city.

The spaces/ environment where *Viver Lisboa* works

In the last decade of the 20th century, a renovation process began on the Northeast border of Lisbon in an area that had been occupied since the 1960s by a set of *bairros da lata* (that is shanty towns, or slums): Musgueira, Quinta Grande, Calvanas, Cruz Vermelha, among few others (Salgueiro, 1977), which were demolished, and their populations re-housed in blocks. "Alta de Lisboa" (AL) was the commercial name given to this renovated area and resulted from a public-private partnership which was a mix of social housing and private housing for the middle classes. It was an ambitious plan to build a new urbanization for about 60.000 inhabitants, occupying a huge area of about 300 ha.

However, the means of access, industry, services and leisure, cultural and sports facilities that had been planned have not materialized. As a result AL has remained a kind of "island" that is relatively isolated from the city of which it is part. The roughly 300 ha of AL is currently a fragmented territory, made up of historic, socio-cultural and spatial layers of ruptures. The signs of these ruptures include: the traumatic demolition of the neighborhoods, streets and small houses, which had mainly been built by the population themselves and were full of memories; the abrupt transfer to tall buildings, many of which were on barren wasteland (Guerra, 1998); the destruction of communities of neighbors that went back decades (CEG, 2005); the contrasts – visible in the public space and in schools – between a re-housed population and the middle class population that seemed only to reside (sleep) there; the lack of means of access that could attract private investment; the differences in the architectural quality between the social and private housing; the scarcity of local commerce and other services, particularly in the poorer areas.

In recent years, the local response to this state of affairs has been the setting up of an extremely dynamic associative network, which is made up both of several old associations surviving from the demolished neighborhoods (such as the Musgueira's Social Center – CSM) and of new groups that were formed in AL – Viver Lisboa (VLx) being one of them. These groups, be they formal or informal, produce a significant number

of activities, all aiming to counter the stigmatization of the neighbourhood and to bring dwellers together around the idea of "place" (spatially inscribed territory, with the potential of creating community), making demands on the public authorities for a more complete city.

How *Viver Lisboa* began

Viver Lisboa started out in June 2005 as *Viver na Alta de Lisboa* (Living in Alta de Lisboa) as a personal weblog (free, public, interactive website). The blog first meant to document and illustrate the progress of the *Alta de Lisboa* urbanization plan, as its creator had just moved in an apartment in this neighbourhood under construction.

The main motivations behind the blog were: to follow the development of this part of the city and to stimulate the creation of public pressure to put the urban improvement plans into effect; to develop an increasingly large, interventional and proactive community of residents; the desire to facilitate the social mix philosophy underlying the project, going into the neighbourhood, showing it, increasing ties, abating fears and doing away with prejudice; the need of reflection and debate about a more human and participative city.

It began as an individual blog but other residents in the neighbourhood were soon invited to take part in writing it. Little by little, residents from outside the neighbourhood also started to contribute to the blog, which began addressing broader themes; residents from other neighbourhoods became interested and engaged in the causes of Alta de Lisboa, which remained the main focus of texts and reports. Over the years, there have been discussions on projects, motivations, plans and action strategies. These internal debates sometimes provoke divisions, exits and new arrivals; thus, participations in the blog were and are heterogeneous and inconstant. The blog appeared in a split neighbourhood, divided between two social strata, and it is mostly those with better-off stratus, the newcomers, the house buyers, info-included, curious to know the apartment they are buying and the neighbourhood they have chosen to live in,

that are reading and participating in this blog; but there are also comments and posts, more occasionally and more sporadic, from other residents.

This wide participation lead to the transformation of the blog into an on-line Platform of local action, fed by texts and photographs produced by its participants and with a very clear orientation towards protest.

