# Preserving Urban Heritage and Creativity: The Reuse of the AXA Building in Porto

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# Abstract

This article addresses the interaction between urban regeneration and cultural policies. Planning and developing urban transformation may foster positive and experience design through the experience economy, targeting a cohesive cultural narrative and identity. The discussed case study discussed here concerns the reuse of the AXA Building in the historic center of the city of Porto, in Portugal, as an alternative to classical integrated urban cultural policy and the promotion of free access dynamic leisure activities. In this case, the reuse of a historical building resulted from a hybrid project. Characterized by fusion, the design combined urban rehabilitation, heritage conservation and maintenance, cultural institutions, environments and experiences, social interaction, recreation, and programs aimed at improving the quality of life of both residents and visitors.

Keywords: Urban Creativity, Building Reuse, Cultural Sustainability, Experience Economy.

# Introduction

Urban spaces are tangible material constructions and also intangible immaterial spheres, resulting from cultural ways of inhabiting and participating in the city. In addition to this, through subjective ideological representations, the city becomes an emotionally appropriated place, to live in, to enjoy, and to experience. Therefore, urban regeneration encompasses tangible and intangible goals.

Aesthetic and symbolic creative agents are increasingly intervening in different activities and dimensions, which include connecting culture to economy to the urban space, and feeding the discussion of the potential of such multiparty connections. This linkage may help explain the rationale behind the image of a city. Through territorial marketing, tourism promotes destination places as products, which may be helpful as a tool in devising and designing strategies to revitalize urban heritage, namely historical buildings.

In the presented case study presented here, the Porto AXA Building offered offers some insight into the potential of urban revitalization strategies. An abandoned historical building, as architectural heritage, was subject to reuse. The main façade, windows and balconies were transformed into a vertical music hall, while the inside houses art galleries and exhibitions. The former insurance company office building was converted into a multimedia cultural performance. Additionally, this transformation had a domino effect. Overlooking the Porto main square, Avenida dos Aliados, and the historical building of the City Hall, the creative cultural reuse operated offered a 'blood transfusion' to the decaying neighboring area, revitalizing local commerce and creating new business opportunities. Experience-oriented projects have thrived within the city environment. Urban regeneration and cultural policies may become opportunities to build a more active citizenship and culturally sustainable city, enhancing the subjective dimension of the public space and public amenities.

#### 1. Urban Regeneration since the 20th century

The concept of urban regeneration became relevant in the 19th century, during the industrial revolution, with the need to adapt urban systems to the incoming demographic flow of workers to the city. At the time, this originated urban suburbia based communities, leading to the decline of urban center populations and consequently to a gradual decline and growing weaknesses on a social, economic and cultural level (Benévolo, 2001).

In the late 1920s, the International Congress for Modern Architecture (CIAM) in the late 1920's recognized the need to address the new reality of the urban center. It triggered an awareness of the role of preservation and conservation, as forms of monetizing urban heritage, namely historical buildings, and due to their role at different levels – architectural system, urban context, and the construction of identity.

In 1929, the second meeting of the association presented significant approaches to the social dimension of the design process, seeking greater centrality for the human being in the development of interventional proposals. Between 1931 and 1933 new conferences were held, culminating in the Charter of Athens. This document set the foundations and goals for urban and architectural intervention (De Fusco, 1985). Later, following the destruction of European territories during World War II, it was necessary to rethink their structure and organization, according to social, economic, and institutional frameworks. The reconstruction process allowed contemporary needs and strategies to be addressed, by moving populations to more fitting areas, in search for better and more sustainable living conditions, with better employability and safety, thus implying a change in the principles of urban planning. Post-war reconstruction witnessed serious social and economic problems, discussed in the International Conference on Modern Architecture, which followed the Second World War (Benévolo, 2001). These meetings introduced new urbanism and architecture, whose main concern was the city identity, in a new understanding of the network and connections defining the contemporary quality of life.

The relationship between citizens and housing, the way users relate and react to the surrounding environment, the identity of a place and similar concepts were gradually inserted into political discourses, linked and developed in 1964 with the Charter of Venice (also known as the International Bill of Restoration) (Moutinho, 1999) and more recently with the New Charter of Athens in 2003, in the IV International Congress for Modern Architecture. Especially in the second half of the 20th century, the traditional urban cultural attractions such as theaters, works of art and museums saw the addition of new features and other cultural resources not bound to a specific location, but rather free to flow, move and change in a liquid reality (Bauman, 2001), such as cultural events, self-identity and the revitalization of historic center. According to Bauman, reality is liquid, fluid, volatile, characterized by uncertainty and insecurity and it opposes the rigid 'solid modernity' (Bauman, 2001), informed by numerous moral references, which were set aside and gave way to the logic of now, of movement.

