
Urban Ruins: scenarios for the in-between, Guimarães, Portugal

João Sarmiento^{*2,1}, Marta Labastida^{*4,3}, and Rui Pereira⁴

²University of Lisbon (CEG-UL) – Portugal

¹Geography Department, University of Minho – Portugal

⁴Lab2PT (Lab2PT) – Portugal

³School of Architectural of the University of Minho (EAUM) – Portugal

Abstract

This study, framed in a larger project that aims at mapping and studying ruins and vacant lands in four Portuguese cities (NoVoid), proposes to look at a large (8 hectares) abandoned industrial quarter in the city centre of Guimarães, Northwest Portugal. This medium size city (70,000 inhabitants within the city limits, and 160,000 in the municipality) has a strong industrial base, despite the high number of factory closures during the last 3 decades.

The quarter, part of a larger quarter area Caldeiroa, contains a variety of derelict structures, or ruins, and vacant land. It has a rough triangular shape, and it has no crossing points, being almost hermetic. Significantly, this empty and almost unused space is roughly the same size as the entire medieval walled city, which is almost contiguous and classified as a UNESCO world heritage site. The main square of the city connects these two areas. A long 19th century avenue (approximately 500 metres) divides Caldeiroa to the west and another industrial area to the east, and connects the city centre to the train station and leads to one of the main city exits. The old factory entrances along this avenue are now all sealed, functioning as a barrier to movement. To the west the quarter's limit is the Caldeiroa street, one of the oldest in the city. To the south the quarter is limited by two large functioning hotels and a working factory.

The area is crossed by a small water course, which had an historical function serving the leather factories in the neighbourhood, and is prone to flooding, despite the recent works done to control flows. The neighbourhood has also a bad reputation, having been one of the key places in the city for prostitution, being currently used by drug addicts. The potential and possibilities for this quarter development or change, mainly due to its location and size, are strong, but have until now been halted by the financial and economic crisis since 2008. At the moment the quarter can be understood not only as hermetic, but also as opaque as ignored by the public.

At first we have thoroughly explored the area, mapping and surveying building and vacant land. We used qualitative methods to grasp abandonment and different appropriations, monitoring regularly the area. Afterwards the quarter was the subject of a group of architecture students projects, who further discussed the area, engaged with the local community and proposed several possibilities for development.

*Speaker

Considering that the time of demolishing and building from scratch is obsolete and inadequate to the present economic context of the country and city, we selected three scenarios for this area. These are prospects for the time mediating the present and the eventual development of more permanent uses. The first one, following Françoise Choay on the right of ruins to their uselessness, and especially Gilles Clement on the third landscape, is to understand this quarter as a transitional space where an unattended area can follow its course through a non-intervention policy. The second one is to consider two types of temporary uses. One using the metaphor of the circus, i.e., where sporadic events occasionally fill the quarter with life and people; and the other using the greenhouse as metaphor, since fragile and impermanent structures may promote uses such as collective gardens, markets, etc. While these uses are transitional, they may stimulate the birth of new conditions and ways of looking at the quarter, which ultimately may have a consequence in their future development. Finally, changes may occur by seizing opportunities that take place in adjacent areas. In this case in particular we may consider how the building of a new car park or a cycle path may promote different usages in the quarter.

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