Viver Lisboa as horizontal and vertical mediator

Much of the VLx's protest action is done through the weblog, with petitions, publication of emails and phone calls to services, in order to reclaim solutions and speed responses from the municipal administration. The causes of the protests have mainly been the structural delays in the implementation of the *Alta de Lisboa*'s Urban Plan (PUAL), notably the macro means of access (North-South Axis, Central Axis, Av. Santos and Castro e Porta Sul), and the local problems arising in the neighbourhood, such as: streets full of potholes, vandalized facilities or the inadequacy of the architectural projects to the life style in the public space.

The attempts to attract readers and residents from the neighbourhood to support these causes – by signing petitions or sending emails as a form of protest – faced many challenges and disappointments. Despite many visits to the website and even some visible indignation in the comments posted, people remained still passive and did not fully exploit the potential of this new form of protest and pressure available to them.

VLx developed a partnership with the Community Group of *Alta de Lisboa* (GCAL), in order to enhance the lobbying process and call for adhesion to protests, against the administrative delays. The results were not as expected; many group members of GCAL chose not to involve in the actions/ complains against the delays. Some (such as GEBALIS, DHURS, Municipal Police), because they were town-hall entities and thus could not sign a contesting document addressed to the Mayor of Lisbon (CML); some, because they were linked to the State (schools, health centers, *Misericórdia*), and others because they were afraid of loosing the municipal or government subsidies (*K'Cidade*, Residents Associations and others) if they would join a contesting campaign.

In this fragmented context, *Viver Lisboa* completed its online work with offline activities. Some were organized in the frame of GCAL. This civic network was formally set up in 2007, due to the need to extend some existing partnerships among the local associations and to encourage greater inter-institutional articulation around common strategies, with the aim of strengthening resources to improve the community life. The GCAL is composed of various kinds of organization: state subsidized organizations, NGOs, enterprises, state and municipal entities, that undertake activities in the areas of health, education, work, security, environment, youth, sport, etc.

The first activities organized and promoted by *VLx*, but that took place offline, were thematic **bicycle rides** around *Alta de Lisboa*, with around twenty residents taking part each time. The thematic rides often took the cyclists past various works that were in progress, explaining in the meantime that a tug of war between CML and SGAL (the urban project's public and private partners) was the reason for the delays they witnessed. The participation in these rides came mainly, though not exclusively, from new residents.

CineCidade was organized as a cycle of debates with architects responsible for works in Alta de Lisboa; an initial screening of a film would guide the discussions upon projects that these architects were responsible for, in the neighbourhood. For a number of reasons, only two of these debates took place, namely with the architects Carrilho da Graça and Isabel Aguirre. Very few inhabitants participated in these debates, which were attended predominantly by people linked to the neighbourhood's association network.

Some "reclaiming the space" actions have had surprising results. A group of residents planed to organize the renovation of a vandalized playground. But after announcing a call for volunteers through the blog, the municipal authorities contacted the action organizers, assuming to implement the repairs through the municipal management services – as they should have done and finally did.

Another example of offline action launched and mediated by *VLx* concerned one dangerous crossing, where 18 lanes of traffic meet, which was the target of countless complaints from residents towards the municipality, due to frequent accidents that

were taking place there. Not receiving any response from the municipality (CML), for a long time, the dwellers finally lost patience and built a roundabout out of recycled plastic blocks. The improvised roundabout was built in the early hours of the morning and removed by municipal services one day later; but the event had such an impact in the media, that it generated a pressure group upon the CML, which had no choice but to build a definitive roundabout, completed three months after the "reclaiming the space" action.

O meu Bairro é a Minha Cara (My neighborhood is my face) was a proposal made by *VLx* to GCAL, for a series of restoration and cleaning works of vandalized public spaces. The project is still ongoing and is coordinated by the *Musgueira Social Center*. It brings together the network of local institutions and involves the whole population in actions of removing graffiti, painting building walls, painting murals and looking after green spaces and making small vegetable gardens. Hundreds of residents have been involved in these activities.