A paradigmatic example of this is the permanent revolution of historical centers, showcasing a relentless mutation/change. Urban interventions sought to re-insert these spaces in the urban fabric, by becoming qualifying factors for those urban centers, to the point of being requested by urban populations in small, medium and large cities. The urban space may be construed as the place for strangers to meet. According to Sennet (1978) this meeting has particular traits: there is no before or after meeting; the event has no past or future, there is no continuity to the story. In this sense, urban life requires a social activity the author calls civility. It is the ability to interact with strangers without using their strangeness against them. Bauman (2001) believes we live in a world with more urban spaces than civilian spaces.

Another perspective proposed by Trueman (cit. in Jay, 2006) suggests an urgent need to analyze the urban space as a brand, considering the wide variety of interested sponsors, for example, the local business community. According to this author, it is possible to examine the city as a brand, using conventional branding types and considering different stakeholders. Through this sort of propositions, a specific discourse may be set for the city, as a tourist, professional, and housing product, creating its very own identity. Kotler (Kotler et al. 1993) argues that in a global economy, each destination city competes with others in search for commercial advantage. According to Kotler, places are in fact products, whose identities and values must be designed and marketed. Failing to adequately market a placeing means a risk of stagnation and economic decline.

In this sense the economic prosperity of a country, city or culture is directly linked to the mystique of a place - its heritage, culture, people, and its business and financial systems. They must all work together to create more sustainable policies and strategies. According to Gartner (1993), the destination image is formed by three interrelated components: cognitive, affective and conative. The cognitive component is the set of beliefs and attitudes leading to an internally accepted image of attributes. The affective component is related to the motives for choosing one destination instead of another. The conative component concerns the images developed during the cognitive stage and evaluated during the affective stage (Gartner, 1993).

Destination image is crucial in the touristic decision making process because all decision making factors such as money, time or family are based on the image of each destination, influencing the decision maker's motivation, and their intention to visit and to revisit a given destination (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010).

The interpretation and requalification of architectural structures is a creative exercise deeply connected to design principles. Redesigning redefines spaces in specific environments, in a creative fashion. According to Manzini (2011), as the limits of the planet become more clearer apparent, people begin to realize and interpret them spaces in different ways (in terms of economy and also health) requesting new systems with more responsive resources. Thus, design presents an asset to society, urban planning and the local economy.

# 1.1. Urban Policies and Creativity

Cultural approaches spread throughout many cities in Europe, encouraged in many cases by EU funding. The introduction of urban cultural policy has been much slower than the commoditization of urban culture. On a European level, academic circles only began an explicit debate on this area in the 1990s. Bianchini and Parkinson (1993) A pioneering debate on the subject and with a collection of essays that explored a range of Western European cities and addressed the effect of cultural policy in urban regeneration. Bianchini (1993) identified a set of dilemmas still relevant today: spatial dilemmas such as tensions between center and periphery (the risk of gentrification); economic development dilemmas on whether to encourage production or consumptione; cultural financing dilemmas, on whether to offer ephemeral support to events and festivals or to rather supporting permanent infrastructures. In order to solve these dilemmas, Bianchini advocates cultural planning, as alternative to traditional cultural policies which that are still grounded in aesthetic definitions of culture as art (Bianchini, 1999, p. 41).

The discourse on cities touches on social inclusion, performing arts, urbanism, economics, culture, and innovation -, including the ability to implement intersecting interventions beyond old dichotomies and conflicts in terms of fields and forms of action: economy vs. culture, public vs. private, ephemeral vs. permanent, local vs. global. Due to an interesting political repercussion, cities are allowed to rehearse political, institutional, and governing solutions that are represent creative and innovative means to deal with new urban realities and the difficulties of most of the traditional forms of performance forms (Costa et al., 2007). Discussions on cultural planning have evolved with the urban cultural policy debate, partly because of its more ambitious and holistic nature. A consequence of this is that the culture approach in the scope of urban policy tends to be made in purely functional terms, instead of prioritizing the question of what culture can add to the economy.

