



MEDITERRANEAN CITY-TO-CITY MIGRATION

CITY CASE STUDY

LISBON

REFUGI.ARTE EM MARVILA, LISBON:
SOCIO-SPATIAL INCLUSION OF REFUGEES AND ECONOMIC MIGRANTS



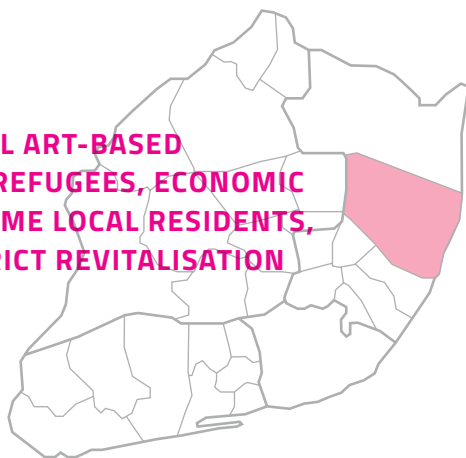
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This case study was developed in the framework of the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration Project (MC2CM), a project coordinated by ICMPD and funded by the European Union and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. The MC2CM project has been working since 2015 with Amman, Beirut, Lisbon, Lyon, Madrid, Tangiers, Tunis, Turin and Vienna to increase the knowledge base on urban migration. Additionally the

project has sought to nurture a peer-to-peer dialogue and mutual learning on specific urban challenges such as social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, employment and provision of basic services for migrants, among others. This case study was selected by the Municipality of Lisbon in order to showcase a practice that contributes to social inclusion of migrants at the local level.

**A MULTICULTURAL ART-BASED
INCLUSIVE SHELTER FOR REFUGEES, ECONOMIC
MIGRANTS AND LOW-INCOME LOCAL RESIDENTS,
PART OF MARVILA DISTRICT REVITALISATION**



ABSTRACT

Refugi.Arte em Marvila is an art-based inclusive shelter for refugees, economic migrants and low-income residents in Marvila district, located in the eastern part of Lisbon municipality. So far, a local architectural co-operative '**Working with the 99%**' has been spearheading the process. The ultimate objective is to contribute to the inclusionary revitalisation of Marvila Street and surrounding areas through the rehabilitation of a municipal under-used heritage facility: Marquês de Abrantes Palace.

The programme builds on previous long-term participatory processes in the area,

catalysed by two micro projects that were largely funded by a municipal programme targeting low-income neighbourhoods. It was submitted in 2017 for city council's approval regarding: (a) formal authorisation for using the Palace and its immediate surrounding open areas for cultural activities; and (b) its transformation and adaptation for future shelter and cultural uses. This programme should be of interest to the municipality as it is in tune with its inclusive and rights-based approach for Marvila, focusing on refugees as one amongst several vulnerable social groups in the area.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The district of Marvila (37.700 inhabitants, INE 2011) is located in eastern Lisbon (548 000 inhabitants, Ibid.). Divided by an inter-city railway line, it is a heterogeneous area, bringing together social housing projects, a disused industrial area, derelict buildings and a rather forsaken residential area, Marvila Street, which used to be lively during its industrial hey days. Following the Lisbon Master Plan and the building of a new public hospital and bridge over the river Tagus, in line with the principles of 'poly-centrality' espoused by the Lisbon Municipal Council (UCLG and City of Lisbon, 2016: 37), the area is witnessing signs of real estate market logics and emerging gentrification.

The social profile of Marvila Street and surrounding areas includes Portuguese largely disadvantaged social groups, along with people of African origin and their descendants, and some gipsy communities. Market-driven tendencies and local resistances/wills point to two potential competing social transformation scenarios for the area: on the one hand, the settling of wealthy young groups in gentrified areas close to the river and, on the other hand, the arrival of refugees and economic migrants in a state of extreme vulnerability.

The purpose of Refugi.Arte programme is twofold: (a) to promote socio-spatial inclusion of the low-income residents of Marvila street and its surroundings areas, through participatory processes; and (b) to generate welcoming conditions for

about 40 deprived refugees and economic migrants, in line with public policies recently advocated by the Lisbon Municipal Council. These objectives should be met through collective and shared access to the Marquês de Abrantes Palace and the upgrading and revitalisation of the district. The programme aims to challenge both commodification and gentrification processes, expected or in progress, whilst claiming a human rights-based approach, starting with the right to a decent place to live.

IMPLEMENTATION

In 2016, Portugal received 1,194 refugees out of 2,066 requests (UNHCR, 2016: 62), many arriving from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea and Somalia. This is a small number, compared with the 10,000 refugees expected to arrive in Portugal by 2018 under the European Programme. These refugees are initially received by the Portuguese Refugee Council and later directed to decentralised areas, urban and rural, across the country. Regarding Lisbon municipality, the City Council inaugurated in early 2016 a transitory centre where up to 30 refugees are welcomed at a time, their future emancipation depending on different factors such as their language proficiency or their professional skills and chances. Lisbon moreover promoted the **Social Rights House** and the **Lx Jovem Space**, as spaces of social rights and inclusion through art facilities, located in Marvila district. These municipal facilities focus on refugees and other migrants and

their descendants, and reflect political interests that are at the core of **Refugi.Arte em Marvila Project**.

The envisioned programme of **Refugi.Arte** builds on two previous participatory experiences in the neighborhood, co-financed through the Municipal Programme for Neighbourhoods and Priority Intervention Zones [BipZip]. The first intervention (2014), launched by the cooperative 'Working with the 99%' and the Warehouse Collective, in partnership with the Lusófona University and under the leadership of the Xerem Cultural Association, resulted in the construction of an intergenerational park in the street of Marvila. The second collaborative intervention (2015), resulting from a partnership between the cooperative 'Working with the 99%' and the Hangar Art Research Centre, (a) recorded the histories and experiences of Marvila residents, primarily from working-classes, and (b) defined with residents potential future uses and functions for the under-used heritage building Marquês de Abrantes Palace.