Viver Lisboa used the pretext of cultural events in order to mediate the interaction among different social groups, in the context of *Alta de Lisboa*. **CineConchas** is such a free entry, open-air cinema event which takes place in July in *Quinta das Conchas*. It is run in conjunction with the Musgueira Social Center (CSM) and is part of the Lisbon Festivities. It has taken place three times since 2008 and has exhibited 30 films ranging from the classic James Bond, to *Lisboa* (a silent movie from the 1930s, an anecdotal chronicle accompanied by improvised live piano music), to cartoons for the entire family. The aim when conceiving the event was to bring closer together, in a shared space, different social groups, usually segregated in daily life. It is already considered Lisbon's main open-air cinema event and its success is visible in the high attendance and mixed public.

In a neighbourhood with a history that is buried in the ruins of the demolition of the Musgueira, Calvanas, Quinta Grande and Cruz Vermelha neighbourhoods, it was important to make known how these residential settlements began and grew; it was important to show what happened to the people who built the neighbourhood with their own hands, who became parents and grew up in places that were later demolished

and occupied by the new city. The documentary **Vizinhos** tried to discover these stories, working above all in the *Musgueira Norte* neighbourhood. Producing this documentary meant witnessing the challenges and difficulties people faced with re-housing, and also listening to the expectations of new residents who had bought houses here. The documentary received good feed-back from the local population and also from the wider audience, as it was selected for Doclisboa 2009 and Panorama 2010, and was shown 11 times – all of which subsequently triggered lively debates.

The **Shortdocs** project was also done in partnership with CSM, in the frame of the *Mediateca* program, which works above all with the neighbourhood adolescents. It involved the technical and aesthetic training of various groups of young people, in the domain of production of short documentaries about the neighbourhood. The evaluated outcomes were positive: the project became independent and sustainable, as a number of monitors from the *Mediateca* obtained the skills to continue training other youths.

On dozens of occasions, articles published on *VLx* blog have led to news articles appearing in the press, on television and the radio. However, due to the stagnation of the Alta de Lisboa project, the "news" is no longer news. In addition, the relationship with mass-media lead to disappointment: over the five years since it began, our initiative has come up against the general ignorance of the media, in what concerns the main principles underlying our work (urbanistic, social, public-private partnership); mass-media's lack of receptiveness limits its handling of the subject of cities to nothing deeper than the sensationalist stories about protests against means of access or lack of facilities. The neighbourhood's stigma is omnipresent, even in what should be objective and impartial media, and results in the simplification of the analyses of the protest causes and in the ignoring of achievements.

VLx' impact on its surrounding urban realities

Over the past five years, *VLx* has contributed to a deeper understanding of the intricate balance of power in the *Alta de Lisboa* urbanization project. This understanding

was made available for the dwellers, through the internet (texts, images, messages, and responses to questions). This public understanding (knowledge) was then used to channel local action and to push the balance the power towards the advantage of dwellers; this balance is an ongoing process.

The action network around *VLx* was hundreds of times given as positive example in the press, on radio, in academic works about *Alta de Lisboa*. It served as model for many other associations and institutions, which were inspired to expand their communication to internet. Our actions have brought together many people from other neighborhoods, and placed *Alta de Lisboa* in the Lisbon Festivities program for the first time.

Future perspectives

A civic initiative's power to intervene is heavily dependent on the visibility of its actions. In the case of *Viver Lisboa*, the online platform (blog, site and facebook) will gain greater visibility the larger its audience becomes. *Viver Lisboa* has attempted to produce one article a day, to foster the loyalty of readers. The audience has been growing over the years and with the exception of understandable dips in holiday and festive periods, reaches up to 750 visits a day. Nevertheless, there is the notion that the intervention capacity that was felt in the first two years both with the CML and the media has been declining. The work of citizenship undertaken by *Viver Lisboa* will always depend on its members and the interactivity with the readers. As in the past, it will always encounter oscillations, moods, motivations and availability from its collaborators, which is embedded in its nature of online action network.

