

Changing the public spaces in the neighbourhoods of Contumil and Pio XII

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To cite this article: GUEDES, Cristina – Changing the public spaces in the neighbourhoods of Contumil and Pio XII. **Estudo Prévio** 5-6. Lisboa: CEA/CT/UAL – Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, 2014, p. 175-180. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Available at: www.estudoprévio.net].

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Abstract

In the project regarding public spaces in the Neighbourhoods of Contumil and Pio XII, the need to restructure neighbourhood paths, improve access to mobility-impaired people, redefine road and sidewalk layouts, create new parking spaces and thus allow for the redevelopment of the whole area.

The new road layouts, designed as orthogonal axes, reduce the importance of the existing roads, designed in the 1960s, and give the neighbourhoods a more urban and human feel.

A series of modules were studied, which were prefabricated in concrete and gave the neighbourhood a more consistent appearance and, simultaneously, solved the issue of the area's steepness: walkway barriers, tree collars, entrances to buildings, walls, benches, steps, access ramps.

Opting for prefabrication in concrete allowed for an effective and cheap solution.

Our design of the public space also aimed to make it a driving force in the community, as it provided a space for leisure sports and informal activities for the several population segments.

Keywords: Porto, prefabrication, Bairro, Pio, Contumil.



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The design of the public spaces in the Neighbourhoods of Contumil¹ and Pio XII was not easy. This was not a simple aesthetic refurbishing but it aimed at providing a positive urban and community experience in a degraded, rundown neighbourhood, where public space was isolated and had been continuously misappropriated. The irregular terrain and old-fashioned road layout added to these difficulties. Considering this was a complex situation, the project included apparently contradictory guidelines: integrate the neighbourhood in the city and enhance its community feeling; provide a unifying solution and take into account specific situations; counter misappropriation of public space and allow the community to easily make it their own. Three steps became essential: restructure access to the neighbourhood, redefine public and private spaces and find a standard solution for public space (including urban furniture).

So as to open the neighbourhood to the city and make it part of the city, roads and sidewalks were restructured, parking spaces were increased and access to mobility-impaired people was improved. This affected the whole area in question. The new road layouts, designed as orthogonal axes, reduced the importance of the existing roads, designed in the 1970s, and gave the neighbourhoods a more urban and human feel. Moreover, the project also redefined the sidewalks so as to make them more efficient and accessible, in particular to mobility-impaired people.

So as to stop the misuse and misappropriation of spaces at ground level, private and public spaces were redefined. Simultaneously, we provided the neighbourhood with new public spaces. Areas around the buildings were restructured and new accesses created.

Restructuring roads and sidewalks presented an added obstacle in view of the need of adjusting the existing ground level thresholds to the required by the design of new roads.

So as to find a formal and truly unifying solution, a series of prefabricated elements were analysed, which were made of concrete, were resistant, modular, versatile, and allowed for a standard neighbourhood design. These included walkway barriers, tree collars, entrances to buildings, walls, benches, steps, access ramps. Prefabrication in concrete made it possible to find an effective solution at a low price while providing a resistant and easily maintained solution. More importantly, it allowed for a very flexible standardization and one of the most relevant elements in this intervention was the dichotomy standardization/flexibility.

In fact, using a short number of elements which were globally applied, we were able to meet the challenges posed by the project, namely give a renewed and urban image to the whole neighbourhood and solve the specific cases (including the different ground level thresholds) without placing at risk the unifying purpose of this intervention. Moreover, this solution also offers aesthetic advantages as we used the industrial elements in a play on continuity, on repetition and texture at a low cost and making use of the elements' versatility (they often fulfil two functions - urban furniture and separating element).

The project to refurbish/rejuvenate this public space posed the difficulties inherent to attempting to reconcile it with the heritage of the existing buildings, which were heavily degraded and rundown, probably as a result of the development planning having been carried out after the buildings having been constructed. However, the project allowed for integrating the neighbourhood in the city and for the creation of a driving force of the population, making leisure, sports and informal activities possible.



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Road structure

The neighbourhood's road structure was restructured, ensuring access of vehicles to all housing blocks and the increase of parking spaces. The project included easy access road system to all blocks, including of emergency vehicles. In the Neighbourhood of Contumil, the street Rua do Eng. Pedro Inácio Lopes, which crosses the neighbourhood and is confined to the neighbourhood, was redesigned designed as orthogonal axes. The new layout gives less importance to the road system and gives the neighbourhood a more urban character. We focused on two existing roads accessing Rua de Contumil and opened a new road to Rua do Professor Bonfim Barreiros, thus making it easier to drive around the neighborhood while maintaining a difference between main and secondary roads.

Parking space

To counter wild parking as cars took over garden space and destroyed sidewalks and vegetation, the parking spaces were clearly marked and their number was increased to four hundred and five, distributed evenly among the areas around the building. So as to take best advantage of the parking spaces, the location of the bus stop for STCP - Sociedade de Transportes Coletivos do Porto was altered.

Taking ownership of public space

Following the decision and the common practice of Porto City Hall, the project included the demolition of the illegal outbuildings, as well as of patios in the buildings' ground floors, which were replaced by sidewalks and gardens. Other types of ownerships at ground floor and in public spaces had to be assessed on an individual basis, some of them during the construction phase. The gypsy community, which occupied empty spaces between the buildings, was not excluded. The solution was to build clothes-lines to provide more space to the small apartments. The ownership of public space by semi-private social institutions was rather reinforced. That was the case of MADI (Movimento de Apoio ao Diminuído Intelectual).



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Inclusive design

Since the ground floors of the buildings are high, the project took into account the mobility-impaired residents and built ramps as well as steps at the entrances of the buildings.

Stay areas | informal uses

The current leisure areas were refurbished so as to make it possible that different activities be held. Thus, a playing field paved with porous concrete was built as well as leisure areas with a more organic layout for informal sports activities.

Materials

The choice of materials was made considering the unifying objective of this intervention, the fact that the materials must be long-lasting, easy to maintain and inexpensive. Therefore, we opted for bituminous for paths and sidewalks; 10x10 granite cubes for the parking spaces; concrete prefabricated elements for walkway barriers, tree collars, entrances to buildings, walls, benches, steps, access ramps; metal bars for round tree collars and flower bed borders.



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Systematization | Prefabrication

A series of prefabricated elements were analysed, which were made of concrete, were resistant, modular, versatile, and allowed for a standard neighbourhood design. These included walkway barriers, tree collars, entrances to buildings, walls, benches, steps, access ramps. The steepness of the terrain was balanced by means of prefabricated walls/benches in concrete which serve as borders to the garden areas in the slopes. The urban furniture contributes to the enhancement of outer spaces, considering its flexibility and resistance to intensive use and possible vandalism.

Landscaping

The existing vegetation was mostly kept and maintained, only those trees which obstructed the new road layout were cut down. New vegetation was added to the existing trees, which allowed for shade. The trees are also an important feature which provides hierarchy. The sidewalk infrastructure included service terminals, supplementary lighting, water system and the possibility of adding other elements. The permeated land was designed so as to efficiently drain water to the rain water network.

¹ 248 houses under the control of o Instituto de Habitação e da Reabilitação Urbana da Administração Central + 254 houses belonging to Porto City Hall (Câmara Municipal do Porto) managed by CMPH – DomusSocial – Empresa de Habitação e Manutenção do Município do Porto, EM.