According to Lorentzen (2009) draws on the concept of the experience economy, created by Pine and Gilmore (1999), to argue that , cities can progress, drawing on and he believes that the economy is not just based on culture, entertainment or tourism, or even the cultural and creative industries, but also on local services (restaurants, the wellbeing industry, etc.). Therefore, territorial development requires a co-localization of the consumption experience with production, to the extent that it invites people to enjoy and spend their money both as residents and as visitors and tourists (Lorentzen, 2009).

The convergence between culture and economy in the urban context has increased since the 1990s with the expansion of city marketing techniques and city branding strategies. Identifying the city as a branded product allows the recognition ofzing an organized cross-system of goods and services for citizens and visitors to appreciate. In order to ensure that urban cultural policies maximize their role in shaping contemporary cities, the mandate of cultural policy must be further expanded in a way that addresses the complex and multifaceted nature of urban culture. Bianchini (1999) suggests that this can only happen through a radical change in our understanding of how to plan and develop city policies:

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"What urban planners and policy-makers need today is perhaps the creativity of artists. This is the creativity of being able to synthesize; to see the connections between the natural, social, cultural, political and economic environments, and to grasp the importance not only of 'hard' but also of 'soft' infrastructures. The knowledge of how to use soft infra-structures [daily routines of working and playing, rituals location, ambiences and atmospheres, people's sense of belonging] is crucial for successful policy implementation" (Bianchini, 1999, pp. 42-43).

Cities require a more holistic and flexible understanding of cultural policy, combining the sphere of the arts with the economic, political, social, educational and environmental spheres of cities. Cities house skilled workers, infrastructure (cultural facilities), specialized schools, major cultural events, and transportation facilities. This means that they can meet the flexibility requirements of the new economy and the "creative city,", a term coined by Bianchini and Landry in 1995. According to these authors, creativity arises as an alternative to instrumental thinking.

The dominant intellectual traditions shaping urban policies are deeply rooted in instrumental, rational, and analytical thinking. Bianchini and Landry (1995). The authors describe how creative thinking is a way to abolish inflexible prejudice and to address complex phenomena that cannot always be dealt with in a strict logical way. Genuine creativity involves thinking about new problems by adopting as main principles experimentation, originality, and the ability to rewrite rules; to be unconventional;, to find common grounds in seemingly conflicting areas; to look at situations laterally and flexibly. These ways of thinking and acting encourage innovation and generate new possibilities. In this sense, according to Bianchini and Landry (1995), creativity is a "modernist" concept, defending progress, novelty, and relentless change (1995).

# 1.2. The Portuguese Case

In Portugal, the evolution of urban policies did not keep up with the country's process of urbanization process.

The late urbanization (second half of the 20th century) accelerated, leading to serious imbalances in the territory. These imbalances and disqualifications are were due to the absence of territorial planning policies, caused by an unfavorable political context. While in Europe, territorial and urban planning met its heyday between 1929 and 1979, according to Ferreira (2004), Portugal faced dictatorship (1926-74) and revolution (1974), which resulted in setbacks regarding in the planning system.

The national territorial planning system began in the 1970s with various regulatory instruments such as the General Urbanization Plans (1971) or and the Law of Land Management (1976). However, the goals and guidelines of the various plans could only be met in 1998, with the Law of Land Management and Urbanism (LBOTU - Lei de Bases do Ordenamento do Território e do Urbanismo), which integrated all territorial management tools in a hierarchical system based on principles such as coordination, compatibility, equity and participation (Ribeiro et al., 2012). Concerning the city, this trend is even more evident, as programs with regulatory character, such as the Municipal Master Plan, shift to strategic and collaborative sector programs, such as the Partnerships for Urban Regeneration, a tool of city policy regulated under the Regional Operational Programs of the QREN (2006-2013). According to Domingues (2003), until the end of the 1990's, the Portuguese urban policies were scarce, under-financed, and disconnected among from both each other and from the various levels of government.

The POLIS XXI Cities Policy openeds a new cycle for urban policies, recognizing that the development of the country is was directly linked to the role of cities as competitive places for citizenship and quality of life;, that a good city policy should develop surrounding areas;, and that the implementation of this policy should be sustained in cooperation with urban actors such as municipalities, associations, and companies (Ribeiro et al., 2012). This was a milestone in urban policies, introducing important innovations. The first one was to extend the interventions made in the historic centers to other areas of the city and even its outskirts. A second innovation was the combination of several dimensions: physical interventions to transform cities into areas of social cohesion, economic competitiveness and environmental quality (Conde and Resende, 2007: p.55). The third aspect was the promotion of forms of governance based on public participation and partnerships with various actors/ urban agents (Ribeiro et al., 2012). In this regard, partnerships with various actors allowed the growth of cultural and artistic communiUrban renewal and revitalization through culture is growing in Portugal. However, it is associated with an increased understanding of the relationship between culture and more conventional techniques, such as spatial economic development, and the planning and revitalization of buildings and spaces. The transformation carried out in the first Portuguese cities proved that culture is an economic motor, through physical facilities such as theaters, parks, gardens and movie theatres. However, for these spaces to be experienced and felt as part of a collective culture, as new public spaces, there is still a long way to go.