4. Building bridges between separated worlds: a new way of practicing social sciences

Kommunitas and *Viver Lisboa* are initiatives that, clearly, make bridges between these separate 'urban worlds', building social networks, a pool of contacts, charged

with the potential of social solidarity and concerted action, as we mentioned above (Miller and Slater, 2000). Despite the differences between them, between the cities and countries they belong to, there are a lot of similarities of these initiatives:

a) in context, each focusing on a disadvantaged neighbourhood;

b) in origins: first, each an individual choice, then a network building up around it;

c) in concrete actions: doing Cinema events; producing "amateur" films; protesting for urban planning issues (bicycle, green areas); performing interventions in public spaces, together with young people;

d) in impact: setting the base for social partnership; performing exercises of participative citizenship; promoting the idea that change is possible;

e) in future opportunities: facing fragile environment, instability, feeling the desire to continue, but always depending on the mobilization of the volunteer networks.

What we have presented here is new forms of association that are independent (politically, economically, etc) and extremely flexible and adaptable to the environmental circumstances; associations centred on daily activities and rapid responses, which imply a permanent collective mobilization of efforts, only possible with a responsible behaviour but also keeping the informality of relationships. They work in accordance with concrete objectives and strive for maximum efficiency (an interesting comparison in the Portuguese case, given the heritage of an associative panorama); they would be enterprises if they were not voluntary associations based on voluntary work.

Their leaders are young, academics or professionals, integrated in more comfortable socio-economic worlds than those where their social work and intervention takes place; in this sense, their voluntary work goes in search of proximity with other realities, oriented by values of solidarity and justice, while resisting to the various forms of personal "accommodation" based on individual (and individualistic) success. They want to break, in a certain way, the barriers (borders, edges) of their "social origin"; they play the role of interpreters, mediators or cultural brokers among distinct and potentially conflictive positions. They promote connections (linkages) between different individuals and groups of interests; they create communication between social catego-

ries that used to be apart; they are able to build bridges in the communities that they choose as their own communities, rooted in public spaces, such as streets, and places of living, such as neighbourhoods (Cordeiro e Vidal, 2008).

In a more theoretical approach, we can say that agency is one of the most important hallmarks that works in this process of urban linking, up and down, among different social worlds and environments of the city.

We can look at the interactive activities held by these two initiatives through distinct lenses; depending on the point of view, all of them carry processes of social change, even quite limited or invisible. These forms of urban interconnections centred on a kind of work which does not have a very formal framework, are developing highly innovative inter-class, inter-generation and inter-cultural forms of communication and socialization; they do so through the promotion of interactions that overcome social barriers, and they obtain interesting results involving social change.

The way in which these actions can change – and have changed – urban life, albeit on a small scale, how they contribute to create positive liaisons, albeit at the local level, with the public space of our cities, how they contribute to reducing stereotypes, social segregation – is something worth the analysis from the academic point of view and also something worth being supported and encouraged from the practical (policy) point of view.

Their innovative work and the way they connect to the city, its exclusion mechanisms, its formal order, have a common pattern. Sharing their experiences, with the occasion offered by this paper, will enable a constructive analysis on their common pattern – analysis which will assure one first step towards improving and developing this pattern.

The above presented comparison has a pragmatic goal: to present action-research models that should inspire the development of a scientific practice of public interest with research aimed at "understanding by doing". From our standpoint, what our paper shows with this comparison is, also, how action-research functions as a tool for social mediation structures, in peripheral context. We are talking about participatory methods and interdisciplinary knowledge empowering simultaneously researchers and

communities, namely collaborative ethnography (Lassiter, 2008), community based participatory research; we are also talking about action-research as a paradigm for achieving social change (Bargal, 2008) – in individual careers, in social science and academy, in society, in brief. This might be a turn in social research in the 'peripheral' countries with less "tradition" in social sciences: here, the practical part of social research could develop, if supported.

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[i] The concept of community, one of the most debated concepts in contemporary social sciences, is also tangential to our story of the two initiatives; the understanding of community suggested here is that of a social network, a pool of contacts, charged with the potential of social solidarity and concerted action (Miller and Slater, 2000)