The **Refugi.Arte** programme aims to continue the broad exchange of ideas that was an innovative dimension of the above participatory process around the architectural plan for the rehabilitation of the Marquês de Abrantes Palace. The Plan was indeed presented and discussed with the local community through round tables, opened to all interested parties. Interestingly, some external stakeholders and institutional representatives from various Lisbon City Council departments participated in the debates (even if unofficially), listening to the concerns of all actors and reflecting

upon the solutions presented. Building on the successes of such tested methodologies, the proposed **Refugi.Arte** programme hopes to integrate the local community progressively into the new project, consolidating the close relationship and trust already established with technicians. This approach should also be conducive to opening up opportunities for refugees' inclusion in the conversations. Simultaneously, new actions enabling the sharing of culturally-specific knowledge will be initiated, such as skills training courses and workshops on sewing, gastronomy or handicrafts.

Each of the above multicultural activities aims to complement **Refugi.Arte em Marvila**, contributing to an inclusive strategy built on: (a) a collective intent (carried both by technicians and the local population) in favour of participatory, potentially inclusive, projects and practices; (b) a response to existing socio-economic inequalities and the prevention of future disparities, resulting from creeping gentrification in some parts of Marvilla district; and (c) the co-elaboration of shared socio-spatial practices, built on innovative interventions that challenge dominant neoliberal logics.

FINANCING AND RESOURCES

The initial phases, precursors to the **Refugi.Arte** Programme were both subsidised through BipZip grants funded by Lisbon local government. It is expected that 60% of the architectural, engineering and related work for the rehabilitation and transforma-

tion of Marquês de Abrantes Palace into a cultural centre/shelter will also be funded by Lisbon Municipality. The remaining 40% will be supported by the Cooperative, as well as the residents, migrants, refugees and scholars, through their volunteering time.

RESULTS AND IMPACTS

It is not possible to identify the results and impacts of Refugi.Arte em Marvila given that, so far, the programme has not been launched and is expecting a funding decision from Lisbon City Council. Nevertheless, taking into account its objectives, namely using art as a tool for social inclusion, one can expect two major effects:

(a) Building an art-based inclusive shelter for refugees and economic migrants should help establish a connection between the Marvila Street and surrounding areas, namely the housing neighbourhoods and the disused industrial areas near the river, whilst stimulating the revitalisation of this low-income district;

(b) Empowerment of local communities, economic migrants and refugees, as well as the development of spaces of encounter between local and foreign communities should curb down growing rates of xenophobia.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

A first challenge has been transforming Marquês de Abrantes Palace into a housing shelter for refugees, economic migrants and deprived residents. The idea has not been well accepted by local landlords, mostly those renting precarious houses in the vicinity. They claimed that their properties would lose financial value due to the negative image associated with refugees among economic migrants and low-income local residents. Yet, the development of various participatory activities in and around the Marquês de Abrantes Palace has led to an appropriation of the proposed plan and a positive commitment regarding refugee's future reception and accommodation. Such activities included for instance the participation of Syrian refugees, sharing traditional Syrian dishes and delicacies with local residents and performing Syrian artistic events. This and similar activities have helped to build bridges across communities, and have led to the dynamic participation of local residents.

Another serious challenge has been the threatened public sale of a unique piece of national heritage, such as the Marquês de Abrantes Palace. The Cooperative "Working with the 99%" has been the main organisation publicly challenging the municipal alienation of the asset. The challenge was successful and the City Council has decided to keep the Palace and its immediate surroundings for common use.

Regarding potential future barriers, lack of proper funding, along with local government co-optation (i.e. taking credit for the initiative without supporting it) might put in jeopardy the success of the whole enterprise, as well as the participation and/or autonomy of civil society groups who have been actively involved. Moreover, given the high number of refugees in relation to the number of proposed structures to receive them in Lisbon, there might be a very high pressure on Marques de Abrantes Palace.

LESSONS LEARNED

The continuous presence since 2014 of the Cooperative 'Working with the 99%' in Marvila Street, points to the importance of long-term involvement for successful inclusionary interventions. In Marvila, long-term presence and engagement has enabled the building of trust with local residents, leading to short, medium and long-term strategies for the progressive inclusion of this long-forgotten part of the city.

Moreover, the involvement of a multidisciplinary team - with a strong arts-based and multicultural approach - has broadened the perceptions of the area, helping to bring out its potentials and not just its weaknesses. The focus on community participation, meanwhile, has led to a gradual appropriation of the project by local residents and to new public and collective uses for Marquês de Abrantes Palace, namely those selected for the project Refugi.Arte in its multiple dimensions.

Past processes strongly highlight the importance of organised civil society in the formulation of local policies related to inclusion and human rights, in an increasingly multicultural city. Despite growing real estate speculation and gentrification in the area, Refugi.Arte em Marvila gained the support of the paradigmatic Department of Social Rights of Lisbon Municipal Council, strongly committed to the inclusion of refugees and economic immigrants (as identified by Lisbon City Council, 2015). This tentative success tends to advocate for the importance of political will and a rights-based approach in addressing refugees and migrants related issues.

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This case study has been prepared by Yves Cabannes, Sílvia Jorge, Sílvia Viegas under the coordination of Barbara Lipietz and Tim Wickson from the Bartlett's Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College of London (UCL) and the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, in the framework of the MC2CM Project.

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@urban_migration
 icmpd.org/mc2cm
 mc2cm@city-to-city.org