
Exploring the diversity of ruins in the Portuguese perforated city: a cluster analysis-based approach

Eduardo Brito-Henriques*¹ and David Cruz*¹

¹Centre for Geographical Studies / Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, Universidade de Lisboa (IGOT-ULisboa) – IGOT Cidade Universitária R. Branca Edmée Marques 1600-276 Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract

A few academics in France and Germany have been using the term ‘perforated city’ as a substitute to the more common term ‘shrinking city’. By using it they intend to describe a reality where urban decay and urban sprawl may coexist in the same city or urban region. Contrary to shrinkage, the concept of ‘perforation’ admits that demographic decline and dereliction may affect some parts of the city while new housing developments and new businesses spread in other parts. Thus, a new urban pattern marked by miscellaneous voidances arises, in which filled and empty plots, as well as new, renovated, and derelict buildings are merged.

Although living with ruins became normal in the ‘perforated city’ and several kinds of ruinous presences are apparently pervasive in the contemporary urban space, ruinscape remains a largely uncharted topic in urban studies. In this paper we intend to reverse this, drawing attention to the enormous complexity and variety of ruined structures that exist in the ‘perforated city’. At the same time, we seek to find some logic in that miscellany; by examining the diversity of ruins, we believe that the multiplicity of causes of dereliction and ruination in cities may be reached and exposed.

Urban ‘perforation’ is a very common and widespread situation in Portugal. Having been driven by real estate speculation, the Portuguese urban development in the past decades led to a paradoxical model of urbanization in which new apartment blocks and condos for single-family houses in periphery coexist with ruined old buildings in city centre, abandoned manufacturing plants, derelict barracks, and unfinished real estate projects.

In this paper, four Portuguese perforated cities representative of different urban and regional contexts are considered. An exhaustive inventory of all ruins present in them was made. In a second step, a sample of 20% of those ruins in each city was inquired and described, considering features such as dimension, former uses, age, date of abandonment, and type of owner. Finally, a hierarchical cluster analysis was applied to data in order to find typologies of ruins and estimate their occurrence in urban space.

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Keywords: ruins, dereliction, shrinking cities, urban perforation, Portugal

*Speaker