Political power in Portugal, regardless of philosophical inclinations, has come to allow some autonomy to the cultural ground. Since 1995, public cultural policy has had a traditional attitude, understanding culture as a world view. According to Silva (1997: p. 44), public policies in the cultural field are indispensable and must increasingly incorporate elements of stimulation and co-responsibility of the plurality of actors and interests expressed in the so-called civil society.

### 2. Case Study: the Porto AXA Building

This century witnessed an increase in building restoration and the requalification of underpopulated city areas through historic preservation. Rehabilitation has become a research object for engineering, architecture and design. In Portugal, economic concerns and ecologically sustainable development fostered the adaptive reuse of historic buildings, and the subsequent requalification of old urban centers, resulting in economic restructuring.

Classified as a World Heritage Site in 1996, the urban historic center of Porto progressively concentrated service industries, commerce, banking, and insurance head-offices, suffering from high traffic -volume, pollution, the degradation of buildings, streets, and roadways, the loss of identity, and a growing exodus of the resident population exodus. Desertification had a significant socioeconomic impact. To face it, and the increasing patrimonial degradation, the built landscape was object of subject to rehabilitation works. Although important for the new city dynamics, the most relevant element for change was the adaptive reuse of the AXA Building, which became a benchmark in the urban space and cultural life of downtown Porto.

Near the Porto City Hall, the AXA building is a seven - storey building with fifty rooms and over 4,500 square meters. The building, is the property of the AXA insurance company. It is now a core element in the new urban space syntax, in a context of intense urban dynamics, touristic flows and leisure and cultural activities. The AXA Building is currently the headquarters of the "1<sup>ª</sup> Avenida" (1st Avenue), an Economic and Social Development Project of Downtown Porto, sponsored by the local authorities. In addition to institutional partnerships, the cultural intervention showcases works from young artists and curators, in artist-in-residence programs, and includes a professional dance school ("Balleteatro"). The space is divided in over 7 floors with more than 50 rooms hosting cultural activities, especially exhibitions and music concerts. The AXA Building established a symbiotic environment, combining informality and interactivity with visitors. The reuse of the AXA Building contaminated cascaded to the surrounding area, disseminating meeting spots, smaller performances and audiences, and promoting memorable events for locals and tourists. It translated into a metamorphosis of the economic landscape of the city, by enhancing entertainment, experiences and memories, by offering the building and the city a second life supported by art and culture, and by improving the residents' well-being and quality of life.

Cultural sustainability is an essential dimension in the representational and symbolic domain. In a city with high-quality museums and art galleries, a new center of attraction served by a vast network of public transport, and catering and accommodation establishments, creates a cultural and leisure epicenter, promoting a larger shopping complex, and improving the city experience:

participation in leisure activities has been assumed to increase subjective wellbeing. Leisure is important because it is more under personal control than other sources of life satisfaction" (Brown et al., 2015: 135).

Hence, cultural spaces should be experienced and embodied in the experience of local population as social spaces and, positive sources of life satisfaction. They should be living spaces inspiring a common understanding of the place, performing as unifying elements and helping to form a public identity, ownership, freedom and responsibility. Contemporary urban tourism has also diversified from historical, patrimonial tourism, and it is now based on targeting stimulating life-pulsing urban landscapes, exhilarating experiences and meaningful recollections. Traditionally, urban tourism centers offered the possibility to combine shopping, sightseeing, and leisure activities. Now, in addition to the fascination with the historical benchmarks of monuments and architecture, there are new aesthetic factors: lifestyles, quotidian routines and atmospheres. In a recent study, a positive association was found between participation in sport, heritage and active-creative leisure activities, and life satisfaction but not between participation in popular entertainment, theatre hobbies and museum/galleries (Brown at al., 2015). This is paramount to understanding the new urban market for tourism and leisure, based on improved upgraded attractions, events and environment, considering the city as a source of wellbeing, positive emotions and higher life satisfaction.

The economic ecosystem of the downtown Porto received a 'blood transfusion' from the AXA building, reviving a declining system. The increase of in revenue and the offer of a diverse, and unique experience occurs in a dynamic relationship with other people and objects, with the influence of multiple contextual factors and that boost the quality of the individual experience. All neighboring streets were affected, and the city experience was revalued. Although prices have increased, so have the number of visitors and residents, at a 'glocal' scale, with longer working hours in new establishments such as bistro-restaurants, second-hand boutiques and guesthouses.

There was a domino effect prompted by the reuse of the Porto AXA building. It is an iconic building for the new urban paradigm in which the interaction between buildings and urban space triggers momentous experiences, attracting new clientele all -year round and promoting the use and enjoyment of public spaces. In the 21st century, government, local authorities, and the private sector combine funding efforts to promote memorable experiences through culture, with daring events and seemingly impromptu public concerts, using the static urban city and architecture as a stage.

The city appeals to the five senses, to perception and emo-

tion, as a 'skin' to wear and enjoy, and as a place to revisit, re-experiment, and re-create. The Porto AXA Building is a socially relevant space of cultural intervention. It is not depleted by structural limitations, on the contrary, it is filled with a series of cultural activities, exhibitions of emerging artists, and music concerts on the building façade stage overlooking the City Hall.

We increasingly desire a new kind of space –, at the same time no place and every place, nothing and everything, as little as possible in expression, and as much as possible in potential and variation – ; a space that can fit, with few resources, our future existence. Physical spaces require a versatile language that does not limit their possibilities. The repeated experience of enjoyment and circulation through different spaces and their re-use generates a dynamic stimulation of the senses. In fact, participation in leisure activities, which are active and promote social interaction, has been assumed asserted to increase subjective wellbeing. To insist on this dynamic reconstruction/reuse of social space allows us to politicize the space itself, because it:

allows representativeness, transforming power and subject entity (not just object identity) to the local community, before the hegemonic significant force (...) of those who design, finance and administer urban spaces for public use" (Balibrea, 2003: p.50).

The AXA Building project established a fluid bond, discursively constructed with the glocal community, who haves become a protagonist of the meaning of the identity associated to with the space. According to Ribeiro (1998), it is possible to create spaces for a community to identify, recognize and revitalize through 'works of cult' taking place, and according to this author, that is the ultimate purpose of design.

# Conclusion

The importance of culture, cultural policies, and creativity for urban regeneration has been playing played a very important role in policy-making for the cities since the 1990's. It allows the emergence of the so-called cultural districts or cultural quarters, often defined as creative clusters, because they constitute local-scale industries and economies.

This article reflects the need to record for the future that urban regeneration also happens through spaces of imagina-

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tion, of surprise, of collective expression, and by emancipating places, as in the case of the Porto AXA Building. This return of the human senses to the city was explored by cultural mediation and more precisely by cultural agents. They recognized new features and new dynamics in spaces that the urban fabric had been unable to appropriate and return to the public and individual sphere. They kept in mind the importance of leisure as a source of life satisfaction that is more under personal control, and envisioned motivation as the driving force behind all behavior.

Considering tourism, cultural interventions can also be seen as instrumental for destination image and motivation, because what drives a tourist to visit a particular destination is very critical for cities that are not country capitals, as in the case of Porto. By abolishing the hindering conventions concerning private and public, what is culturally consecrated and what is not (consecrated), such reuse may be regarded as a form of resistance to a symbolic strict symbolic order, aiming at improving the quality of life in the city, impacting on tourist satisfaction and revisiting intention, with significant managerial implications for destination marketing managers.

This case study suggests that the colonization for cultural purposes of a space mediated by creative culture may enhance the appreciation of heritage, the and public participation in the process of cultural creation, and may also have a domino effect on urban regeneration. This has implications for policy makers and leisure service providers, especially those associated with heritage recreation. Economic measures should be considered alongside subjective wellbeing measures, such as life satisfaction.

Although this article is not focused on cultural democracy and cultural reception, nor on shortening the distance between creation and reception, the author hopes to inspire public and private institutions by showing that the requalification of urban abandoned buildings may be a tool for communication and the promotion of image, identity, and brand. This can foster tourists' happiness and improve customer satisfaction, which lead to increased customer loyalty, higher profitability, and greater market share, alongside the generation of better goods and services and enhanced subjective wellbeing. In short, it brings better living conditions in a more sustainable economy.

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